

**City Council Strategic Planning Session
November 7, 2022**

The City Council of the City of Elizabeth City met in a strategic planning session on Monday, November 7, 2022 in Council Chambers, located on the 2nd floor of the Municipal Administration Building, 306 E. Colonial Avenue, Elizabeth City, NC.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor E. Kirk Rivers
Mayor Pro Tem Kem Spence (*Arrived at 5:24 p.m.*)
Councilman Johnson Biggs
Councilman Joe Peel
Councilman Javis Gibbs
Councilwoman Rose Whitehurst
Councilwoman Katherine Felton
Councilwoman Barbara Baxter
Councilman Johnnie Walton

MEMBERS ABSENT: None

OTHERS PRESENT: City Manager Montre' Freeman
City Clerk April Onley

The City Council strategic planning session was called to order by Mayor Kirk Rivers at 5:14 p.m. Mayor Rivers gave the invocation, after which everyone joined for the Pledge of Allegiance.

1. Meeting Structure / Committee Assignments:

Mayor Rivers advised that the previous Council's goals and objectives from 19-20 had been supplied on the dais for their information. The Clerk will compile the general thoughts and goals of the current Council into a document something like what's there and provide it to all members. He explained that the purpose of the first item is so everyone knows how things come to be on the agenda. The committee structure allows the Council to interact with staff and act as a sounding board without being on television. This offers the ability to ask questions without seeming like they're on one side or another. He stressed the importance of being a team, and everyone serves as a chair on a committee. He encouraged the Council to not be afraid to ask the hard questions during those committee work sessions. He noted that it's not a requirement that the individual committees meet on their own beforehand, but it's fine if they want to. He pointed out that every work session is technically a committee meeting anyway. He explained that things will go to the committees first, and only the people on that committee carry out that vote. The only difference is the Finance Committee, which is comprised of all members of Council. He said that if an item passes the committee, it carries over to the next consent agenda, but anyone on the Council can still request that it go to regular agenda instead of the consent agenda. They'll just need to advise the City Clerk that they want it to go to the regular agenda for further discussion. He pointed out that the consent agenda is for items that don't have any (or many) concerns. He noted that it's okay to have concerns about something that's already been to a committee, and when that happens, we'll just add the item to the regular agenda for extra discussion. He explained that when the manager wants to put something on the agenda, he'll send it to the committee first. If it passes, it will go to the full Council. From there, if it's an item with no additional questions, it will go to consent next time. If there are questions, it will go to regular. He added that these procedures can be tweaked if necessary, but he did want to take a moment to make sure that everyone understood the process now that we have a full body and manager in place. He said he wanted to wait until we had a city manager to really get into the details. He reminded everyone that if there's something on that work session meeting and it's really important and needs to go to that evening's regular session, they can always amend the regular session agenda to do that as they've done in the past.

2. Overview of Strategic Planning / Vision:

Mayor Rivers stressed the importance of inclusion, and creating opportunities for residents and getting the city to a good financial place. He said he believes in recognizing people who

are right beside you. We don't do a good job of always lifting up and appreciating our own. We have eight great minds around the table and we need to engage with everyone's particular skillset and vision.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence said he wanted to see Council really get along and show the community that although we have different backgrounds and feelings, we can get along and move forward. He said that he believed this is the best Council he'd ever been on, and he was proud to see how much they each appreciated one another and showed each other respect. He said he'd like to see the Council engage more in the community. "We are elected officials, but we don't want people to feel like they can't touch us – that shouldn't be how it works. You won't get the pulse of the city without being out in the city. We have to understand what's going on to know what to fix. We need to be firm, fair and consistent across the board."

Councilwoman Felton noted that her primary goal was to work toward having a Council that was more "together." They may not always vote the same or agree with one another, but they should be able to disagree without being disagreeable. For the third ward in particular, she said she campaigned on helping getting grants for low to moderate income people for fixing up their homes. She said that she'd like our grant writer to help us get grants for the people of our city. Her recollection was that we used to have a writer who found money for specific areas in the city, and grants were approved for people in the community to rehab their homes. The only stipulation was they didn't sell their home within 10 years. She said she wants to see our low to moderate income community helped more.

