

MINUTES
STRATEGIC PLANNING AND VISIONING SESSION
DESTIN CITY COUNCIL
FEBRUARY 21, 2025
CITY HALL ANNEX COUNCIL CHAMBERS
8:30 AM

The Council of the City of Destin met in regular session with the following members and staff present:

Destin City Council

Councilmember Sandy Trammell
Councilmember Kevin Schmidt
Councilmember Torey Geile

Councilmember Dewey Destin
Councilmember Jim Bagby

Destin City Staff

City Manager Larry Jones
Public Works Director Michael Burgess
Human Resources Director Jamie Haynes
Dep. Dir of Comm. Dev. Steve O'Connor
Public Information Director Tamara Young
Parks & Recreation Director Lisa Firth
Deputy Parks & Recreation Director Ryan Reed
Deputy Community Development Director

City Clerk Rey Bailey
Building Official Noell Bell
Sr. Admin Services Coord. Sheril Bethea
IT Director Andy Peters
Finance Director Krystal Strickland
Library Director Wen Livingston
Principal Planner Daniel Butler
City Attorney Kimberly Kopp

CALL TO ORDER, INVOCATION AND PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mayor Pro Tem Dewey Destin called the meeting to order at 8:30 AM; followed by the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

A) City Manager

The City Manager delivered an address emphasizing the importance of accountability, continuous improvement, and a strong organizational culture within the City of Destin. The speech outlined key principles for leadership, workplace efficiency, and team dynamics while reinforcing the city's commitment to excellence and service to the community.

1. Accountability & Improvement

- Mistakes should be analyzed to determine their causes and prevent recurrence, rather than focusing on blame.
- Holding individuals accountable is essential, but problem-solving and progress should be the primary focus.

2. Focus & Productivity

- Employees must strip away distractions ("noise and clutter") to concentrate on essential tasks.

- Avoid ineffective efforts—symbolized by the "Doom Loom" metaphor—where individuals expend energy without achieving results.
 - Progress should be measured daily, ensuring every effort aligns with the city's vision.
3. **Work Ethic: Plow Horses vs. Show Horses**
- The city needs "plow horses" (or "tugboats")—workers dedicated to progress rather than appearance.
 - Hard work and persistence are more valuable than mere presentation.
4. **Momentum & Vision**
- Once positive momentum is established, the organization should capitalize on it to sustain progress.
 - Visioning is about setting long-term goals rather than getting lost in short-term tasks.
5. **Work-Life Balance & Organizational Citizenship**
- A positive work environment leads to better performance and happier employees.
 - The culture should foster teamwork where employees help one another beyond their formal job descriptions.
 - Leadership should promote work-life balance to ensure overall job satisfaction and commitment.
6. **Leadership & Principles**
- Leadership should be about guiding by example rather than just giving orders.
 - The city should adhere to core values such as honesty, integrity, respect, and transparency.
 - Adaptability in style is acceptable, but principles should remain firm (e.g., Jefferson's quote on standing "like a rock" on matters of principle).
7. **Operational Guidelines for City Staff**
- Three commitments for city employees:
 1. **No Drama** – Avoid unnecessary workplace conflict.
 2. **No Surprises** – Keep leadership informed to prevent unexpected issues.
 3. **No Embarrassments** – Maintain professionalism to protect the city's reputation.
8. **Commitment to Excellence**
- Striving for greatness requires only a little extra effort, so the city should aim for excellence rather than mediocrity.
 - The city should continuously work towards improvement rather than settling for being "good enough."
9. **Council's Role in Visioning**
- The purpose of the session is for the city council to define a broad vision for the future.
 - The focus should be on long-term planning and priorities rather than specific, minor projects.

- The council's guidance will shape budgetary decisions and work plans moving forward.

The address concluded by emphasizing teamwork, dedication, and striving for greatness in service to the City of Destin.

