



# Welaka Gazette

January 2024



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## From The Mayor's Desk

### **Update on the Proposed New Town Charter**

This month, I'm taking a break from my regular Mayor's updates to discuss a topic many of you have brought up: the new Town Charter proposal. I want to provide some clarity and context without giving my personal opinion. Here's what's been happening:

### **What is a Town Charter Anyway?**

Before we dive into the specifics, let's cover the basics. A Town Charter is like the constitution for our Town – it sets out how the Town is governed. It's a crucial document that guides how our local government functions and serves its people. It's important to understand what we're talking about when we discuss updating it.

### **The Journey to Proposing a New Charter**

When I took office as your Mayor, updating our Town Charter, which dates back to 1947, was one of my priorities. On July 13, 2021, the Welaka Town Council passed a resolution (Resolution 2021-06) to form a Charter Review Committee. The Council saw that the Charter was outdated, possibly not in line with state law, and needed a complete overhaul for the Town's welfare. They emphasized the need for community involvement in this process, hence the Charter Review Committee.

### ***Appointment of Committee Members:***

The Town Council was responsible for appointing the members of this Committee. These appointments were made with the aim of representing a diverse cross-section of our community, ensuring a broad range of perspectives in the review process.

### ***Committee's Purpose:***

The primary purpose of this Committee was to conduct an exhaustive examination of the current Town Charter, identifying outdated areas that are inconsistent with state law or do not serve the Town's and its residents' best interests.

### ***The Committee's responsibilities included:***

- Reviewing each section of the existing Charter.
- Holding public meetings to gather community input and feedback.
- Proposing amendments and updates that align with modern legal standards and community needs.
- Preparing a revised draft of the Town Charter for Town Council consideration and eventually for a vote by the Town's residents.

The Committee was set up and, for two years, held 21 public meetings to thoroughly revise the Charter. The goal was to bring the revised Charter to you, the voters, for a final decision.

### **Misconceptions Cleared Up: The Role of the Town Council**

In our last Town Council Meeting, a motion to put the new Charter on the March 2024 ballot was made by our Council President but didn't receive a second, so it could not proceed forward. This brings me to an important point I need to clarify.

There's a misconception that the Town Council was going to approve the new Charter. This isn't correct. Under Florida Law, the Council doesn't have the power to approve a new Town Charter. They can only approve putting it on the ballot for you, the residents of Welaka, to vote on. Adopting the new Charter is entirely in your hands, not the Council's.

## What's Wrong With Our Current Town Charter?

Now, moving on to the Town Charter. The first question was, what was outdated about the current Town Charter?

### Outdated Elements of the Current Town Charter

One of the primary concerns with our existing Town Charter is its datedness, impacting both its relevance and legality. Here are some specific areas where the Charter shows its age:

1. **Land Ownership Requirement for Office Holders:** Perhaps the most glaring issue is the requirement that only landowners, termed 'freeholders,' can run for key positions like Mayor or Town Council member. This exclusionary rule not only limits participation in our local government to a small segment of our community; for example, those living in Sugar Mill Woods could not hold office because they don't own land here. It is also unconstitutional. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled such requirements violate the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution, making this aspect of our Charter legally indefensible.
2. **Vague Residency Requirements:** The Charter lacks clarity on when candidates must establish residency in Welaka. This ambiguity means non-residents could potentially run for office, only needing to move here if elected. Such vagueness undermines the principle that local leaders should have established roots and a deep understanding of the community they serve.
3. **Mayor's Extensive Powers:** Our current Charter endows the Mayor with an unusually broad range of powers, combining administrative, legislative, and even judicial functions. Specifically, per the current Town Charter, the Mayor acts as the judge of the Municipal Court for the trial of all offenders against the municipal ordinances. This concentration of power is problematic, as it blurs the lines between different branches of government and raises concerns about checks and balances.
4. **Municipal Court and Enforcement Powers:** The current Charter empowers the Mayor to issue warrants to have brought before him any person(s) charged with the violation of the town ordinances and to set bail. The Town Marshall even carries out these orders set by the Mayor. If followed, this arrangement places an extraordinary amount of authority in the hands of a single individual and could lead to potential abuses of power.
5. **Imprisonment and Forced Labor Provisions:** Alarmingly, the Charter stipulates that individuals unable to pay fines immediately upon conviction of violation of a Town ordinance may be imprisoned and compelled to perform labor for the Town. This provision, arguably a relic from a bygone era, is ethically questionable and likely legally indefensible in today's legal landscape.
6. **Taxation and Assessment Practices:** The Charter allows the elected Town Treasurer to collect taxes and allows the Town Council to impose higher tax rates than state law permits and may levy additional taxes they deem necessary. Moreover, the Town Clerk, appointed without any specific qualifications, is responsible for assessing your property values for taxation. This lack of qualification requirements for such a crucial role could lead to inconsistent and potentially unfair tax assessments.

