



CITY OF STATESBORO
WORK SESSION MINUTES
APRIL 21, 2026

Mayor & Council Work Session

50 East Main Street

3:30 PM

A Work Session of the Statesboro City Council was held on April 21, 2026 at 3:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers at City Hall, 50 East Main Street. Present was Mayor Jonathan McCollar; Council Members: Tangie Johnson and Shari Barr. Also present was City Clerk Leah Harden, City Attorney Cain Smith, City Manager Charles Penny, Assistant City Manager Jason Boyles and Public Affairs Manager Layne Phillips. Absent was Councilmembers Paulette Chavers, Ginny Hendley, and John Riggs.

1. Old Register TAD Financing

City Manager Charles Penny introduced the discussion about the Old Register Tax Allocation District (TAD) financing, explaining that the city had previously financed public improvements and infrastructure for the Publix development area but needed to refinance the project as the current financing was set to expire in August 2026.

Doug Gebhardt from Davenport, the city's financial adviser, presented a comprehensive overview of the TAD financing situation. He explained that a TAD is a defined geographical area where taxes generated from property value increases above a base year are allocated back into that specific district. The Old Register TAD was established around 2018-2019 with participation from both the school system and county, allowing the city to benefit from their tax increments as well. Gebhardt detailed the financial history, noting that the original bond was issued in 2019 for infrastructure improvements around the Publix area, primarily roads and sidewalks. The COVID pandemic delayed development, requiring a refinancing in 2023. Now, with the area more mature and generating sufficient revenue, a full long-term financing was needed to replace the bullet maturity of \$4.75 million due in August 2026.

The presentation showed significant growth in the TAD's market value, from approximately \$5.5 million in 2021 to nearly \$44 million in 2026 - almost an eight-fold increase. Current TAD revenues were generating around \$450,000 annually. However, Gebhardt noted that the new property tax relief sales tax (FLOST) would reduce millage rates by approximately 40 percent for city and county, though school board rates would remain unchanged, resulting in projected revenues of about \$340,000.

Gebhardt proposed two financing options through a direct bank loan process rather than public market bonds. Option 1 was a 20-year bullet structure providing maximum flexibility, where surplus revenues each year would pay down principal. Option 2 offered a more structured approach with annual debt service of approximately \$237,000, providing banks with more predictable returns while still allowing for prepayment of surplus funds.

Mayor Pro Tem Shari Barr asked about using additional TAD revenues for other projects. Gebhardt explained that the redevelopment plan restricted use of these funds solely to the original infrastructure project, and once the debt was paid off, the TAD would dissolve completely, returning those tax revenues to the general fund.

The financing timeline called for council approval of an intent resolution at the evening meeting, distribution of RFPs to banks the following day, responses by May 11th, and final approval at the May 19th council meeting with closing in mid-June.

2. Comparing Firefighter Health Care Models

Fire Chief Tim Grams began the presentation by announcing that the Statesboro Fire Department had officially achieved ISO Class 1 rating, placing them among only about 515 fire departments nationwide to receive this elite designation out of nearly 37,000 departments.

Chief Grams then introduced the partnership with Georgia Southern University, crediting Deputy Chief Bobby Duggar with initiating conversations around firefighter health and wellness programs. The partnership, which began around

2018, has grown to become the foundation for numerous health initiatives including annual physicals, hiring a fire department physician, bringing on athletic trainer Marissa, and establishing the city gym.

Dr. Bridget Melton and Dr. Emily Langford from Georgia Southern presented their research on firefighter health care models. Dr. Melton, an exercise physiologist with 25 years at Georgia Southern, explained that firefighter injuries cost approximately \$9 billion annually across the United States, with most fireground injuries being preventable musculoskeletal strains, sprains, and overexertion.

The partnership takes a "tactical athlete" approach, recognizing that firefighters, like military and law enforcement personnel, must perform physically and mentally at high levels under unpredictable conditions. The program includes fitness training, mental skills development, nutrition guidance, and rehabilitation services, all supported by graduate research assistants.

Dr. Langford presented data from their partnership with Statesboro Fire from 2018 to present, showing improvements across all health metrics including body composition (reduced body fat, increased bone density), maintained cardiovascular endurance and blood pressure, and significantly improved muscular fitness, strength, endurance, power, and mobility.

