



Welaka Gazette

February 2024



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From The Mayor's Desk

This month, from the Mayor's Desk, I will pick up where I left off last month. Last month, I discussed the Welaka Town Charter and some significant issues with our current Town Charter from 1947. This month, I will dive into the financial cost of your current Town management and discuss our Utility Department.

If you recall, last month, the oversight by the Welaka Mayor is very significant. It includes overseeing all Governmental Operations on a day-to-day basis. That includes hiring and termination of employees, including all human resource decisions. Assigning all tasks to Town Department Supervisors and ensuring they are completed. They include all Town and Utility Department maintenance, and completing all employee evaluations along with approving all pay increases.

Financially, it includes approving all expenses and signing all the checks. The Mayor approves the bills, then the Town Clerk pays them, and the Mayor signs the top signature line of the check. Recommending the tax rate for the Town to the Town Council for the purposes of creating the Town budget and creating the Town budget for all departments, including general governmental services, Police, Utility, and Building Departments. Present the Town budget to the Town Council for approval, then carry out and monitor it after its approval. Working with our Town Clerk to prepare for our annual financial audit. Insurance reviews, including health, liability, and property damage insurance. Review all assets of the Town to ensure they are listed on our insurance policy and negotiate the best possible insurance rates for the Town. The Mayor also applies for almost all of the grants and oversees them, which is challenging with all the grant requirements.

On the Building Department side, the Mayor works with the Building Inspector to answer any questions, including zoning issues. The Mayor also oversees building permits to ensure they are being issued promptly and is often the final decision where there is an unresolved issue with issuing a building permit. The Mayor also meets with all developers to discuss what projects they want to build in the Town. They work with the Town Attorney to ensure all the items are in place to build, such as zoning requirements, utilities, proper emergency vehicle access, etc.

On the Police Department side, the Mayor works with the Police Chief to set the department's budget. They also authorize and approve all grant applications. Work closely with the Chief to ensure the residents' safety is maintained. Along with any other matters the Chief of Police wishes the Mayor to weigh in on. Keep in mind the Mayor is not a sworn law enforcement officer and, as such, they cannot give the Chief of Police direct orders concerning enforcement of the law.

On the governmental side, the Mayor works with the Town Attorney to draft all ordinances, sometimes turning over that responsibility to a fellow Town Council Member. All new ordinances considered by the Town Council are typically brought to the Council by the Mayor. The Mayor also has an appointment to all Town Boards, including Codes and Zoning. The Mayor is a voting member of the Welaka Town Council and sets and publishes the agenda. The Mayor is the chairperson of all Town Council meetings and oversees the parliamentary procedures of all council meetings.

On the Utility side, the Mayor is the head of the Utility Department. Signing all monthly DEP reports, ensuring all

daily visual inspections and sampling are occurring. The Mayor also creates and approves all maintenance and repair plans for the department, which is the final step in ensuring the water in the Town is safe for the residents to drink.

Before I continue with the Mayor's duties, I want to digress for a moment to discuss the role of the Mayor in the Utility Department and why it cannot be allowed to continue. When I took office as your Mayor, I realized on day one how poor of condition the Utility system had been allowed to deteriorate into. The Wastewater Plant was rusting and falling apart, and essential backup pumps needed to pump water to the Town were broken. There were countless issues with the wastewater collection system. I immediately sought funding to replace our aging wastewater plant. The State of Florida ultimately awarded the Town \$13.3 Million Dollars to build the plant, which is unheard of for the state to pay for the new plant for the Town completely.

Beyond that, I began to triage the Utility Department, identifying the most critical components of the system so they could be fixed or replaced first. I started taking water and wastewater classes at the Trio Center for the University of Florida to get a better knowledge of the system. Many of the issues with our Utility System have to do with the maintenance of the system. Unfortunately, the elected Mayor of this Town is in charge of making those decisions with no requirements for experience or certification in this field. In the past month alone, I have discovered an issue with our wastewater system that was created by one of my well-meaning predecessors. To save money, improper repairs were made to the wastewater system that would have rendered 75% of the Town without water or the ability to flush their toilets if a failure had occurred.

As of this writing, I am soliciting bids to repair that part of the system and put it back as it was designed. The cost for these is upward of \$50,000. Had the repair been done correctly the first time, we would not be facing a repair at such an expensive time in our country. This is one of countless improper repairs I have found in the system since becoming Mayor. Last month, in January, the Town Council, in a unanimous vote, approved a utility rate increase for your water and sewer. The rate increase goes directly to creating a Utility Asset Management fund to ensure we have the money we need to maintain our system. We have also created a Utility Asset Management Plan to ensure that a plan is in place to carry out repair and maintenance. I wonder if my predecessors had appropriately maintained the system; perhaps we would not be in the position that has forced us to increase rates to do the much-needed repairs now.