These outdated elements underscore the urgent need for a thorough revision of the Town Charter. The 1947 version does not reflect modern legal standards, ethical considerations, or the democratic principles we uphold today.

### Our Town's Government Structure:

I've been discussing some of the issues within our current Town Charter. Now, I'd like to dive into whether our Town operates under a Strong or Weak Mayor system. According to our Town Charter, we have a Strong Mayor form of government. What does this mean? Well, as your Mayor, I'm the Chief Administrator of Welaka. I manage the day-to-day activities, collaborate with the Police Chief for Police Department operations, and oversee our Utility Department.

### Understanding the Three Branches of Government:

We've all learned about the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial, right? In our Strong Mayor system, I'm at the helm of the executive branch. But there's more - I also hold legislative powers since I'm a voting member of the Council, allowing me to help create ordinances. If we strictly followed our Town Charter, I'd even have judicial powers to judge and punish ordinance violations. This means I could make, enforce, and judge violators of Town ordinances. Sounds like a lot of power in one place, doesn't it? That's a departure from the usual idea of checks and balances in government.

### Strong Mayor vs. Council-Manager Government:

So, what's the difference between a Strong Mayor government and a Council-Manager government? In our current system, as the Mayor, I am elected by you and act as the Chief Administrator. In a Council-Manager system, the

Town Council hires a Town Manager who works according to their directives. The manager's job, whether elected or hired, is to implement the policies the Town Council sets - the same Council that you elect to represent you.

### **Accountability in Different Government Forms:**

In a Strong Mayor system like ours, if the Town Council feels I'm not adhering to their policies, they can't do much about it. I'm elected, so only you, the voters, can remove me unless I break state law. In contrast, under the Council-Manager system, the Council can fire the manager if they're not carrying out the Council's policies and hire someone else. Now, who decides the qualifications for the Town Manager? In Welaka, the Town Council would set this criteria.

### **Qualifications and Accountability Concerns:**

Under our current system, the Mayor, who acts as the Town Manager, needs only two qualifications: 1. being a Town resident, and 2. being a registered voter. This means the person in charge of running the Town, the Utility Department, and even parts of the Police Department do not need education, experience, or knowledge of government. If the elected Town Council realizes this person isn't up to the job, they're pretty much stuck until the next election in two years. Some folks have mentioned the possibility of a recall election. Still, state law only allows this after the first six months in office. Plus, recall elections, like the recent one we saw in Crescent City, are rarely successful.

### **A Setback with the New Town Charter:**

Unfortunately, the Town Council failed to approve the ordinance to place the new Charter on the ballot for you to vote for or against in the March 2024 election. This situation led to several members of the Charter Review Committee resigning from their positions. As a result, we're left with at least two, possibly three, vacant spots on the Charter Review Committee.

### **Your Participation is Vital:**

As a resident of the Town of Welaka, your involvement in this process is crucial. Here's the current plan: the Town Council intends to fill these vacant positions on the Charter Review Committee at this month's meeting and then organize a second series of public meetings. These meetings will address any additional updates needed in the proposed Town Charter, including what form of government you wish to see the Town operate in moving forward. Once this happens, the goal is to place it on the November 2024 ballot, where you can vote for or against the new Town Charter.