The presentation highlighted a major three-year national study conducted with FEMA and the University of Kentucky, comparing traditional workers' compensation models with direct access care models across six fire departments in Georgia, Colorado, California, and Kentucky. The study included large, medium, and small departments to ensure balanced comparison.

Results showed the direct access care model resulted in 35 percent lower risk of musculoskeletal injuries (17 percent vs 25 percent injury rate), significantly lower costs (\$6,400 vs \$10,000 per firefighter), and fewer lost days (4.4 vs 10.8 days per incident). The direct access model also showed significantly lower preventable injuries.

Most impressively, Statesboro's specific results far exceeded even the direct access model averages, with costs of only \$450 per injury compared to \$10,000 for traditional and \$6,400 for direct access models. Maximum case costs were \$16,000 for Statesboro versus \$190,000 for traditional models, and maximum lost days were 50 versus 230 for direct access models.

City Manager Charles Penny noted that while the federal grant supporting some graduate assistants was ending, Georgia Southern had committed to funding graduate assistance for another year. He emphasized that Statesboro was doing "amazing things" in employee health that other communities envied.

Mayor Pro Tem Shari Barr asked about cultural adoption within the department. Chief Grams confirmed that the programs were now built into the department culture, with nearly 100 percent buy-in from firefighters who initially may have been skeptical but now understand and see the benefits.

Deputy Chief Bobby Duggar noted that other fire departments regularly call seeking information about replicating Statesboro's model, including departments from Savannah, North Georgia, Waycross, Denver, and San Antonio. He emphasized that Statesboro, despite being one of the smallest departments with this comprehensive system, had become a model that larger departments were trying to replicate.

3. Data Center Proposed Ordinance

Planning Director Justin Williams presented a comprehensive proposed ordinance for regulating data centers in Statesboro. He explained that staff had made significant progress in developing regulations after visiting data centers and conducting extensive research with other cities, TSW consultants, and various stakeholders.

The proposed ordinance would create a new section in the Unified Development Code specifically for "Technological Facilities and Data Centers," following Georgia Department of Community Affairs naming conventions. Williams emphasized the goal of balancing accessibility for development while protecting the community.

The ordinance defines two categories: edge data centers (not exceeding 50 acres) and hyperscale data centers (up to 200 acres or 500,000 square feet). It also defines sensitive receptors including residences, schools, churches, and other facilities requiring quiet environments.

Data centers would be permitted in Highway Oriented Commercial (HOC), Light Industrial, Mixed Use (MX), and Office districts, with restrictions preventing hyperscale facilities in MX and Office districts. The ordinance includes provisions for adaptive reuse of existing buildings.

Williams provided context by showing the massive 432-acre, 3 million square foot for the Freeport Data Center being developed in London, Georgia, emphasizing that Statesboro's ordinance would prevent such overwhelming developments.

Setback requirements include 75 feet from sensitive receptors for edge data centers and a full football field (300+ feet) for hyperscale facilities. All facilities would require 50-200 feet of buffering with trees and vegetation.

Utility requirements mandate connection to municipal sewer and water with closed-loop cooling systems for all facilities. A water management plan showing projected monthly and peak consumption would be required upfront.

For noise control, rather than setting arbitrary decibel limits, the ordinance requires noise studies to establish ambient conditions and ensure data centers don't increase ambient noise levels. Emergency generator testing would be limited to weekday daylight hours for approximately 30 minutes.

Environmental provisions reference existing ordinance sections while allowing the UDC administrator to require compliance with Georgia Stormwater Management Manual standards and alternative pervious materials like permeable pavers.

The ordinance incentivizes wetland preservation by allowing preserved wetlands to count toward required tree canopy, addressing concerns about Army Corps of Engineers changing wetland classifications.

Screening requirements include visual barriers with approved trees and opaque fencing at sensitive receptors. Architectural features like rooftop generators must be enclosed with parapet walls. Maximum building height is set at 65 feet, matching other zoning districts, with fire department approval required for higher parapet walls.

Community investment provisions require applicants to demonstrate positive economic impact or enter community agreements for infrastructure funding. Decommissioning plans must include IT infrastructure removal to allow future business use of buildings.

All data centers require special use permits from city council, with 24-month timelines to obtain land disturbance or building permits or lose the permit. Zoning changes restart the special use process, and cessation of utility service for 12 months triggers permit expiration.

