

City of Graham City Council Special Meeting Minutes Budget Planning Session January 20, 2026



The City Council of the City of Graham held a Special Meeting for a Budget Planning Session on January 20, 2026, at 8:00 a.m. at the Alamance County Board of Elections, 1128 South Main Street, Graham, NC.

Councilmembers Present:

Mayor Chelsea Dickey
Mayor Pro Tem Ricky Hall
Council Member Bobby Chin
Council Member Bonnie Whitaker
Council Member Jim Young

Staff Present:

Megan Garner, City Manager
Aaron Holland, Assistant City Manager
Renee Ward, City Clerk

Mayor Dickey opened the meeting and asked the Council for consensus to revise the Boards and Commissions policy.

The Council's consensus was to have staff review the policy and make recommendations for the Council's consideration.

Facilitator Rebecca Jackson, True North Performance Group, reviewed the strategic planning session objectives and agenda.

Ms. Jackson asked the Council to list some of its successes and accomplishments.

What had the City of Graham accomplished over the past 12-18 months, and what made it possible?

- Council Member Chin – Wastewater treatment plant – increases quality of life and supports growth.
- Council Member Young - Designated a church as a historical designation.
- Council Member Whitaker – New City digital sign – keeps citizens informed.
- Mayor Pro Tem Hall - Major software improvements and ERP systems – increase a high-performing organization to serve citizens in a more efficient way.
- Mayor Dickey – Graham Regional Master Plan approved – this will allow for more active play for our citizens and community.
- Mayor Pro Tem Hall – Purchased a new ladder truck for the Fire Department – helps lower insurance rates for citizens.
- Mayor Dickey – New water lines replacement of 100-year-old pipes– upgrading the main water line from the filtration system for more capacity.
- Council Member Chin – Developed a career ladder for many employee positions, including training and development, which helps improve morale.
- Council Member Whitaker - Purchased additional land that was mostly paid for with grant money to allow for parks to expand to offer many different opportunities.

- Mayor Dickey – Hired a new police chief – Parks and Rec launched a new after-school program – New businesses coming downtown (CVB) – staff worked to dedicate churches as warm spaces.
- Mayor Pro Tem Hall – Hired a Public Relations Specialist – to promote the city and keep citizens informed.

Ms. Jackson asked Council to list a few keys to success:

- Mayor Pro Tem Hall - Commitment to the citizens of Graham.
- Council Member Young – To serve all citizens coming to Graham, not just City residents.
- Council Member Whitaker – Community engagement - people will tell you what they want.
- Council Member Whitaker – Funding and resources.
- Mayor Dickey – Engaging our partners.
- Council Member Chin – Businesses look to have infrastructure in place – Keep note on what’s going on in surrounding cities and counties – Work on infrastructure to attract regional opportunities.

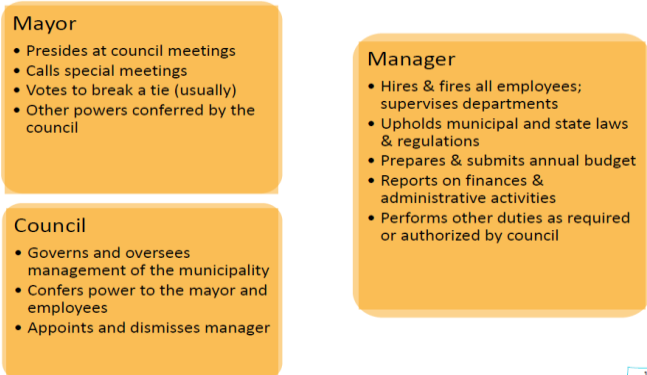
What do we carry into this retreat? Three important things you are carrying into this retreat.

- Council Member Young – Renegotiate agreements with Mebane – Sesquicentennial Park decision – Attract more small businesses and help them with grants
- Council Member Whitaker – Rewriting the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) – Renegotiating our contracts with surrounding municipalities - bring in new business, such as a sit-down family restaurant and grocery store.
- Council Member Chin – Construction of new fire department – expand reservoir system – ready infrastructure at sites for new industry (water, power, roads)
- Mayor Dickey – Prioritize long-term planning, funding residential services and infrastructure – emphasis on community input – Finding common ground and a path forward as a board.
- Mayor Pro Tem Hall – Continue moderate to a low growth rate.
- Council Member Chin – Balance out funding stream between property tax and commercial revenues.

