



**Columbia City Council Work Session Minutes
Tuesday, May 5, 2026**

Call to Order

The Columbia City Council conducted a Budget Workshop on Tuesday, May 5, 2026 at City Hall (Mayor's Conference Room), 1737 Main Street, Columbia, South Carolina 29201. The Honorable Daniel J. Rickenmann, Mayor called the meeting to order at 10:12 a.m. and the following members were present: The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr., The Honorable Will Brennan, The Honorable Tina N. Herbert, Mayor Pro-Tempore, The Honorable Peter M. Brown, The Honorable Tyler D. Bailey, and The Honorable Sam P. Johnson. Also present were Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager and Ms. Erika D. Moore Hammond, City Clerk. This meeting was advertised in accordance with the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act.

Invocation

The Honorable Edward H. McDowell, Jr. offered the invocation.

Adoption of the Agenda

Upon a motion made by Mr. Bailey and seconded by Mr. Johnson, Council voted unanimously to adopt the agenda as presented.

City Council Discussion

1. Fiscal Year 2026/2027 Proposed Budget — Ms. Missy Caughman, Assistant City Manager / Strategic Initiatives & Innovation

*General Fund
Public Safety Priorities*

Ms. Missy Caughman, Assistant City Manager for Strategic Initiatives & Innovation presented an overview of the General Fund budget, noting projected revenues of approximately \$166 million, which is an increase of \$5 million. She explained that revenues can fluctuate due to one-time situations and rate-related factors. She reported \$14.2 million in transfers, along with a reduced capital lease of approximately \$4 million for FY 2025–2026 compared to a typical lease amount of \$9 million. She stated that property taxes account for approximately 45% of total revenues and with other primary sources including licenses and permits make up roughly 75% of the general fund revenues. She noted that one-time revenues have largely been exhausted, while service demands continue to grow faster than revenues. This limits flexibility within the budget.

Mr. William "Skip" Holbrook, Police Chief / Columbia Police Department shared the Police Department's ongoing efforts to leverage technology and utilizing cadets and civilian staff for minor incidents and within the Real Time Crime Center. He discussed the return of subject-matter experts, concerns regarding retirement-eligible employees, and the increasing costs associated with equipment such as body cameras, vehicles, fuel, and

protective gear. He stated that a fully equipped officer costs approximately \$193,000.

Councilor McDowell thanked Chief Holbrook for presenting the strategic plan, noting that it demonstrated a proactive approach and provided the City with a clear strategy for 2025-2030.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager stated that the City has hired 673 sworn firefighters since 2015 and noted that recruit classes are more full than they have been in many years. She said compensation investments and the step program have helped reduce vacancies from approximately 75 to 49 over the past year. She also highlighted recent capital upgrades, including the burn building renovations, Ladder 7, Engine 12, the swift water response truck package, and enhancements to firefighter safety training and operational capacity to support the City's growth.

Ms. Missy Caughman, Assistant City Manager for Strategic Initiatives & Innovation shared the Fire Department's operating capital and staffing needs, including additional fire marshals and safety officers to support the City's growing number of commercial buildings and development. She noted the department also requires specialized equipment and continued fire station modernization, including updates related to privacy accommodations, exhaust systems, and firefighter decontamination areas. Long-term capital improvement planning will also include additional station needs and the potential addition of a ladder truck and staffing for the Harbison Station to address growth in that area. She noted these long-term Fire Department needs are estimated between \$20 and \$30 million.

Mayor Rickenmann emphasized the need for a long-term strategic approach to fire station planning and public safety investments. He noted that while some historic fire stations may still be viable, the City must realistically assess when existing locations no longer meet service boundaries, ISO ratings, and response zone needs. He stressed that the City should not plan around minimum standards, but instead fully understand future operational requirements as Columbia continues to grow and host major events as the capital city. He also expressed concern that current projections may underestimate future public safety needs and requested clearer estimates and scheduling information for station improvements and relocations.

Mr. Aubrey Jenkins, Fire Chief / Columbia Fire Department discussed the increasing number of EMS and vehicle accident calls handled by the Fire Department, noting that most responses are not fire-related and that the wear and tear on equipment and fleet vehicles has become significant. He stated that the City may be missing reimbursement opportunities related to emergency responses and emphasized the need for additional quick response vehicles and personnel to reduce strain on high-cost apparatuses, extend equipment lifespan, and improve operational efficiency.