B) Human Resources

Human Resources Director Jamie Haynes provided an overview of the city's 2025 Employee Survey results, along with key takeaways and initiatives aimed at improving employee satisfaction, leadership engagement, and workplace culture. She emphasized the importance of using survey results as a tool for reflection and strategic improvement rather than as "good" or "bad" news.

Survey Participation & Key Categories

- Participation Rate: 73% (80 out of 110 employees) – a strong indicator of employee investment in city operations.
- Survey Areas of Focus:
 1. Employee Well-Being & Satisfaction
 2. Leadership & Trust
 3. Communication & Employee Voice
 4. Compensation & Career Growth
 5. Workplace Culture & Fairness

Survey Results & Analysis

- Employee Well-Being & Satisfaction: Overall, high satisfaction (4 stars). However, employees expressed a need for improved promotion of physical and mental well-being, despite feeling they have a good work-life balance.
- Leadership & Trust: Moderate satisfaction (3 stars). Employees feel respected by the city manager and department heads but believe there is room to strengthen relationships between employees and elected officials (mayor and council).
- Communication & Employee Voice: Generally positive, but employees feel that leadership could improve how information is delivered to ensure accessibility for all employees.
- Compensation & Career Growth: While employees understand job expectations and receive timely feedback, they feel that pay and career advancement opportunities could be improved (2 stars).
- Workplace Culture & Fairness: Strongest category (4 stars). Employees report high levels of respect from supervisors and colleagues, with a positive work environment.

Employee Priorities for Benefits - Employees ranked their most valued benefits as follows:

1. Pay
2. Retirement benefits
3. Health insurance

Through discussions, it became clear that employees prioritize stability—knowing they will receive reliable pay, benefits, and retirement security.

Key HR Initiatives & Improvements

To address the areas needing growth, the HR Department is implementing several initiatives:

1. City of Destin Leadership Academy (Starting May 2025)
 - A six-month leadership training program led by a professor from Northwest Florida State College.
 - 25 employees per session, ensuring all city employees eventually receive leadership training.
2. Deep-Dive Benefits Analysis
 - Reviewing potential transition from a fully insured health plan to a partially self-funded model to reduce long-term cost increases.
 - A council workshop will be held to discuss 1-to-5-year options.
3. Reshaping Time-Off Policies
 - Combining sick leave and vacation into one paid time off (PTO) bank while maintaining accrual rates.
 - Aims to enhance flexibility and employee well-being.

Key Takeaways & Next Steps

- Bridging the gap between employees and the city council will be a primary focus.
- Senior leadership will review employee feedback from small group discussions before formulating action plans.
- Continued efforts to enhance communication and employee engagement are a priority.

Ms. Haynes concluded by emphasizing the city's commitment to ongoing employee engagement, workplace improvement, and leadership development.

C) Partners (Waste Management, Destin Water Users, Beach Safety, Fire Rescue, Okaloosa County Sheriff's Department, Chamber of Commerce)

Waste Management – Doug Rainer – Senior Account Executive

Mr. Rainer provided an update on Waste Management's sustainability efforts, particularly the \$30 million recycling facility in Fort Walton Beach, which became operational in August. He emphasized the importance of reducing landfill impact by improving recycling practices and discussed the City of Destin's recycling rate, which stands at 15%—lower than some other local municipalities. He shared statistics on contamination rates in different areas of Destin, highlighting that a significant portion of contamination comes from residents bagging their recyclables, which makes the materials non-recyclable. Rainer stressed the need for better education and public outreach to improve recycling habits. He also acknowledged past concerns about recycling being mixed with trash and assured that materials are now being properly processed at the new facility.

Councilmember Schmidt inquired about the possibility of switching the collection days for yard waste and bulk waste so that residents who do yard work over the weekend would not have to leave debris out all week. Mr. Rainer acknowledged the concern and said that while changes could be made, it would require adjusting schedules for other municipalities as well.

