City of Graham
City Council Meeting Minutes
September 8, 2026

The City Council of the City of Graham held a regularly scheduled meeting on September 8, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in the Council Chamber, City Hall Municipal Building, 201 South Main Street, Graham, NC.

Council Members 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
Bob Ward, City Attorney
Bryan Coleman, City Attorney
Renee Ward, City Clerk

CALL TO ORDER: Mayor Dickey called the meeting to order and presided.

INVOCATION & PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Pastor Derek Thorpe of North Graham Baptist Church gave the invocation, and all stood for the Pledge of Allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA:

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to adopt the agenda, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed unanimously.

CONSENT AGENDA:

A. To approve the August 11, 2026 City Council and Closed Session minutes.

B. To approve a Budget Amendment in the amount of $152,000 for the Wastewater Treatment Plant, comprising $120,000 for Biosolids Dewatering/Disposal and $32,000 for Clarifier 2 Gearbox labor.

C. To approve a Budget Amendment in the amount of $7,000 in State Drug Forfeiture revenue for the Police Department's patch replacement.

D. To approve resolutions for the Fall 2026 Graham-Mebane Wastewater Treatment Plant PFAS & Reliability and 2026-2036 Water & Sewer System Capital Improvement Plan.

E. To approve an amendment to Section 4-4 of the City of Graham Personnel Policy to establish a separate probationary period of six months for qualified, in-state lateral-transfer officers per the North Carolina Criminal Justice Education and Training Standards Commission.

F. To approve tax releases in the amount of 2,148.53.

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to approve the Consent Agenda with a correction to the minutes, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

PUBLIC HEARINGS:

ITEM 1: REZONING – 0.73 ACRES – 1528 E. HARDEN STREET

A public hearing was scheduled to consider rezoning a 0.73-acre lot at 1528 E. Harden Street from R-G (General Residential) to B-2 (General Commercial) to allow the existing house on the lot to be used for commercial purposes. (Planning Board recommended approval)

Assistant City Manager Holland stated this request was to rezone a 0.73-acre lot at 1528 E Harden Street from R-G (General Residential) to B-2 (General Commercial) to allow the existing house on the lot to be used for commercial purposes. The land currently falls in the Commercial Corridor Land Use category, which supports commercial growth in strategically located clusters within the NC-54 and NC-87 corridors. He shared that this was on the agenda last month when Council approved the annexation, and the property owner was now seeking rezoning for commercial use.

The public hearing was opened, and the following person spoke.

Dewey Brown, Jr., 1015 E. Harden Street, Graham, stated he took an old, dilapidated property, cleaned up the landscaping, remodeled the house, and improved the area. He was present to answer questions.

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to close the public hearing, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Council Member Young to approve the rezoning of 0.73-acre lot of property from R-G (General Residential) to B-2 (General Commercial) to allow the existing house on the lot to be used for commercial purposes and that it would be consistent with the current land use plan for the overall goal of occupying the structure on the lot and is consistent with the Commercial Corridor land use type and furthers policy 2.2.1, and 2.3.2 as put forth by the Graham 2035 Comprehensive Plan, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Hall. The motion passed unanimously.

ITEM 2: REMOVE OVERLAY DISTRICT – 0.056-ACRE LOT – S. MAIN STREET/HWY 87

A public hearing was scheduled to remove the Overlay District from a 0.056-acre portion of a 0.4111-acre property within the S. Main Street/Hwy 87 Overlay District. The remainder of the property is zoned B-2 (General Commercial) and, upon removal of the Overlay Zoning, would allow avoidance of a required sidewalk extension and to provide new parking in the front yard to support the existing commercial use. (Planning Board recommended approval)

Assistant City Manager Holland stated this request was to remove a 0.056-acre portion of a 0.411-acre property that falls under the S Main St/Hwy 87 Overlay District. He stated this property was once part of a larger property that was split when Moore Street was cut through and was left with an overlay from the prior property, even though it was not adjacent to Highway 87. The request was to remove the overlay so the property owner would not be restricted by the overlay conditions and restrictions associated with Highway 87.

The public hearing was opened, and the following spoke:

Justin Kesler, representing Angela Hall, owner of Ancora Wealth Partners, stated they would like to move their office from Burlington to Graham and construct a parking lot in the front because they cannot place it in the back due to the septic tank and overlay restrictions.