Mayor Rickenmann highlighted that fewer than 10% of fire department calls involve active firefighting, with the majority consisting of EMS responses, vehicle accidents, and other service calls that place significant wear on equipment and personnel. He noted that many associated costs, including disposables and operational strain, are not reimbursed, further compounded by the demands of serving as the capital city. He stressed the importance of incorporating these realities into the City's long-term public safety planning, including adjustments to operations, staffing, and regional coordination. He called for stronger collaboration with county partners to develop a comprehensive plan that addresses future growth and prepares for increased demand tied to major economic development projects such as Scout Motors.

Councilor Brennan agreed that while the City must address immediate public safety needs, it also needs a broader strategy that accounts for operations, equipment, and facilities over the short, intermediate, and long term. He suggested the City consider engaging a third-party consultant with specialized expertise to help evaluate operational efficiencies, identify potential cost savings, and develop a comprehensive plan for future investments in equipment, facilities, and overall fire service operations.

Mayor Rickenmann emphasized the importance of modernizing fire department operations, noting that departments nationwide are adopting new staffing models and shift structures to improve quality of life, recruitment, and employee retention. He stated that the City should undertake a comprehensive review of public safety operations and develop a detailed long-term plan that can be clearly presented to the public. He stressed that public safety must remain a top priority, as safe neighborhoods, business stability, and economic growth all depend on maintaining effective emergency services.

Councilor Brown stated that the discussion represents a pivotal moment the City has been working toward for several years. He emphasized the need to develop a comprehensive economic and cost-of-services model that aligns future growth with the financial demands of providing public safety and other municipal services. While these issues have been discussed previously, the current conversation marks the beginning of a more formal and coordinated planning effort.

Mayor Rickenmann noted that the City can no longer operate as though it faces the same demands as a typical municipality, emphasizing the significant impact of hosting major events and serving as a regional hub. He stated that the increasing strain on public services is becoming unsustainable for residents and taxpayers to absorb without adjustment. Mayor Rickenmann acknowledged that maintaining the appropriate balance between service levels and financial responsibility will require difficult decisions, potential operational changes, and a clear understanding of the associated costs, while also recognizing opportunities to improve the system moving forward.

Councilor Johnson pointed out that there have been significant modernization efforts within the fire service that the City needs to pay attention to.

Mayor Rickenmann stated that while the City understands its growing public safety needs, it must develop a clearer long-term plan and communicate those needs effectively to the public. He emphasized the importance of investing not only in personnel, such as additional fire marshals, but also in technology and infrastructure that can improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens, and enhance real-time information sharing. The City has moved beyond simply maintaining current service levels and must now focus on growth to meet increasing demands tied to its role as the capital city, university community, and regional destination. He also highlighted the financial strain placed on residents and businesses due to large numbers of visitors and tax-exempt properties, stressing the need to explore balanced funding solutions and study how other communities are addressing similar public safety challenges.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager, noted that the most recent fire study, completed in 2022, was shared with the Fire Advisory Committee and can also be distributed to City Council to establish a baseline for further discussion.

Mayor Rickenmann emphasized the importance of reviewing service call data across the City to better understand where demand is highest and how some calls may be reduced through improved resource allocation or public awareness of available services. He noted

that recurring hotspots, including areas involving unsheltered populations and other high-demand neighborhoods, should be carefully evaluated as part of a broader, data-driven public safety strategy. He stressed that future decisions must balance emotional concerns for firefighter and public safety officer well-being with clear statistical analysis to ensure staffing and resource decisions are based on actual need. He highlighted the potential for modern technology to improve efficiency in inspections and operations, citing examples where digital tools can streamline communication, reduce delays, and save both time and costs, reinforcing the need for a consultant-led, data-informed planning approach moving forward.

Councilor McDowell noted that while aspects of the current discussion have been raised over the years, they have not been fully addressed in a comprehensive way. He expressed appreciation that these issues are now formally on the table and emphasized the importance of taking appropriate action moving forward. Councilor McDowell also noted that some of the proposed ideas would not require additional cost to taxpayers, reinforcing the opportunity to implement meaningful improvements without creating a new financial burden.

Mr. Harry Tinsley, Emergency Management Director provided updates regarding the Public Safety Complex at 400 Laurel Street and Real Time Crime Center technology upgrades. He thanked City Council for its continued support of the City's emergency operations and noted that the department relocated from 1225 Lady Street to 1800 Main Street in October 2020 and is now preparing to move into the new facility. He explained that integrating Emergency Management with the Police Department and Real Time Crime Center has increased the need for upgraded technology, workspace, and data processing capabilities. He stated that some systems are beginning to age out and require modernization to support live situational awareness, emergency response coordination, and multi-agency operations during public events and emergencies. He also highlighted the growing role of drone technology in future public safety operations.

