



CITY OF
FORESTPARK

**CITY OF FOREST PARK
CITY COUNCIL RETREAT**

Friday, May 1, 2026, at 9:00 AM
Kimpton Overland Hotel
Two Porsche Dr. Hapeville, GA 30254

The Honorable Mayor Gwendolyn W. Ellison

The Honorable Kimberly James
The Honorable Hector Gutierrez
The Honorable Allan Mears

The Honorable Delores A. Gunn
The Honorable Latresa Akins-Wells

Latosha Clemons, Interim City Manager (not in attendance)
Vanessa Holiday, City Clerk
Danielle Matricardi, City Attorney (not in attendance)

SUMMARY MINUTES

FACILITATED BY: Michael McPherson, Members Services Consultant with Georgia Municipal Association and Lisa Benjamin with Lexicon Strategies

- I. **CALL TO ORDER/WELCOME** – Mayor Ellison called the meeting to order at 9:17 A.M.
- II. **ROLL CALL - CITY CLERK** – All members were in attendance for Roll Call except Councilmember James and Councilmember Akins-Wells. Councilmember Akins-Wells joined the meeting at 2:15 P.M.
- III. **ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA** – Motion to adopt the agenda was made by Councilmember Gunn; seconded by Councilmember Gutierrez. The motion passed unanimously 3-0.
- IV. The Retreat began with brief introductions.

Roles of Facilitators: Keep the conversation focused, be the gate keepers, make sure everyone is heard, protect the participants in this environment, keep a written record, help the group reach a consensus, and answer questions.

Mr. McPherson will cover Governance, and Ms. Benjamin will cover Strategic Planning, noting a Summary Report will be provided.

Ground Rules included: No interruptions, participate honestly, don't bring up any past history, be orderly and considerate, show respect, listen to everyone's opinion, check your titles at the door, think community-wide and focus on broader strategies, trust each other enough to speak,

put on your city council hat and take off your personal interest hat, talk to each other, the media, don't beat a dead horse – dismount, and QTIP – quit taking it personal.

Mr. McPherson stated that in order to have a successful Team Forest Park, you need to be a good example to all cities, stating it would be great if everyone was present for the Retreat, and that the ultimate lesson for today is to communicate, and respect each other's point of view; noting grandstanding during a public meeting is demoralizing to your staff, and you need to allow support the City Manager, and staff to do their jobs without interruption from the elected officials.

Councilmember Gutierrez stated councilmembers need to do a better job of trusting each other, and discuss issues with each other, not in public, noting all members of Council have the same mission, and that is to do good for the citizens of Forest Park.

Councilmember Gunn stated the governing body needs to set a standard, as it is the elected officials responsibility to govern in accordance with the Charter; and noted the officials are many parts, but collectively, one body; and noted that many times members of the community are not equipped with knowing the full scope of information, and make statements without having all the facts, and the officials should not buy in to that, but rather talk with each of our colleagues, and have the respect to be able to hear each other.

Mr. McPherson stated the key word is Respect and stated the success of the city hinges on the members of Council staying engaged with each other, and that you need to be on the same page, as one unified front.

Councilmember Mears expressed the difficulty of having a Council with multiple alpha members who do not understand that it is okay to agree to disagree.

Mr. McPherson stated the city's key priority should always be the Comprehensive Plan. It should be the primary focus and the guide for the city, and the Mayor & Council should do what is necessary to implement the city's Comprehensive Plan, and not doing so is a disservice to your residents and business owners.

There was a group discussion regarding staff turnover being problematic; building a culture of accountability, and the growth of the city seemingly being on the edge of a metro city, and also still having hometown tendencies; and noted there have been issues with the turnover of the City Manager position, as the position has not been steady for several years now.

Mr. McPherson noted the City of Forest Park is a Council Manager Form of Government where the City Manager takes his/her directions from the Council, and issues those directives to staff to implement, noting the City Manager is typically present during retreats, and recommended a full retreat once the new City Manager is brought on board, and to remember that your meetings are online and viewable to the public at all times, and potential candidates are watching.

Mr. McPherson stated that ideally, you should bring forth items for a vote when you have had conversations with your colleagues, making sure that you have support with a majority vote, and referenced the author John Dunn's book "No Man is an Island."

Councilmember Gutierrez stated it would be nice to have a true consensus, not just three votes, and referenced the overt bias that everyone has.

Councilmember Gunn stated she believes in the city's Charter, SOP's, ordinances, and state law.

Mr. McPherson stated organizations must develop trust by: Not interfering with other's roles, make sure written protocols are in place, understanding "good governance", support good management; including effective, efficient, accountable, and equitable delivery of services, insuring a sense of respect for the public and openness to public input, willingness to move on key issues, operating under the comprehensive strategic business/planning process, respecting each other, agreeing on roles and responsibilities, demonstrating a strong commitment to work collaboratively, and following through with commitment to hold regular and timely reviews and feedback on programs or services.