Council took a five-minute break.

What are the seven expectations for an effective Council-Manager Relationship? How are we applying them?

Council-Manager Roles & Responsibilities Compared





Challenges for Elected Boards

- Bound by more legal requirements than nonprofit or for-profit boards
- Often don't think of group development as a priority or a shared responsibility
- Discussing interpersonal issue in open meetings
- Contentious campaigns may reduce trust among the Board, staff and community
- Previous community involvement may cause board members to make assumptions about each other's interests and motives
- High turnover can reduce commitment to group development.

Seven Expectations for an Effective Council–Manager Relationship

- ❖ 1. Shared Commitment to Serving the Community
- ❖ 2. The Manager Is a Trusted Advisor
- ❖ 3. Council–Employee Relationships Are Managed Thoughtfully
- ❖ 4. The Council Acts—and Is Addressed—as a Body
- ❖ 5. Mutual Trust Is Built Over Time
- ❖ 6. Open, Respectful Feedback Is Encouraged
- ❖ 7. Shared Responsibility for Governing Effectiveness

Ten Habits of High-Performing Governing Boards

High-Performing Governing Board Habits

Think and Act Strategically	Understand the Law and Policy-Making Process	Demonstrate Teamwork	Master Small Group Decision Making	Honor the Council Staff Partnership
Develop and maintain a clear, big-picture vision for the community’s future. Avoid micromanaging staff or operational decisions.	Understand legal responsibilities, ethical obligations, and the difference between policy and administration.	Board members work collaboratively, respect differing viewpoints, and support decisions once made.	Use effective meeting practices, deliberation skills, and clear processes to make sound collective decisions.	Boards respect for the council–manager form of government. Council sets direction and policy. Staff implements decisions and manages operations.

High-Performing Governing Board Habits

Use Council Time Strategically	Adopt Clear Rules of Procedure	Review Accurate Data and feedback	Recognize Shared Constituencies	Act Transparently
<p>Intentionally allocate time across 4 key areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Goal-setting & visioning -Work / study sessions -Regular meetings & public hearings -Community & outreach. 	<p>Clear meeting rules and agreed-upon protocols support fairness, efficiency, and productive discussion.</p>	<p>Boards rely on timely, accurate information to evaluate policy effectiveness and organizational performance.</p>	<p>The community is interconnected & work jointly with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Other local governments -State & federal agencies -Non-profits -Community Stakeholders. 	<p>Boards operate openly, communicate clearly, and make decisions in ways that build public trust and confidence.</p>

21

Strengthen effective governance

Governing is a Team Sport

- Only the board can govern the board
- Responsiveness and respect are a two-way street
- The manager reports to the governing board, not to individual elected officials
- Elected officials' behaviors are visible to the public.



What would be the very best team?

Council comments: Work is fun, highly efficient, commitment, trust, clear goals, collaboration, innovation, dedication to the mission, respect for one another, and positive relationships.

Ms. Jackson shared that this should be the team's commitment going forward, and everyone should work towards this type of atmosphere.

What Makes a Great Team?

- A clear mission
- Informal atmosphere
- Lots of discussion
- Active listening
- Trust and openness
- Disagreement is OK
- Criticism is issue-oriented, never personal
- Consensus is the norm
- Effective leadership
- The issue is not who controls, but how to get the job done
- Clarity of assignments
- Shared values and norms of behavior
- Commitment



What behaviors should be expected?

Council comments: good listeners, commitment, actions should be focused on your job and follow through, ability to come to a decision in a timely manner, keep an open mind, highly motivated, accept responsibility, and be accountable.

Passion can make you close-minded if not everyone agrees. You have to bring people along. Sometimes you come in thinking one way, and your mind changes during debate and discussion.