### **Why Your Participation Matters:**

Participating in these meetings is of paramount importance because the Town Charter is one of the most critical documents for our Town. The issues with our current Charter are evident, and action needs to be taken to address them and determine the direction of our government moving forward. Each year, state and federal laws make local government more complex, highlighting the need for a qualified individual to oversee the day-to-day operations of the Town. Ultimately, the voters of Welaka must make the choice of our Town's government. However, it's clear that we cannot continue to function effectively under the current Charter.

### **A Grateful Acknowledgment:**

Before we wrap up, I want to express my appreciation to the current and past members of the Charter Review Committee. Your dedication over the past two years, even as it took precious time away from your families and was unpaid work, has not gone unnoticed. Your commitment to the betterment of our Town is deeply appreciated. Our goal is to continue to move forward in updating the Town Charter, ensuring your hard work was not in vain. This month's message from the Mayor's desk may have felt different. However, dispelling rumors and myths and separating fact from fiction was necessary. Your time spent reading this section is genuinely appreciated.

Next month I will delve deep into the financial cost of hiring a Town Manager versus increasing the pay of the Mayor to continue functioning as the full-time Town Manager. I will also discuss the need for a qualified Utility Director and how the Town cannot continue to elect a Mayor with no qualification requirements and no knowledge of operating a utility system to be in charge of the Town's drinking water. I'm looking forward to talking to you again next month as we continue to work together for the betterment of Welaka.

*Very Best Regards,*



Jamie D. Watts  
MAYOR

# **From The Council President**

As you are reading this, we have arrived in 2024! As I reflect on this past year and ponder the upcoming year, I am excited about possibilities ahead for our Town. Every new beginning holds promise and there are so many exciting things ahead for our community!

In the next few weeks, you should see notices for workshops and Town Hall meetings from our Police Chief, our Town Attorney, and the Charter Review Committee. Chief Porath will be answering residents' questions and addressing their concerns at a Town Hall meeting scheduled for January 4<sup>th</sup> at 6 PM. The Town Attorney will hold a Special Workshop to discuss the proposed boundaries for our Community Redevelopment Area, and the Charter Review Committee has invited Jim Hanson to discuss the position of City Manager and answer questions from the audience. These are in addition to the regularly scheduled Council, Committee and Board Meetings scheduled for January.

By spring we should see the groundbreaking for our new Wastewater Treatment Plant and by late spring we should know if we have funding for the Historical Property Survey grant that has been recommended for approval. Around the same time, we should hear if our two FRDAP applications to update and improve Jefferson Smith Park and create a pickleball court at the Field of Dreams Park were approved.

I've just named a few upcoming happenings and opportunities; more are on the horizon. My biggest wish for our Town is to have more citizen involvement in 2024. I would love for each and every one of you reading this to take a personal interest in all that is going on, ultimately to create the Town that you love to live in.

Wishing you and yours a happy, healthy, and abundant 2024!

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](http://www.TellTownHall.com)  
Code Enforcement Complaint? Email [codes@welaka-fl.gov](mailto: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](mailto:events@welaka-fl.gov).



## **ANNUAL GOLF CART REGISTRATION STICKERS HAVE BEEN DISCONTINUED**

*Please make sure to follow the regulations in ORD 2010-08.*

*Registration refund checks will be mailed.*

## **ANNUAL BUSINESS TAX LICENSE IS REQUIRED BY OCTOBER 1, 2023**

**Applications and the Fee Schedule ORD 2022-07 are located in the Welaka Town Hall foyer and on the front page of the [www.welaka-fl.gov](http://www.welaka-fl.gov) website.**