Mr. Henry Simons, Assistant City Manager of Operations provided updates on the Public Safety Complex and Municipal Court relocation efforts. He stated that the Public Safety Complex at 400 Laurel Street is expected to be completed by the end of the year. He shared that the City is exploring relocating Municipal Court into the former federal courthouse and noted that a design firm will need to be hired once the City gains access to the facility. He stated that renovation costs are expected to be significantly less than previous estimates because the building already functions as a courthouse and primarily requires upgrades to lighting, technology, and other infrastructure.

Mayor Rickenmann emphasized the need to engage the State in discussions regarding highway maintenance and litter cleanup, noting that state-funded highway crews are already responsible for maintaining nearby interstates and gateway corridors. He raised concerns about visible trash along key roadways within the City, citing specific examples of heavily littered medians that negatively impact public perception. Mayor Rickenmann suggested exploring a partnership or expanded coordination with the State's existing maintenance contractors to extend cleanup efforts onto additional corridors. He also noted that similar state-maintained highways appear cleaner and questioned whether existing resources could be leveraged more effectively to improve conditions across the City's primary entryways.

Councilor Bailey said we would like to see the State do their part, and they're not doing it.

Councilor Brennan highlighted the need to focus on near-term actions that can be

implemented within the next year. He stated that establishing a partnership with the State is unlikely to be resolved in that timeframe.

Ms. Missy Caughman, Assistant City Manager for Strategic Initiatives & Innovation outlined the proposed programs, noting that the neighborhood initiative would be a community-partnered effort allowing neighborhoods to manage cleanup activities within their own areas. She explained that the main thoroughfare program would be contractor-led, providing approximately eight cleanings per year across roughly 50 miles of the City's primary corridors.

Mr. Robert Anderson, Public Works Director reviewed the City's ongoing beautification and maintenance efforts, including residential street sweeping, median sweeping, sidewalk edging, and litter cleanup operations targeting known hotspots throughout the City. He also highlighted the proposed \$200,000 Neighborhood Beautification Grant Program, which would provide signage grants and require participating neighborhoods to complete annual cleanup events to help enhance the City's appearance and walkability. He also provided updates on the City's Animal Shelter needs, noting that prior studies determined the current facility should be replaced rather than renovated. With construction estimates now projected between \$25–30 million, staff is proposing an initial \$2 million investment to begin assessments and design services for a replacement facility.

Ms. Teresa Wilson, City Manager gave an overview on the capital replacement needs, noting that approximately \$15 million is needed annually to support lease programs for police, fire, public works, parks and recreation, and other general fund department vehicles, equipment, and technology refreshes, with debt service estimated at \$2.5 million. She stated that new capital purchases have not been included in the lease program and will depend on budget availability. She emphasized that expanding City programs and services requires continued investment in equipment and technology. While the City has not received formal notice, staff has been verbally advised to expect a proposed intergovernmental daily rate increase of at least \$25 per day for the ASG Detention Center.

There was discussion about unappropriated surplus funds; the economic impact on the City; service delivery demands; whether unused funding remains with departments or returns to the general fund; Police Department staffing levels, including Code Enforcement positions; additional active shooter response equipment; public safety technology investments; lifespan and replacement costs of fire equipment and emergency calls related to the University; Real Time Crime Center technology upgrades; the timeline for the Municipal Court project; beautification funding; litter and debris along SCDOT roads and major thoroughfares; prioritizing cleanup areas; litter enforcement strategies; signage and public messaging to communicate expectations for maintaining the appearance of the City; youth and neighborhood engagement in cleanup initiatives; LED streetlight upgrades and their impact on public safety; and long-term animal shelter needs.

Executive Session

Upon a motion made by Ms. Herbert and seconded by Mr. McDowell, Council voted unanimously to enter into Executive Session at 12:25 p.m. to discuss **Items 2 and 3**.

2. Discussion of negotiations incident to proposed contractual arrangements pursuant to S. C. Code §30-4-70(a)(2)

*We Love Five Points, LLC
Congaree Riverfront District Business Park
Convention Center District Business Park
Budgetary Requirements Related to the Intergovernmental Fire Agreement
CRC 911 Communications Agreement*

3. Receipt of legal advice relating to matters covered by attorney-client privilege pursuant to S.C. Code §30-4-70(a)(2)

Brittany Ruffin as PR of the Estate of JR v. the City of Columbia

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 1:45 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted:

Erika D. Moore Hammond, MMC, CPM
City Clerk