Strategic Vision

Strategic Vision

Long-term and short-term planning

- Long-term planning is a comprehensive framework that comprises of goals to be met within a certain period, (3, 5,10 years) Vision and goals.
- Short-term planning evaluates your progress in the **present and creates an action plan** to improve performance, typically in 12 month period.

Leading with Vision

Externally focused
Simple
Exciting
BIG
Clear
Inspirational
It's where we want to be!



It's Your True North!

Externally focused
Simple
Exciting
BIG
Clear
Inspirational

Aligning the Organization for Success



Lunch.

Leading with Vision:

Council's role in pursuing vision:

Who are we? To serve the citizens of Graham, a municipality, with public services.

What is our purpose? To be good stewards of tax dollars, serve the citizens.

Who do we serve? Residents of Graham, businesses, and business owners and are held accountable to residents.

What makes us unique? Safety and quality of life for the City of Graham.

City Council Goals:

Ms. Jackson asked Council to identify its best goals.

Infrastructure - to ensure outdated infrastructure is completed, road paving, water lines, all past due for maintenance and replacement, and connect sidewalks to increase walkability.

Community engagement and stakeholder strategy – Duke Energy, DOT with state roads - to help citizens understand what we are doing and increase transparency; use tools and methods, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to tell the City's positive story.

Economic Development - diversify tax base - providing an environment to attract businesses or create an environment to bring industry, commercial, retail, and residents to Graham – outcome for the community, maintain a responsible tax rate, ensure local jobs, potential city survey (costs money)

Maintain effective growth development management and maintain core services, - Update UDO and Comprehensive Plans, keep small-town charm, lessen the burden on City inspectors, and City services.

Public Safety – ensure safety in our community – low response time and low crime rate, lighting in downtown for pedestrian safety, new fire department – maintain and provide appropriate building and equipment, maintain effective police and fire coverage.

Parks & Recreation – activities for all, quality, safe and well-being, aesthetically pleasing and fun to visit, increasing green space, Graham Regional master plan, Graham/Mebane Lake Master Plan.

High Performing Organization – good financial management, capital improvement, equipment, IT for effective services, retain employees (benefits, wages, health insurance), update effective processes, and fixed asset management.

2:01 pm – Break

Council Key Strategic Goals for next 12 to 18 months: (not in any particular order)

- 1) **Safe and Secure Community** – decide on a funding mechanism for a new fire station and begin construction, to install beacon lighting for Court Square, prioritize fire department staffing to improve measures (meet standards for today and have staff in place for the new fire department)
- 2) **Effective Community Engagement and Strategy** – tell the City’s story through social media, develop an appropriate communications strategy, and seek Council input.
- 3) **High Performing Organization** – Davenport - implement Council funding priorities and strategies, implement funding priorities for capital and equipment, fund remaining technology improvement plan,
- 4) **Parks and Recreation** – move forward with the Master Plan Phase 1 – with development of budget and approved actions (discuss funding at the February 9, 2026, meeting), receive report and cost for the Sesquicentennial Park, and move forward with Council-approved action.
- 5) **Economic Development** - funding and begin UDO rewrite, strengthen partnership with the Chamber and ACC for small business development, and industry to include annual reporting.
- 6) **Infrastructure** - backlog of street repaving, utility replacements/upgrades (water, sewer, stormwater), and renegotiate the water agreement with Mebane.

Council's Top three Priorities:

#1 – fund and begin UDO revision

#2 - fund backlog of utility upgrades/replacements/repairs

#3 – begin design and construction/funding for new fire department

February 9, 2026 - Davenport Associates /Council Members– will review funding of long-term capital in the general fund and utilities, and put dollars to the Council's goals.

Next Steps:

- 1) Receive Davenport funding capabilities
- 2) Write vision, mission, goals, and team commitments
- 3) Share with Council and staff
- 4) City Manager to give monthly PSA updates
- 5) Departmental budget prep with staff
- 6) Budget prep Council in May

Council consensus and support were for its 12–18-month key strategic goals and its top three priorities.

ADJOURNMENT:

Meeting adjourned at 3:28 pm.

Renee M. Ward, CMC
City Clerk

Special City Council Meeting
Budget Planning Session
January 20, 2026