There was a discussion regarding councilmembers giving directives to the Council Aides regarding projects and initiatives, where an example was given where a councilmember made a request to a department, and the Director had already issued tasks and assignment assignments to department staff, but feeling the pressure to rearrange their department's schedule because the request was coming from a member of Council.

Mr. McPherson stated, and the councilmembers agreed, the Council Aides need to copy the City Clerk on communication so that the supervisor is aware of the request(s), and to notify the Directors about issues and concerns within their respective departments for the Directors to resolve the issue, not the Council Aides.

Councilmember Mears suggested a flow chart.

Mr. McPherson referenced the changes in population throughout the country where there is a high population is aging adults, however, today's families are not having multiple children, which means you have to think about your future workforce, future revenue streams and how schools in your community could be affected; stating the city needs to be equipped to continue to provide services and good infrastructure to the community, and while remaining current with technology, create SOP's and not deviate from them, reiterating the focus on the city's Comprehensive Plan; and suggested the city look at adopting an A-I policy.

Mayor Ellison led a discussion regarding revitalizing the city's Comprehensive Plan, developing a Marketing Strategy for the city, and requested that all members of the governing body receive a copy of the Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. McPherson expressed the importance of getting in the habit of being open and honest with each other with one-on-one conversations at least once a month to understand each other, and reviewed GMA's City of Civility – 9 Pillars of Civility, noting the city could adopt a Resolution if interested; and viewed a leadership video from Colin Powell regarding creating trust, as was indicated in the video, if people trust you, they will follow you, if only out of curiosity.

Mr. McPherson noted building trust is critical and is sometimes difficult; noting management must set the tone at the top, and that an organization's culture is established by its leadership through the attitude and actions of the council and management, administrative style, and staff's service to the public.

Mr. McPherson showed two examples of "What do you see", where members had different opinions and interpretations of what they saw, highlighting that individuals may not see things the same way as others, and that's okay, and that you need to respect the majority vote, even when you disagree, for the good of the city, and not harp on your view after the vote.

Mr. McPherson closed with the key component of collaboration, noted the governing body needs to communicate and problem-solve with each other; maintain collaborative relationships with fellow councilmembers; preside over and participate in city council meetings adhering to open meetings rules effectively, and not criticize in public, but praise publicly, no grandstanding, reel things in before they get out of order; always interact with and respond to member of the public; and design effective and inclusive processes for engaging the public, noting being transparent is essential.

Ms. Benjamin asked each member a series of questions:

Share Your Why; Write down Your Shared Vision for the City; Envision the Headline for the City of Forest Park in (5) five years; What does Success Look Like for the City of Forest Park? What is Forest Park known for? What are the Values Guiding the Mayor & Council? What type of Leadership does Forest Park deserve? Responses will be included in the Summary Report.

Ms. Benjamin asked the governing body to complete a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. Responses will be included in the Summary Report. Partial responses included:

Strengths included: Location, Community Engagement, Ft. Gillem, and Mayor Ellison.

Weaknesses included: Lack of marketing, Lack of housing, and Scarce Downtown Businesses.

Opportunities included: Marta, New Leadership and A-I automation.

Threats included: Land Locked and Negative Perception of the City.

Ms. Benjamin asked the governing body to state the top five priorities for the city: Responses were: Housing, Governance Excellence, Efficiency in Operations, Homelessness and Hared Values, Priorities and Collaboration.

Ms. Benjamin referenced Leadership Synergy, stating individual actions reflect on the entire Council/Body and read a Decorum and Accountability Statement, noting each member of the governing body must maintain control on the dais, actively address issues in advance of the meeting, focus on the issues of the city, use the QTIP (Quit Taking It Personal) when necessary (to and from the right person), commit to making a change, take responsibility for each other (fact checking), speak up, if you see something, say something, listen and de-escalate situations as when they arise, and self-check.

Ms. Benjamin asked for takeaways from Day 1 and gave a review of what to expect for Day 2.

Members expressed that there will be a greater willingness to listen, reiterated the need for a marketing plan for the city, noted the importance of reviewing the city's Comprehensive Plan, and has a better understanding of roles and responsibilities, specifically, the role of the City Manager.

V. **EXECUTIVE SESSION** - Personnel, Litigation, Real Estate or Cyber Security OCGA § 50-14-1
None

VI. **ADJOURNMENT** – With no further business, Mayor Ellison adjourned the meeting at 3:30 P.M.

In compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, those requiring accommodation for Council meetings should notify the City Clerk's Office at 404-366-4720 at least 24 hours before the meeting.

Respectfully submitted by:

Vanessa Holiday, City Clerk

Gwendolyn Ellison, Mayor