**You Must Provide: Insurance Certificate(s), Business License(s)**

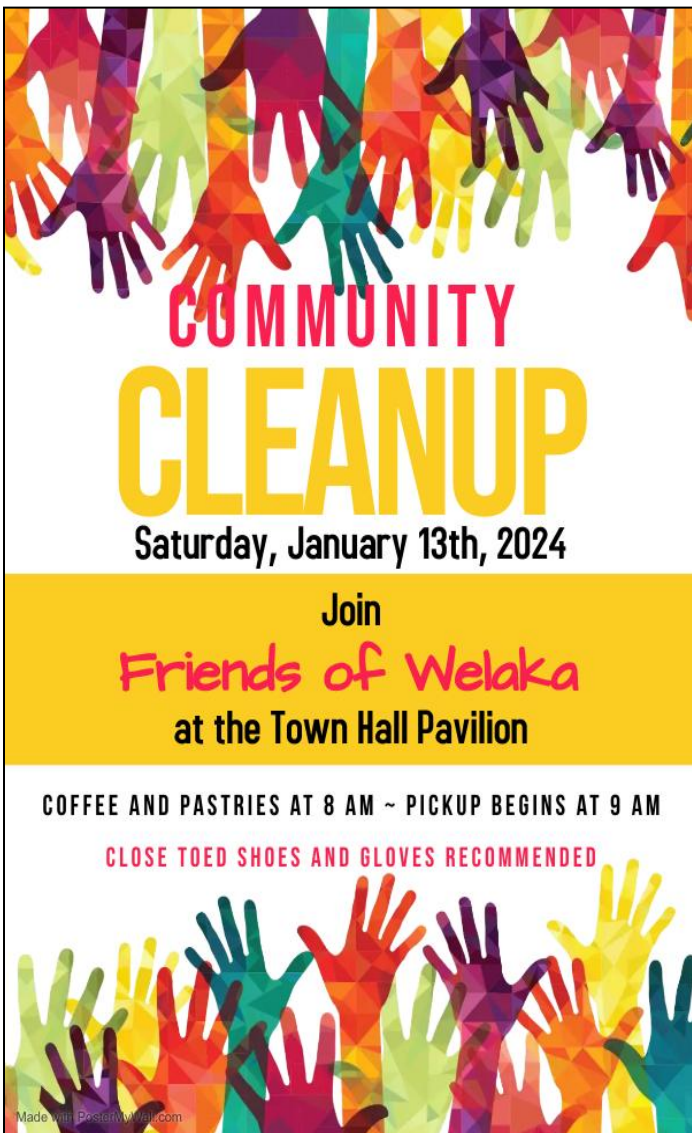
**(Credit/Debit Card, Cash, Check or Money Order)**



## **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.**



**COMMUNITY  
CLEANUP**

**Saturday, January 13th, 2024**

Join  
**Friends of Welaka**  
at the Town Hall Pavilion

COFFEE AND PASTRIES AT 8 AM ~ PICKUP BEGINS AT 9 AM

CLOSE TOED SHOES AND GLOVES RECOMMENDED

Made with PosterMyW.com



A new Event Center has opened in the Town of Welaka!  
Available for family reunions, club meetings, parties, holidays, etc.  
According to owner, Charlie Chapman, the Event Center gives Welaka residents and visitors an optional venue that can accommodate 60+ people. It took a year to complete as he wanted it to be first class.  
*IT CERTAINLY DELIVERS!*  
The building boasts high ceilings, beautiful ambient lighting, comfortable seating and tables, a kitchen, and even a VIP room.  
Visitors will be pleasantly surprised at what awaits them beyond the metal facade.  
Conveniently located in downtown Welaka at the corner of 4th Avenue and Palmetto Street.  
To book the Event Center, please call (904) 669-7538  
THANK YOU!

GFWC WOMAN'S CLUB OF WELAKA  
INVITES



**Everyone to play BUNCO!**

Second Monday  
of each month starting

January 8

6:30 PM \$5.00

644 CR 309 Welaka



# Grief Support Group

*Help and encouragement after the death of a loved one*

A GriefShare support group is a safe, welcoming place where people understand the difficult emotions of grief. At this 13-week group, you'll receive valuable guidance and tips, leading you to relief, comfort, and peace of mind.