This is why I have and will continue to advocate for professional management of our Utility System. We cannot allow our drinking water system to be overseen by an elected Town Mayor whose only qualifications to be in charge is that they vote in the Town and live here. The Utility Department is the most significant asset the Town owns. We can not trust its future to just anyone. I realize that many have been opposed to a Town Manager; however, not having an adequately experienced Utility Director overseeing the maintenance and repair of our system is not only ludicrous but borders on irresponsibility.

To return to the Mayor and their responsibilities, the job of the Mayor is a significant one with many moving parts, including everything from a firm understanding of government to how to operate local government effectively. It includes planning, zoning, building, and a thorough knowledge of Town ordinances. It includes working with the Police Chief to ensure public safety. Finally, it consists of a thorough knowledge of the intricate workings of our complex water and wastewater system.

As your Mayor, I dedicate over 40 hours a week to the Town, not to include my time away from Town Hall at the water or wastewater plant. Responding to emails, returning phone calls, and answering staff questions. I make dozens of daily decisions to ensure that your Town government keeps you safe, provides drinking water, and ensures other essential public services are carried out. You might wonder what such a complex job with many moving parts pays. The answer is \$800.00 a month, which equates to approximately \$3.07 per hour. Please do not read this and think I am complaining about what I am being paid because I am not. I said that to impress upon you that a mayor willing to dedicate the time it takes to oversee the entire operations of the Town gets paid. Bear in mind there are approximately 954 residents in Welaka with the addition of the River Hill subdivision, which was

not built during the last census. People keep saying we are only a Town of 717 people, but that has not been the case since 2021. We continue to grow, and I expect the Town to have over 1,000 residents by the end of 2024.

You might be wondering what hiring a full-time Utility Director would cost. The average salary for a Utility Director with salary and benefits is \$50,000 annually. You might also wonder what it would cost to hire a Town Manager to oversee the day-to-day operations of the Town and report to the Welaka Town Council. The average salary for a Town Manager with salary and benefits is \$90,000 annually. To hire either one is not cheap.

Let's talk briefly about the options for managing the Town and the Utility Department, including the pros and cons of each option. Our first option is to continue as we have, hoping that future Mayors will have the experience and knowledge necessary to operate the Town and the water department. If the Town continues with the option, remember that the Mayor must be chosen from the 954 residents that live in Welaka. The Mayor is an elected position, so no requirements such as experience, education, or special knowledge exist. You only need to vote, live in Welaka, and get the most votes to run the Town. Because the Mayor is elected, they are chosen by the people so they can vote them out. Unfortunately, the term of Mayor is two years, so there is little the voters of Welaka can do for two years. Also, because the Mayor is an elected position, if they refuse to carry out one of their many duties or even show up to work, for that matter, there is little to nothing that can be done. If the Town wanted to raise the Mayor's salary to that of a Town Manager, with salary and benefits, it's right at \$90,000 annually. The trouble with that scenario is that the pay is so high you run the risk of attracting unqualified people who only want to run for Mayor for the pay.

The second option is to allow the Mayor to continue to oversee all day-to-day operations of the Town while hiring a full-time Utility Director. While this is a viable option, it also places the entire salary of the Utility Director on the Utility Department and its customers, who are all residents of Welaka. Hiring a Utility Director would ensure the Utility Director has the experience, education, and qualifications needed to operate such an important asset of the Town. You might wonder who would set those qualifications. The answer is the Welaka Town Council that you have elected. The Town Council would set the qualifications and hire the Utility Director, and they would work at their will and pleasure. This is how Utility Departments are operated all over the country.

The third option is a Town Manager/Utility Director who the Welaka Town Council hires to oversee the day-to-day operations of the Town and the Utility Department. The Town Council would set the qualifications, and the person would work at their will and pleasure. This means if they fail to do their job or do a poor job, they can immediately be fired by the Welaka Town Council instead of having to wait two years when the Mayor runs the Town and is elected by the people. In this form of government, the Welaka Town Council has more oversight over your Town government as they set the policy, and the Town Manager/Utility Director carries out that policy. Also, by combining the Town Manager and Utility Director, the salary can be proportionately split between the Town of Welaka and the Welaka Utility Department, which have two separate budgets. This would help alleviate an increase in taxes because the Utility Department is paying part of the salary, and it would help alleviate an increase in Utility Rates because the Town government is paying part of the salary. In this option, the Mayor would still have the same voting power as the Welaka Town Council and would chair the meetings. They would not run the entire Town's day-to-day operations.