Councilmember Schmidt also expressed concerns that the larger garbage cans provided by Waste Management may lead residents to throw more waste in them instead of recycling. Mr. Rainer noted that proper recycling is a mindset change and suggested a stricter approach—such as leaving behind contaminated recycling bins and attaching notices—to encourage compliance.

Councilmember Trammell mentioned that some residents believe recycling efforts are futile because they have seen waste and recycling being mixed at disposal sites. Mr. Rainer acknowledged that there had been issues in the past when the Fort Walton Beach facility was under construction, but he made an assurance that recycling is now properly handled. He recognized that changing public perception requires ongoing education and transparency.

Councilmember Trammell also suggested that Waste Management apply the same approach to residential recycling issues as it does for commercial properties—sending pictures and direct notifications to property owners when recycling is improperly sorted. Mr. Rainer agreed that this approach could be useful and mentioned that Waste Management already track recycling issues, especially for habitual offenders.

Mr. Rainer invited council members to visit the new recycling facility in Fort Walton Beach for a tour to gain a better understanding of how recycling is processed. He encouraged anyone interested to contact him for a visit.

Destin Water Users – Lockwood Wernet – General Manager

Mr. Wernet emphasized Destin Water Users (DWU) commitment to supporting the city's future development and infrastructure. He highlighted the importance of adopting the Land Development Code to facilitate proper planning, ensuring adequate beach access to sustain tourism, and striking a balance in regulating vacation rentals. Additionally, he encouraged

continued efforts to improve roads and pathways, which would aid DWU's operational efficiency. He underscored DWU's long-term partnership with the city to enhance the quality of life in Destin.

Beach Safety – Joe D'Agostino – Division Chief

Mr. D'Agostino provided an update on the state of beach safety operations, emphasizing that the program is now at a stable "maintenance level" after two decades of development. He credited the City's budget increase last year for helping achieve this milestone and acknowledged the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies, including the city, county, and state.

He highlighted key programs under the Beach Safety Division, including:

- Lifeguard Coverage: Seven miles of continuous beach protection, including the harbor and the pass.
- Accessibility: A beach wheelchair program at most beach entrances and trails.
- Youth Engagement: A Junior Lifeguard Program held at Henderson Beach State Park.
- International Collaboration: A lifeguard exchange program with Australia, offering local lifeguards the opportunity to train abroad and vice versa.

Reflecting on his 20 years of service, Mr. D'Agostino underscored the importance of beach safety efforts by sharing a critical statistic: in the past two decades, lifeguards have rescued 3,322 people—an average of one life saved every other day. He emphasized that while discussions often focus on administrative details like salaries, PTO, signage, and flag colors, the core mission remains preventing drownings and ensuring public safety.

He noted that past headlines about mass drownings are now rare, thanks to enhanced safety measures and improved public awareness. While beach attendance remains high, the 2023 season saw a slight decrease, with approximately 2 million visitors—a modest drop compared to peak years like 2020 and 2021.

Councilmember Trammell suggested that the significant rescue statistics should be publicized more widely to highlight the positive impact of the Beach Safety Division. Mr. D'Agostino agreed, emphasizing the importance of promoting safety successes rather than only addressing public complaints.

Fire Rescue – Mike Landis – Deputy Chief, Destin Fire Control District

Deputy Chief Landis provided updates on the fire control's efforts, including the nearing completion of a new dock in partnership with the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), which will enhance emergency response. He also mentioned a new fireboat arriving soon, featuring a 3,000-gallon-per-minute pump for handling boat fires. Staffing levels are being increased with recent hires and ongoing recruitment. He also emphasized high-level training initiatives and new partnerships with state task forces to enhance disaster response capabilities, ensuring Destin can manage emergencies locally without waiting for state resources.