### Contact Us Today

Mondays 6:00-8:00PM  
Jan. 11-April 8th  
1st Baptist Church of Welaka  
Call Jobie: 252-423-0746  
email: JobieJEM@gmail.com

[griefshare.org](http://griefshare.org)

# Grieving the death of a spouse?

*Or do you know someone who is?*

Your life has changed forever. The daily emotions and challenges can seem too hard to bear.

### You'll hear:

- Practical advice from others who've been there.
- What to expect in your grief.
- How to cope with life without your spouse.
- Why it won't always hurt this much.

**Find help at a Loss of a Spouse seminar.**

# LOSS OF A SPOUSE

**Please join us for this encouraging seminar.**



Monday Jan. 8th 6-8PM  
1st Baptist Church of Welaka  
Call: Jobie 252-423-0746  
Email JobieJEM@gmail.com



*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	Cooler Table	Gun Table
\$75	\$1,000	\$1,500

For More Information

**Ray Roerick (406) 853-7867**  
or email [palatkaheat\\_airbdd@yahoo.com](mailto:palatkaheat_airbdd@yahoo.com)

**GFWC WOMAN'S CLUB OF WELAKA, INC.**  
Contact Courtney (904) 554-6458



## 11th Annual Golf Tournament

**The Oaks Golf Club**

**Saturday, March 2, 2024**

Registration: 8:00 am

Tee-Off: 9:00 am

Rain-Out Date: Saturday, March 9, 2024

**Scramble:** Captain's Choice 1<sup>st</sup> \$200 & 2<sup>nd</sup> \$100

**Closest to the Hole:** Men's and Ladies \$25 each

**Club Member:** \$50 and **Non-Club Player:** \$60

**One Random Drawing**

*We need Players, Sponsors, and Gift Certificates. We need your help to make this Tournament the biggest success ever!*

**Pick up Registration Forms at:** The Oaks Golf Club or the Welaka Woman's Club on Tuesdays.

**Registration Forms returned on or before February 18<sup>th</sup> will receive FREE \$2 Raffle Tickets**

Immediately following the Tournament, enjoy a complimentary luncheon at The Oaks Clubhouse prepared by the Woman's Club of Welaka. The results of all Winners will be announced, along with Raffles, Silent Auction Prizes, and the 50/50 Winner!

**A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Crescent City High School Band!**

Organized 1959  
MEMBER  
General Federation of Women's Clubs International  
GFWC Florida Federation of Women's Clubs

# 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

*It is our pleasure to serve the Town of Welaka!*



# January



**Welaka, FL**  
River of Lakes



**2024**

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1 Town Hall Closed (New Years Day Observed)	2 Trash & Recycling Pickup	3	4 Welaka Police Dept. Public Meeting 6:00 PM - Town Hall Tree Board Public Workshop 1 - 3 PM - Town Hall	5 Citizens Advisory Committee Meeting 9:00 AM - Town Hall	6
7	8 Trash, Recycling & Yard Debris Pickup Events Committee Meeting 5:30 PM - Town Hall Pavilion State Fire Inspections Welaka Commercial Businesses	9 Town Council Meeting 6:00 PM - Town Hall State Fire Inspections for Welaka Commercial Businesses	10 State Fire Inspections for Welaka Commercial Businesses	11	12	13
14	15 Town Hall Closed (Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Observed) Trash & Recycling Pickup	16 Meter-Reading Day	17	18 Zoning Board Meeting 6:00 PM - Town Hall	19 Arbor Day (Florida)	20
21	22 Trash, Recycling & Yard Debris Pickup	23 Code Board Meeting 6:00 PM - Town Hall	24	25 Tree Board Meeting 6:00 PM - Town Hall	26	27 Arbor Day Event 10 AM - 12 PM Downtown Park
28	29 Trash & Recycling Pickup	30	31			

**PLEASE MAKE SURE YOUR FULL ACCOUNT NUMBER IS ON YOUR PAYMENT**

Thank you!