Mayor Rivers said he remembered that, and he believed most of that money back then was CDBG money. Councilwoman Felton added that we also need our infrastructure being fixed because we've got flooding issues and so on that people are suffering from everywhere.

Councilman Biggs said his campaign platform was unity. He'd grown tired of every time he went somewhere people saying that our Council was a "show." He said he felt that we're achieving changing that perception. Secondly, there's the issue of the city's finances, and getting those in order. Until we get those corrected, it impacts our grant ability. Public utilities, water, waste water is the next biggest thing. He stated that he wants to make sure we have a plan in place to move forward. Next is trying to do something about the blighted homes in all wards. He mentioned a house on Southern Avenue that's been burned and in terrible condition for years and is still standing. Local government is what impacts people's lives the most, and we need to make sure that we are as responsive as we can be to the public's needs. He reiterated his concern about the amount of overgrown vacant lots, and blighted properties he came across regularly.

Councilman Peel stated that he wants the city to be a place where everyone feels safe in both their neighborhood and anywhere in town. He wants it to be a place where citizens are friendly and have engagement, and are getting what they pay for in terms of efficient government and having their needs met. He wants to see people having a good quality of life, everything from what we do for kids at Parks and Rec to the homes they have to live in. He mentioned that he'd previously had Kellen identify 12 buildable lots that the City owns. Although a contractor would not come in and build on them one at a time, but maybe we could sell them as a group to a contractor as low-income housing. He said there are groups that could come in and do that. He mentioned that we used to have a rental inspection program that the state did away with. He said if we decided to hire a lobbyist in Raleigh, the only way we would get that back would be to pass a special bill for us, so that would be something to have them push for. When that program was started, they found rentals that didn't even have floors in them. "Not only do we have blighted houses, but we have blighted boats on the waterfront. There's one that's been down there for two years." He concurred about the need for an immediate plan for infrastructure and how it's going to be funded. He said he thinks we're going to have issues with what we need to do, and we may need to raise water and sewer rates before the next budget. They were only ever raised half as much as the last study recommended and we have a lot more issues than we had back then. He noted that leasing vehicles may be a way of improving the quality of our fleet. He encouraged the Council to find as many suggestions for ways to save money because we're going to need to spend money too.

Mayor Rivers noted that manager told him he has identified several areas where he's found there might be ways to reduce expenditures and we might get the leasing discussion on the November meeting.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence asked about the trash.

Manager Freeman said we could include that in the leasing possibly, and he'd had discussions with contacts in the trash collection industry who are going to give us an idea of what we could do to catch up. That group will come out of Maryland and take a look for us. Director Bell is already having a conversation as well, and then we'll bring you that information. I don't know that will make the December meeting, but it will definitely be on for January. In terms of leasing, the city was spending about \$500,000 in cars and I could turn everything over into a lease for that. He said he was connected to a vendor that cut out outfitting cost down as well. He will be meeting with the police chief on all of that tomorrow.

Councilwoman Whitehurst said her goal was to provide civil, effective leadership. She ran on that platform because she felt like she could offer that, as many of the other councilors have suggested. She wanted to see the board stand together and move forward even in times of disagreement. "We work for the people. The people put us in here. We have to listen to them. You have to get out there, know them, talk to them, know their concerns. We have to send the message back that they were listening, they were heard. We could do more there." She said she'd like to see more compassion for the needy in our city and those that are less fortunate and experiencing disparities. She would like to see Council support SOULS more. SOULS is in a unique position where they are partnership with Victory Praise and Worship. SOULS is 15 years old this year – it's always been run by volunteers. All money has been given as donations. She said there's an opportunity now for SOULS to have a home with Victory Church. They want to have that ministry under their wing. Her vision for SOULS is that it eventually becomes a transformation center. The most needy in our community end up at SOULS first. We can connect them to the resources and maybe connect them to emergency housing. She wanted to work with Jon to find grants for the homeless. The slogan for her campaign was "together we can make Elizabeth City a strong city, a safe city and a clean city."