Okaloosa County Sheriff's Department – Capt. Jason Fulghum

Capt. Fulghum urged the city to consider two priorities for future planning:

1. Replacing the Stallman Office – The current facility, built before Destin's incorporation, is outdated, undersized, and lacks proper storage and infrastructure. He proposed partnering with the Tourist Development Department (TDD) to construct a new facility that could house not only the sheriff's office but also EMS and city code enforcement, improving coordination and professionalism.
2. Adding a Beach Deputy – He highlighted the critical role of the sheriff's beach unit in maintaining safety and order, noting that currently, only three deputies cover Destin and Okaloosa Island, with only one on duty per shift. These deputies handle over 7,000 calls annually and assist with water rescues. He advocated for additional funding to expand the beach patrol presence to ensure public safety and maintain Destin's family-friendly atmosphere.

Councilmember Bagby questioned whether the sheriff's office still leased space at Destin Commons and inquired about the cost of that lease. He suggested that if the city invested in a new facility for the sheriff's office, it should be centrally located, potentially at city hall, and funded collaboratively by the TDD and other entities.

Capt. Fulghum confirmed that the sheriff's office still had an office at Destin Commons, leasing space for approximately \$1 per year. He expressed support for relocating to a centralized city facility, emphasizing that such an arrangement would strengthen partnerships with the city and code enforcement while improving operational efficiency.

Councilmember Schmidt emphasized the need for the county to contribute its fair share to law enforcement funding in Destin. While he supported improving sheriff's office facilities, he stressed that Destin residents already pay significant amounts for law enforcement services and that the county should bear more responsibility. He urged the sheriff's office to work with the county and the Board of County Commissioners to secure funding rather than relying solely on city resources.

Capt. Fulghum agreed that law enforcement funding should be a shared responsibility and stated that the sheriff's office is open to discussions with the county and the TDD. He reaffirmed the office's commitment to working collaboratively with the city to explore solutions for improved facilities and services.

Chamber of Commerce – Shane Moody – President and CEO

Mr. Moody provided a broader economic perspective, noting that Florida has the 16th largest economy globally and is experiencing rapid growth. He highlighted key statistics:

- Florida's population is expected to reach 24 million by 2030.
- Okaloosa County currently has 4,314 job openings but only 2,900 job seekers, creating a workforce shortage.
- Increasing traffic congestion is a significant issue as population and tourism continue to rise.

He urged the city to explore multi-use solutions, such as parking garages with integrated workforce housing. He also encouraged the city to implement necessary fee increases to sustain services, noting that rising costs impact all organizations, including the Chamber. Finally, he praised the city for its efforts and partnerships, stating that the Chamber remains committed to supporting business development and economic growth.

Councilmember Geile asked how the city could ensure that workforce housing remains affordable beyond the first sale, expressing concern that once homes are resold, they often become unaffordable, undermining long-term affordability goals.

Mr. Moody clarified that he prefers the term "workforce housing" over "affordable housing" since affordability is relative. He emphasized that Destin must integrate workforce housing into multi-use developments rather than just constructing standalone apartment complexes. He also stressed the need for economic development initiatives that attract high-skill, high-wage jobs, helping workers progress into better housing options over time.

Councilmember Bagby suggested that the city review a recent presentation to the city council regarding community land trusts as a potential solution to preserving long-term affordability in the workforce housing. He proposed sharing the presentation with relevant stakeholders to explore the feasibility of implementing such a model in Destin.

D) Council Perspective

Councilmember Bagby

- Recommended the book '*Good to Great*' by Jim Collins, emphasizing its lessons on leadership, team-building, and organizational success.
- Stressed the importance of having the right people in the right roles within city leadership.
- Envisioned Destin as a peaceful coastal community, maintaining its unique character while improving infrastructure.
- Advocated for more pocket parks and additional green spaces to enhance quality of life.
- Supported the idea of a community land trust as a potential solution for affordable housing, though acknowledged land limitations.
- Highlighted the need for better communication between council members and city staff to address misconceptions and concerns.
- Encouraged investments in parks to promote community well-being and enhance the city's appeal.
- Expressed confidence that Destin is on track to becoming a world-class community through strategic improvements.