The approval process includes consultation meetings, letters of allowance from the mayor, right start meetings, potential zoning amendments, special use permits, land disturbance permits, and building permits.

Justin Williams noted the ordinance addresses concerns raised by the Ogeechee Riverkeeper at county meetings, including special use permit requirements, water management plans, and mandatory closed-loop systems.

The proposed timeline includes a May 5th Planning Commission meeting, May 19th first reading, and June 2nd second reading for potential adoption.

Mayor Pro Tem Shari Barr asked about non-disclosure agreement prohibitions. Justin Williams explained this wasn't included but could be added, noting the water management plan would provide peak usage information but not power consumption details.

City Manager Charles Penny expressed concerns about ensuring data centers pay their electrical costs rather than transferring costs to citizens through rate increases.

Mayor Pro Tem Barr raised environmental concerns about backup generators, particularly diesel fuel systems. Justin Williams explained the ordinance only regulated monthly testing schedules, not long-term emergency operations, noting some facilities were moving to battery or natural gas alternatives.

Regarding the timeline, Mayor Pro Tem Barr wanted to review the document before first reading. Mr. Penny assured council they could see the draft anytime and control the approval timeline, with the Planning Commission providing recommendations but council retaining final authority.

4. Annual Audit

City auditor Richard Deal from Deal & Associates presented the annual audit for fiscal year ending June 30, 2025. He thanked the city council for continuing their services and praised the finance department for their excellent work providing audit information.

Deal highlighted key findings from the government-wide financial statements. Total city assets reached \$236 million, representing a \$12.263 million or 5 percent increase. Total liabilities were \$50.345 million, actually decreasing by \$5.954 million or 11 percent.

Major liability items included \$5.960 million in unearned ARPA revenue, \$6.876 million in OPEB liability, and \$11.2 million in net pension liability. The pension liability decreased significantly by \$3.9 million or 26 percent due to strong investment earnings. Revenue bonds payable totaled \$14.3 million, down \$1.307 million or 8 percent.

The city's total net position reached \$183 million, increasing \$15.058 million or 9 percent. Of this, \$115.640 million (63 percent) was invested in capital assets net of debt, with \$14.261 million (8 percent) in unrestricted net position.

Governmental activities showed total expenses of \$39.8 million, up \$4.6 million or 13 percent, while total revenues were \$52.923 million, increasing 6 percent. Major revenues included \$3.5 million in used ARPA funds, \$8.657 million in T-SPLOST, \$8.8 million in SPLOST, \$1.817 million in investment earnings, and another \$2.068 million in restricted investment earnings.

For the general fund specifically, total assets were \$7.976 million, down \$471,000 or 6 percent. Fund balance was \$6.856 million, decreasing \$640,000 or 9 percent. Despite the decrease, the general fund remained strong at 27 percent of annual expenditures, above the recommended 25 percent minimum.

General fund revenues totaled \$20.711 million, up \$2.180 million or 12 percent, while expenditures were \$21.642 million, increasing \$3.080 million or 17 percent.

Other funds showed strong positions: 2013 SPLOST had \$1.947 million remaining, 2019 SPLOST had \$19.669 million remaining with \$9.676 in total revenues, and the new 2023 T-SPLOST collected \$8.664 million with \$13.451 million fund balance.

Enterprise funds had total net position of \$81.510 million, up \$2.212 million or 3 percent. Total revenues were \$29.573 million, increasing \$2.362 million or 9 percent. However, expenses rose significantly to \$28.984 million, up \$5.3 million or 22 percent, resulting in operating net income of only \$589,000, down \$2.9 million from the prior year. Enterprise funds transferred \$4.649 million to support governmental activities.

Internal service funds, primarily the health insurance fund, experienced significant challenges with total net position of only \$23,000. The health insurance fund incurred heavy claims resulting in a \$970,000 deficit, requiring a \$619,000 transfer from other funds.

Mayor Pro Tem Shari Barr confirmed the city remained in good financial shape. Deal agreed, noting very strong finances overall.

City Manager Charles Penny noted that Mr. Deal would provide a brief overview at the regular meeting for public transparency.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:50 pm

Jonathan McCollar, Mayor

Leah Harden, City Clerk