"By strong, I meant financially. I knew we were a mess financially and we had a long way to go to recover that foundation of our finances. We know we have way too many shootings, too many deaths. And clean, we're talking about the houses, boats, the trash. They concerned me as a citizen but they still concern me now."

Councilwoman Felton recalled the possibilities about buying the old jail from the county and maybe redoing that. She asked what happened to that dream? Councilwoman Whitehurst said they did a walkthrough and the jail is going to cost a lot of money to renovate. It's got asbestos in it. It was made to keep people in. It would have to have a sprinkler system put in. It's millions of dollars. They're even struggling with the fact that it needs to be torn down but that's a mega project too. To renovate is too much more than it would be worth now.

Manager Freeman asked if anyone had anything in mind about the size of the facility we were talking about? Before they'd identified five homes that could be converted much cheaper, so he didn't know if they had a headcount. Councilwoman Whitehurst said that at any given time there's at least 50 homeless, but that could be in several counties, so we say at least 20. The first thing the city offered was through SOULS called room at the inn and different churches took them in for a week at the time. When COVID came, they all stopped and we never picked it back up. We put them up in hotel rooms when the weather was severe when River City ran out of money, but we found out they were reselling the rooms or doing other things in the rooms. The next step for the city would be to come up with a program would be some sort of emergency shelter where they check in and check out where we don't put them in hotel rooms. If they knew they had to wait in line, sign in, get a bed and sign back out, we'd probably get those that really need it. She explained that the setup with Victory now is perfect. From there, they have a retired social worker who can funnel people to resources they didn't know about, but they need money to finish it and to help Victory. The next step is emergency housing. She said she did not think the city is ready to build a shelter. I don't see that, but I do see temporary emergency housing for men and women. Hampton has one that's great. People that really want to be somewhere out of the cold can come. We have some people who are fine with sleeping in their vehicles and won't come, but to have some kind of emergency overnight shelter would be important.

Councilman Peel noted that it's a difficult situation to fix because you've got all kind of people living on the street and some are happy doing their own thing. I have some concerns about expanding the mission of the city into a homeless shelter situation because we don't have the money. We have needs we can't fix and taking on something else that expands our responsibilities is not good right now. My fear would be if we create something, instead of 20, we'd have 50. Look at what happened in Portland, Oregon. You don't go downtown anymore. It's totally overrun with homeless. I think if we have these kinds of conversations, we need to study the issues, go some places and get a deeper understanding. You can do a lot of bad trying to do some good. I understand it's a problem.

Councilwoman Baxter noted that there was a shelter here before. I'm not sure what happened but we heard the city shut it down. In New York, you have to have a big, big plan. You have to think about security, the mental health, other people. You would have to have all that in place. I'm not going to say it can't be done because the group homes have some of the same type of things but you don't want to be biased on who came in and who didn't. Something definitely needs to be done. If you do open up a shelter, you're also giving people more jobs too. You could have someone come in and do security. Mental health people. I just don't know how we'll go about doing that. My concern is when these people get these grants, they're not doing what needs to be done with these grants. They put people in rough hotels. That's not helping them. That's helping their habits but not them. It's sad and I'm just wondering what we can do as a city to see if the people who are getting grants, how can we make sure they're doing what they need to do to help these people.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence said he was not in favor of the city being in charge of a homeless shelter. We do not need that responsibility. There are entities who want to come here and run it, they just want us to help them. A lady came from Virginia, they just wanted the Council to say they would support them in some way. The lady runs two of them in Virginia. She came in here willing to bring her whole team, had a plan and Council shut her down. I will never vote for the City to be in charge of a homeless shelter. Too much responsibility, too many headaches and we'd not equipped for it. I don't see why we can't bring an entity in here, whichever one brings in the best plan and help them. When we talked about the houses, the problem was we had to put in a sprinkler system, and you could only have so many people plus so many staff, so the houses had to be so big. Before we get to the point where we have 20 people sleeping downtown, we've got to nip it.

Councilman Gibbs noted that assistance programs generally fall under the County's purview. That's who usually provides that.