Councilmember Trammell

- Called for greater investment in parks, suggesting \$10 million be allocated to enhance green spaces.
- Advocated for trees along Airport Road to improve aesthetics and provide shade.
- Stressed the importance of incorporating affordable housing into city planning.
- Urged the council to include the word “history” in the city’s vision statement, which could unlock additional grant opportunities.
- Supported QR codes in public spaces to educate visitors and residents about Destin’s history.
- Pushed for sidewalk projects that include shade elements to encourage pedestrian use.
- Recommended merging the Sheriff’s Department with Code Compliance in a shared facility for efficiency.
- Expressed a strong desire to improve communication with staff, ensuring open dialogue between council members and city employees.

Councilmember Schmidt

- Discussed the ebb and flow of city leadership, noting the impact of frequent leadership changes.
- Addressed concerns that some city employees feel disrespected by the council, which he found troubling.
- Stressed that his door is always open to staff members and emphasized the city manager’s role in bridging communication gaps.
- Expressed disappointment that discussions about parks and recreation from the previous visioning session had not resulted in enough action.
- Called for more pressure on the council to prioritize parks and recreation, urging the city manager and staff to push for tangible progress.
- Advocated for a forward-thinking city vision that considers long-term growth and sustainability.
- Proposed a comprehensive landscaping plan for streets and public spaces.
- Expressed concerns about SRS (Strategic Resource Solutions) items not being discussed at this visioning session, emphasizing the need to review these plans soon.
- Encouraged the city manager and staff to identify specific actions the council could take to move Destin’s vision forward.

Councilmember Geile

- Emphasized the need to prioritize residents through targeted programs.
- Suggested a local business reach-out program, potentially offering incentives to businesses that prioritize local customers.
- Proposed local resident benefits, such as exclusive waiting lists at restaurants during peak tourist seasons.
- Expressed appreciation for city staff, advocating for stronger staff-council relationships.
- Recommended staff appreciation events, such as cookouts or team-building activities, to foster a more connected work environment.
- Urged staff to provide feedback and suggestions on how the council could improve relations with employees.

Councilmember Destin

- Echoed support for more shade, landscaping improvements, and enhanced parks.
- Praised city staff, acknowledging their hard work and the criticism they often face.
- Expressed deep concern about the affordability crisis in Destin, warning that many longtime residents have been forced to leave due to rising costs.
- Emphasized the need to balance the city budget without overtaxing or over-regulating residents.
- Warned against excessive spending on projects that could increase the cost of living for residents.
- Stressed the importance of reasonable taxation and regulation to ensure Destin remains an accessible community.

E) Public Comments

Mr. Brian Otto, a Destin resident, advocated for more partnerships in parks to secure private-sector funding and reduce city costs. He noted that other communities successfully incorporate sponsorships for park enhancements and suggested Destin pursue similar partnerships.

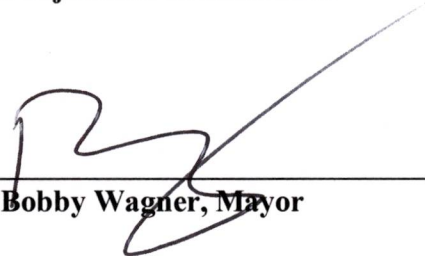
F) City Manager – Closing Remarks

- Reaffirmed a commitment to progress, ensuring that city initiatives move forward efficiently.
- Stressed the importance of addressing challenges with urgency, but without panic.

- Encouraged staff and council to embrace change rather than resist it.
- Emphasized the principle: “That which gets measured, gets done”, committing to clear benchmarks and accountability.
- Urged staff to take initiative and fix issues when they arise, rather than waiting for approval.
- Encouraged the city to take “the road less traveled”, pursuing ambitious goals and innovative solutions to create a better Destin.
- Pledged to move forward with urgency and accountability, ensuring that the city’s vision translates into meaningful action.

ADJOURNMENT

Having no further business at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 10:30 AM.



Bobby Wagner, Mayor

ATTEST:



Rey Bailey, City Clerk