After reading this, you might say, "Well, the current way has worked. Why change it?" The answer is that it hasn't worked well. We see the issues with allowing an unqualified Mayor to run a Utility Department. That includes no maintenance to the system and improper repairs. We have also witnessed recent instances where the previous Mayors approved things against the Town ordinance. The Town of Welaka is growing and changing, and the local government is becoming more and more complex. As a resident of the Town, it is up to you to help decide how the local government will move forward. The consequences of taking no action could easily result in record-high taxes and utility bills caused by an elected Mayor who made poor decisions on behalf of the Town. Remember, I am not advocating for any specific form of government. I am only making you aware of the challenges and opportunities our Town faces and the decisions that must be made to protect our rural way of life and our small-town charm.

I hope you have found this month's insert from the Mayor's Desk informative. Next month, I will dive into a subject on the minds of all residents: taxes. I will discuss what local governments get most of your tax dollars and how they are used. Until next month, I hope the new year brings you joy and prosperity. I look forward to talking to you again next month.

Very Best Regards,



From The Council President

On January 17th our Town Attorney, Patrick Kennedy, held a workshop to discuss the possible boundaries of the community redevelopment area (CRA) so that he can proceed with the Finding of Necessity study. You may recall that the first step in establishing a CRA is to complete a Finding of Necessity study. This will formally identify the blight conditions within the targeted area and establish the area boundary. Blight, as you also may recall, means blight in the traditional sense with deteriorating or deteriorated structures but can also mean property that is underutilized for the current zoning which, of course, would include vacant land.

During the discussion, Mr. Kennedy laid out the Who, What, Where, Why and When of the process. Because of space constraints, I am only going to discuss the Who and What portions of the process right now.

There has been some confusion, especially with the Who portion of the process. This study will only include property that is in the current boundaries of the Town and does not include any property outside of the Town limits.

The What of the process describes the purpose of the Finding of Necessity, which is to identify slum and blight conditions within the targeted study area to determine whether a CRA can be established within the identified area.

I hope that you will follow the process as we move forward, whether virtually or through the newsletter, website, or by attending informational meetings in person. A full copy of the materials that Mr. Kennedy supplied are available at Town Hall.

In Your Service,

Jessica Finch, Welaka Town Council President



Need A Meeting With Your Mayor?

To schedule a meeting with your Mayor, please email
TownClerk@welaka-fl.gov



Do You Have News for the Town of Welaka? Publish it here!

Please email the digital image to TownClerk@welaka-fl.gov



Need To Report An Issue or Make A Town Code Violation Complaint?

Street or Park issue? Report online at www.TellTownHall.com
Code Enforcement Complaint? Email codes@welaka-fl.gov



Eyeglass Recycling

Drop your unused glasses by the Welaka Town for the South Putnam Lion Club to pick up.



Sponsor an Event

The Events Committee is seeking sponsors as they plan new events for the future. If you know anyone who would like to sponsor any of our events, please reach out to our Events Committee at events@welaka-fl.gov.

THE CHURCH of WELAKA
presents
THE SCRIBE

The Scribe is "an unforgettable, dramatic, musical presentation of the life of Christ as seen through the eyes of a Roman centurion soldier, who himself becomes a believer through the testimony of Simon Peter." It is played by a Hollywood actor, sung by a Nashville recording artist and a New York Broadway entertainer, Dr. Paul Pitts. Dr. Pitts wraps up the character of Andronicus Capito in this unprecedented play called The Scribe. Dr. Pitts does not perform this play to entertain you, but brings, in The Scribe, a Biblical story line that will change your life forever.



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LOVE OFFERINGS ACCEPTED.

Sunday, February 4
11am
638 CR 309, Welaka
386-467-3251

GFWC Woman's Club of Welaka
February Events at the Clubhouse



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 5 MONTHLY MEETING

9:30 Meet and Greet. 10:00 Meeting begins
Guest Speaker- Bob H Lee, Florida Game Warden & Author
Hear stories of nefarious characters on the St Johns River.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10 WINE AUCTION

5:30-7:30

The best winter activity in Welaka! Sample different wines and bid on your favorites. Beautiful wine baskets available for auction. Listen to Ron Marlowe's, professional pianist, dynamic and expressive performance.