Councilman Peel concurred with Councilman Gibbs, and said the City does not need to do this on its own because the County is responsible for welfare. That's where the money comes in. For the City to take it on by ourselves, that wouldn't be right. Homeless people have rights too, so you can't just go down and scoop them up and haul them away.

Mayor Rivers said that two years ago when this Council talked about the homeless, Representative Hunter put money aside from the homeless shelter. Anytime people put homelessness in their grants, it shoots things up because a lot of people don't want to address it. We can get a building with grant funds and let another organization run it.

Councilman Biggs encouraged the Council to highly vet that, noting that grant money is a one-time deal. I don't want us to get committed to something and then we have to start turning our wheels to find more and more money. We might say "we'll give you this much and then you have to carry yourself."

Councilman Gibbs said the City has long needed a Council that cares about people. He told people from the beginning that he was not a politician, but he was a people person. He saw it as an opportunity that he could give back. So many people have helped him and his family over the years that he wanted to return the favor. He started watching Council meetings and met people who told him they had family members who lived in other states who watched our meetings because our Council was so poorly behaved. He wanted to be the best Council person for both the second ward and the entire Council. Collaboration was a big thing and had to be between the City and the County. Accountability – he has to be accountable for every vote he makes. When people asked him questions, he stood and answered every question. Respect was another big one for him because he saw a lot of disrespect in the prior Council because there was a lot of personal things going on. He said

they always have to respect one another. Equality is also important because everyone has to have a fair shake. Right is right and wrong is wrong. They cannot be a Council that only engages the community when they're looking for a vote. They must have care and concern for the people. It's not hard to figure out what we need to do. We just have to be a Council that can come together and put our personal issues aside and do what's best for the city. We will only get things done if we work together to get it done.

Councilman Walton said he felt it was important to care for those who can't care for themselves. He wanted to try to change the mindset of ourselves and our constituents. The mindset of anything is what makes you work – what a man thinks is what he is. Nine people can't change everything, but we have so many agencies around here that can make things happen. We can identify a problem and City Council and the County Commissioners can have some influence. If we attack homelessness together, we can work on it. If we stop asking, "what if"? Go to "even if." We have to create something that will make it work. Identify the problems, have influence that will keep you on the side of the bridge. Don't go back in time with some of the decisions that we make. When everyone feels as secured and sheltered as everyone else, that means everyone is being taken care of and that should be what we're trying to accomplish. We can do our part and talk to other people and maybe they can see some of the things our way. The homeless are a small group of people, but they are people and they deserve to be taken care of too. As a group, we need to make sure we're not putting misinformation because that throws you behind and doesn't allow you to go forward. Time is not promised to anyone and misinformation wastes time. If we can get misinformation corrected, it will help everything. If we spread misinformation to the media, it's a disease and if we work on that, it will help the whole cause.

Councilwoman Baxter said she was concerned that the Inspections division of Community Development only had three people in that department for the entire city. They need help. They need someone back with minimum housing, but that may go back with getting that law written back in. There's no chain of command, no place for people to contact people with minimum housing. They have to live like they're living and be terrified of their landlords. They definitely need help over there. It's impossible for them to run the entire city over there. Is it possible, or how much authority do we have to start pulling some of the permits for some of these landlords?

Manager Freeman said there may be some opportunity to talk about public health and public safety and living standards. These matters can go to the courts for rulings. If we're creative, we may be able to address some of these challenges by collaborating with the county through the department of health and have the judge make rulings for the children who live in some of these places. It can be amazing what happens when a judge makes a court order. Once we can get a basic living standard set, safe homes for children, the county may be able to reach into other pots of money and then we can look into what the options could be. Minimum housing won't address the safety issues but it will force the hand.

Councilman Gibbs agreed that it's common sense that we can do more together than by ourselves. It's not going to work any other way.

Councilwoman Felton said it sounds like a lot of things we've discussed tonight our manager is already familiar with. Mayor Rivers agreed and stated that why he'd asked him here tonight. We're merging our goals with the prior goals and we're going to hear the heart of every council person here to make it fit so we have measurable standards and we can give direction. I just want to go around the table and take away the Council meeting item of being a team. He asked what are the strengths you'd recommend if you were selling Elizabeth City?