\$5 donation or 2 bottles of same wine for silent auction.



MONDAY, FEBRUARY 12 BUNCO!

6:30 \$5.00

Bring your friends and neighbors.
Enjoy a good time of competition
and laughter.

Golf Tournament
March 2

NOTICE OF PUBLIC MEETING

The Town of Welaka, through receipt of a grant, is conducting a vulnerability assessment. The Town will conduct the first of two public meetings associated with the assessment on Tuesday, February 6, 2024, from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm at the Division of Forestry meeting room located at 794 CR 309 Welaka, FL 32193.

The purpose of the meeting is to gather information from property owners and residents on critical infrastructure and flooding issues while sharing the goals and steps involved with the assessment.

It's never
been so simple
to be so
significant.

One pint of blood
saves three lives.



Visit the **Donor Portal** to find a drive or make an appointment at lifesouth.org

Give local. Save local.
Welaka Town Hall
Blood Drive

Thursday, February 8

10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

400 4th Ave, Welaka

Scan to book your
appointment
today!



All donors will receive a recognition item and a free cholesterol screening. Donors must be 16 or older, weigh at least 110 pounds, and show photo I.D. 16-year-olds require written parental permission.

Donors can celebrate 50 years with Lifesouth with a limited edition throw blanket! (While supplies last)

LIFESOUTH
Community Blood Centers



Join us for our Second Annual
Wine Auction



Spend an evening with friends, wine,
hors d'oeuvres and entertainment.



Saturday, February 10
5:30-7:30
Woman's Club of Welaka



Entertainment provided by
professional concert pianist
Mr. Ron Marlowe



A wine-themed gift basket will be auctioned at the end of the evening

A donation of \$5 per person is requested; additional donations of two matching bottles of wine are appreciated. Must be 21 years old to attend.

Welaka Methodist Church

682 Third Avenue, Welaka, FL

You're invited to share praise and worship for the following Lenten celebrations!

Everyone is invited!

February 14th - Ash Wednesday service @ 5 PM, followed by a potluck soup/salad community meal

March 24th - Palm Sunday Service @ 11 AM

March 31st - Easter Sunrise Service @ 7 AM

WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Sundays @ 10:15 AM Children's Sunday School

Sundays @ 11:00 AM Worship Service

1st Sunday Communion

Wednesdays @ 9 AM Bible Study of Revelation

Questions - Call Pastor Julie Williams @ (386) 467-2336



Join us on this fundraiser
to improve and preserve
habitat, and wetlands in
Putnam County.

Dinner Banquet Feb. 16th • 6 p.m.

Coventry Oaks
104 Springside Shortcut Rd

Smoked Prime Rib
by Hawg Wash BBQ Joint of Welaka

Single Ticket
\$75

Cooler Table
\$1,000

Gun Table
\$1,500

For More Information
Ray Roerick (406) 853-7867
or email palatkaheat_airbdd@yahoo.com

The Buddy Bus Brings Mammograms to You!

Baptist MD Anderson Cancer Center's mobile mammography unit, the Buddy Bus, is coming to you! The Buddy Bus provides convenient 3D screening mammograms in a comfortable environment complete with waiting area, private dressing room, and an exam room staffed with registered technologists.



Where: Welaka Town Hall, 400 4th Ave, Welaka, Florida 32193

When: Saturday, February 24, 2024

Time: 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

To schedule an appointment for your annual mammogram and reserve your spot on the Buddy Bus, scan the QR code or visit: <https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/7378efa3104c478fa3d546e37d85fa1f>



Eligibility requirements:

- You must be at least 40 years old. If you are age 30 – 39 and have a family member who was diagnosed with breast cancer before age 50, then the "10-year rule" applies.
 - For example, with a first-degree relative diagnosed at age 42, your eligibility begins at age 32.
- One year since last mammogram.
- Not pregnant.
- No breast issues (such as a lump or discharge from nipple area).
- Can climb the unit stairs and stand for 10-15 minutes without assistance. If unable, please contact the Baptist Health's Hill Breast Center at 904.202.2222 option 6 to schedule an appointment at one of Baptist Health's convenient brick-and-mortar locations.
- Has seen an OB/GYN or primary care provider within the last year who is able to review screening results. If you haven't seen a provider within the year and would like to schedule an appointment with a primary care physician, call Baptist Health's care coordinators at 904.202.4YOU (202.4968).
- Reminder! Bring your insurance card and photo ID on the day of the event.

We can't wait to see you!

Questions? Email us at BuddyBus@bmcjax.com.



No insurance? Pink Ribbon Jax has donated 1,400 no-cost mammograms at Baptist Health for qualified community members. [Click here](#) or scan the QR code to learn more about how to receive your no-cost mammogram.



Town Of Welaka invites you to

FOOD truck



Fridays

March 1st April 5th May 3rd
June 7th July 5th August 2nd
5:30pm - 9:00 pm

Jefferson Smith Park, Welaka

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE

GFWC WOMAN'S CLUB OF WELAKA
11TH ANNUAL

GOLF TOURNAMENT

SATURDAY MARCH 2, 2024
THE OAKS GOLF CLUB

REGISTRATION
\$60/PLAYER
OR
\$50/OAKS CLUB MEMBERS

RAFFLE SILENT AUCTION
50/50

EMAIL: Courtneydesouza@gmail.com

TOWN OF WELAKA CONTACT LIST

WELAKA POLICE DEPARTMENT

Michael Porath - Police Chief

Direct Line: (386) 524-4015

(386) 467-9800 ext. 107

MPorath@welaka-fl.gov

AFTER HOURS: (386) 329-0801

EMERGENCY: 911

WELAKA MUNICIPAL SERVICES

Meghan Allmon - Town Clerk

(386) 467-9800 ext. 102

TownClerk@welaka-fl.gov

Ellen Dickason - Assistant Town Clerk

(386) 467-9800 ext. 104

EDickason@welaka-fl.gov

WELAKA UTILITY DEPARTMENT

Emma Sledge - Utility Clerk

(386) 467-9800 ext. 103

ESledge@welaka-fl.gov

WELAKA AFTER HOURS

(386) 467-9800

WELAKA CODE DEPARTMENT

Pauline Kinney

(386) 530-0336

Codes@welaka-fl.gov

WELAKA BUILDING DEPARTMENT

Mark Criswell - Universal Building Inspector

(386) 467-9800 ext. 105 or Option 4

Building@welaka-fl.gov

MAYOR'S OFFICE

Mayor Jamie Watts

(386) 467-9800 ext. 101

Direct: 386-524-4009

JWatts@welaka-fl.gov

WELAKA TOWN COUNCIL

Council President Jessica Finch

(386)467-9800, ext. 200

JFinch@welaka-fl.gov

Councilwoman Kimberly Dugger

(386) 467-9800, ext. 201

KDugger@welaka-fl.gov

Councilwoman Tonya Long

(386) 467-9800, ext. 202

TonyaLong@welaka-fl.gov

Councilwoman Kathy Washington

(386) 467-9800, ext. 203

KWashington@welaka-fl.gov

Town Attorney, Patrick Kennedy

TownAttorney@welaka-fl.gov

Events Committee: events@welaka-fl.gov

Waste Pro: (386) 328-5445

Waste Pro: (386) 328-5445

Putnam County Animal Control

(386) 329-0396

It is our pleasure to serve the Town of Welaka!



February



Welaka, FL
River of Lakes



2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1	2	3
4	5 Trash, Recycling & Yard Debris Pickup	6 Vulnerability Assessment Meeting (Flooding Issues) 6-7:30 PM Div. of Forestry Building	7 Welaka Candidate Forum Hosted by Friends of Welaka 6 PM - Shrimp R Us	8 Life South Blood Bus 10 AM - 5 PM - Town Hall	9 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting 9 AM - Town Hall	10
11	12 Trash & Recycling Pickup	13 Town Council Meeting 6 PM - Town Hall	14	15 Meter-Reading Day Zoning Board Meeting 6 PM - Town Hall	16	17
18	19 Town Hall Closed (President's Day Observed) Trash, Recycling & Yard Debris Pickup	20 Tree Ordinance Public Workshop 6-8 PM - Town Hall	21	22 Tree Board Meeting 6 PM - Town Hall	23	24 Mammogram Buddy Bus 9 AM - 4 PM - Town Hall
25	26 Trash & Recycling Pickup	27 Code Board Meeting 6 PM - Town Hall	28	29		

PLEASE MAKE SURE YOUR FULL ACCOUNT NUMBER IS ON YOUR PAYMENT
PLEASE DO NOT STAPLE OR PLACE WHITE-OUT ON ANY CHECKS OR MONEY ORDERS

Thank you!