Mayor Pro Tem Spence said the ability to work together.

Councilwoman Felton said the Harbor of Hospitality, and that everyone always appeared to get along well.

Councilman Peel said people sell it in many ways. Creative people and people here are friendly, open. Welcoming. Hospitable.

Councilman Gibbs said we're community-oriented, and we support one another, especially businesses. The Chamber always promotes and pushes something to make people aware

of what's going on. Community engagement. There's a lot to do if you want to do it. We need to broaden our horizons and explore different things. Once you do that, get out of the comfort zone, there's a lot to do.

Councilman Walton said he felt we had unlimited possibilities.

Mayor Rivers suggested our waterfront and location.

Councilman Biggs offered the sense of community. There's lots of nonprofits. We don't have a lack of people willing to volunteer when they know there's a need. We do our best to take care of our own and that's something we need to be proud of. Stop and saying thank you. The downtown is growing. Waterfront revitalization. Restaurants, breweries. All the things here now you used to have to go out of town for. COA, ECSU, AOA doing shows. The community may not do a great job pushing those things out so everyone knows about the cultural things they can do.

Councilman Peel said a lot of people don't follow social media and the newspaper doesn't come until so late, so many of the things you want to do might be over. Maybe we could get an electronic marquee downtown that runs certain events. More ways to get information out.

Councilman Walton said he felt we have a strong governmental team. We'd talked about the past Council too much. This team is strong.

Manager Freeman said there's a lot of excitement in the city. He's working on an app that will help push these ideas out. He said he felt that our staff volunteers better than Enfield did.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence noted that now you see more multi-cultural churches than ever. Mixed congregations are a sign of growth. When you separate yourselves by color or race when it comes to God, it's wrong and there's no right way to do wrong. People are catching on that they have to come together for one common goal. I've never seen as many as there are now. Most people that move here, the first thing they ask is where is a good place to fellowship and they've got them everywhere.

Councilwoman Felton stated that when the Council was installed, Mayor Rivers talked about the vision of "better together" and she said she really saw that because he always made sure they all got along. "You are a good leader and it starts at the top."

Councilwoman Whitehurst said there's a lot of integrity here. Many of us said that we were going to operate with integrity and transparency and that's important. We will stand firm on that.

Mayor Rivers asked what the Council thought the weaknesses were.

Councilwoman Baxter said advertising.

Councilwoman Felton said telling our own story, getting it out.

Councilman Biggs said we spend a lot of time talking about what we don't have instead of promoting what we do have. We don't know a lot about some of the huge companies that we have here. We don't know a lot about what's going on at the Coast Guard base. We have a lot of hidden gems in the city that I can't go out and advocate for because I don't know enough about them. What is in our city that nobody else has?

Councilwoman Whitehurst said that somehow we need to get the paper to start telling some of the good things happening in our city. I don't know how we drive that.

Mayor Rivers mentioned the upcoming "Mayor's Moment", which will run right after the meetings and then it will loop.

Councilman Peel suggested our financial situation as a weakness.

Mayor Rivers said staff turnover.

Councilman Gibbs said staff shortage.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence agreed, and added police shortage for sure.

Councilman Peel said he was concerned with the lack of a plan for fixing our infrastructure.

Manager Freeman said he was still concerned with employee salary planning. Salary compression was never addressed so we'll be approaching an issue.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence said we were struggling with an inability to find police officers or any qualified employees.

Councilman Peel added crime issues / safety concerns. Drug overdoses.

Councilman Biggs said we need to start thinking outside of the box on how to fix the safety problem. The officer shortage is not just here. No one wants to go into the profession and no one blames them. We can't compete. How do we use what we have? How do we work with the police force with ECSU? How do we work better with the sheriff's department?

Councilman Peel said police aren't going to fix the problem; it's deeper than that. It goes back to poor housing, poor education, mental health. Gangs, poverty. We have to look at what's going on with the young people in our community and how do we address that? Certainly we need more police, but that's not the cause of the problem, just the end result. It's a societal issue. How do we look at all that?

Councilwoman Whitehurst said we need more mental health support. Mental health issues and drug abuse often go hand in hand, but mental health is huge in our city and the resources are extremely limited.

Councilwoman Felton noted that when it's budget time, it's important to people in the third ward that they are made aware, that they feel like they have some input in the budget process whether it's looking at the needs and being allowed to address the needs. Just making them aware of things and giving them an opportunity.

Councilman Biggs said he knew people may watch from home, but we never have anybody that comes up and addresses us good, bad or otherwise. Nobody showed up and said anything about the budget. As soon as the budget gets passed, they get mad. I don't know how we do that, but we need to get people involved in the process. I know the third and fourth ward community meetings were well done and we've talked about doing one for first ward. Staff did one and Council was invited but encouraged not to talk. Maybe we go into neighborhoods in small settings and talk about the budget and see what they'll say. That night was refreshing to hear what the people wanted. Some things we could address and some we couldn't, but some things were small and could make a huge impact.

Councilman Gibbs opined that this is a special group. I get a lot of comments and compliments about the work we've done and the volunteer aspect of Council. Even thinking about how you're going to help your wards is showing that you care about the people who put you in office. We can get more done together than individually. I hope we stay engaged with all the constituents and look out for them and always keep the big picture in mind. If I can help someone in any ward, I will do so. We have a Council that cares about the people.

Councilman Peel stated that if you want people to participate in the budget process, you have to think about what you really want them to do. Very few people outside of those of us here understand the funds and what goes into the operating budget. Every year, 80% of more of the operating budget is repetitive. It's the little stuff that's extra that you didn't do from one year to the next. If you had specific things you wanted to ask people about like "we have specific problems and we want to tell you about it and see if you could support it" maybe that would work. Have some specific things in mind that you want their input on and I think you would get more people willing to participate.

Councilwoman Felton said "I want my ward to tell me what's on their mind because I'm passionate about spending other folks' money and I want them to know that they have a vested interest. They're not going to understand the budget, but they'll know if they have equipment that needs to be updated or other issues on their mind. I don't expect them to

know it like we should know it but I want them to know that they have a right to know what the city is spending their money on.”

Mayor Rivers asked what the Council felt their mission for the coming year was.

Councilman Peel said to provide focused, collaborative leadership

Councilman Walton said to improve the quality of life for all citizens

Councilwoman Whitehurst said to be fiscally responsible, and to operate with integrity and professionalism.

Councilman Biggs said for long-term success, we need to make decisions that are going to last. Sustainable. The money we invest today doesn't just need to be for short-term gains. It can outlive us being on Council.

Councilman Walton added sustainable decision-making.

Mayor Rivers asked what were the goals for next six months:

Councilwoman Whitehurst said the budget and the audit.

Councilman Biggs said he was not for a tax increase. Mayor Rivers said he was not for one either. Councilman Biggs suggested ARPA money items and how to spend that money departmentally to best serve our citizens and then we can decide if we like it or not but they can at least give us a starting point. Then we can have conversations in our wards of whether or not they agree with it. I told the paper to spend it all on infrastructure, but I know that's not something you can see. We've got to do something with that money and it's something we can deploy. He asked if the expectation no property tax increase? General consensus was no tax increase. Mayor Rivers added it as a goal for the next budget. He then asked about a water and sewer rate increase. General consensus was that was going to be a necessary increase.

Councilman Biggs said that we're so new into the budget year, but we're going to start sending out the budget to actual every month and I'll figure out the earliest date we can get it out. Then we can go down every department and see where they are and where they should be. I agree on the water and sewer rates too. If we can point to where that increase is going and we have a plan, then yes. The state will allow us even if we're on the UAL if we're got a funding source such as raising rates, they would allow us to go out and borrow money because the annual payment would be offset by the raised amount. He added that he'd like to see a spending plan to address the I&I issues.

Councilman Peel said he'd like to see a completed audit, both of them.

Mayor Pro Tem Spence wanted to see more police recruiting.

Councilman Gibbs wanted us to work on employee retention.

6. Adjournment:

Having no further business to discuss, Mayor Rivers adjourned the meeting at 9:06 p.m.

E. Kirk Rivers
Mayor

April Onley, NCCMC
City Clerk