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to close the public hearing, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Council Member Young to approve removing a portion of the overlay district from the 0.4111-acre property that falls under the S. Main Street/Hwy 87 Overlay District, consistent with Section 10.437 of the Development Ordinance and furthering Strategy 2.1.5 of the 2035 Comprehensive Plan, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

NEW BUSINESS:

ITEM 3: FUNDING REQUEST – HISTORIC RESOURCES COMMISSION – HISTORIC PLAQUES

City Council considered approving a resolution authorizing $650 each in funding to install three new plaques on buildings with historic significance, in conjunction with the Historic Resources Commission.

Assistant City Manager Aaron Holland requested the Council's approval to fund the production of plaques to be placed on three buildings in Graham for $650 per plaque + tax. The HRC has successfully installed plaques in prior years with City funding, as recently as 2023. Two of the proposed buildings are designated as contributing in the Historic Resources Handbook, and another was designated as a Historic Landmark in March 2026. They are listed as follows:

1. Children's Chapel United Church of Christ – 334 E. Harden – Designated as a historic landmark March 2026.
2. Green and McClure Furniture Building – 118 N. Main – Contributing.
3. Graham Historical Museum – 135 W. Elm – Contributing.

Mayor Dickey asked whether the board followed a policy or set of guidelines to identify these three businesses.

Chair Ben Beushausen and Co-Chair Richard Shevlin stated they had a list of all historic sites, reviewed who had already received plaques, picked three more, and contacted the owners to get approval to receive a historic plaque.

Mayor Dickey asked what qualified as a historic site.

Mr. Beushausen stated there were several guidelines, mainly for downtown historic buildings and a few outside the downtown district.

Mayor Dickey asked if there was a local firm to order the plaques.

Mr. Shevlin stated they received four to six quotes and unfortunately the local company was twice as expensive for the same quality. He stated the Florida company was selected based on the price and customer service.

Council Member Whitaker asked about shipping cost.

Mr. Shevlin stated the shipping was included in the $650 along with installation hardware.

Mayor Dickey said she would have liked them to use a local company.

Council Member Young shared that the board did its due diligence by researching local companies, but no one could match the Florida company, which has been around since 1936. He stated it did not seem feasible to go with a local company and spend two to three times more per plaque.

Motion by Council Member Young to approve ordering three plaques at $650 each, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Hall. The motion passed 4-1. Mayor Dickey voted no.

ITEM 4: ACCEPTANCE OF PUBLIC STREETS AND RIGHT OF WAY – MEADOWVIEW GLEN - PHASE 2

City Council will consider approving a resolution authorizing the adoption and maintenance of portions of Meadowview Drive located within Phase 2 of the Meadowview Glen Subdivision.

Assistant City Manager Holland stated the Development in Phase 2 of the Meadowview Glen Subdivision has been completed, and the streets have been offered to the City of Graham for adoption. Public Works, the City's Engineer, and the Planning Department inspected these streets for compliance with the proposed development pattern permitted under their approved construction drawings. All public infrastructure in these phases has been deemed complete and meet acceptance standards. The portions of the streets to be dedicated are as follows: Meadowview Drive (50-foot and 110-foot public ROW) includes approximately 0.16 miles. The total roadway length in these sections of the Meadowview Glen neighborhood is approximately 0.16 miles.

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to approve adopting ownership of the portions of Meadowview Drive located within Phase 2 of Meadowview Glen Subdivision, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

ITEM 5: DOWNTOWN GRANT USAGE DISCUSSION

City Council will discuss allocation of the remaining State downtown grant funds.

Assistant City Manager Holland stated at the conclusion of the August 11, 2026 meeting, discussion ensued about how to use the remaining State funds. Staff recommended considering a prior item for downtown utility work, including a recent $350,000 state allocation, which would expand the scope of the downtown waterline replacement project. He also shared that Mayor Dickey asked Council to consider new planters and pedestrian wayfinding signage. He said staff reached out to vendors for planter pricing, which ranged from $28,000 to $40,000, and $40,000 for wayfinding signs. He asked Council to direct staff on the projects mentioned.

Mayor Dickey said the downtown planters are rusting at the bottom, and downtown businesses have requested some facelift items for the area. She asked Council to consider new planters and pedestrian wayfinding signage. She also mentioned the garbage truck that continued to leak liquids and asked if this could come out of the grant funds as well.

Following a brief discussion, the Council directed staff to estimate these costs for both options.

Council Member Whitaker asked about the cost of a garbage truck.

City Manager Garner said it depended on the model, and the price could range from $ 250,000 to $300,000. She stated that, as discussed with the Mayor earlier, the state funding agency said a trash truck would be in a gray area and may or may not be approved because the $600,000 allocation was for downtown enhancements or improvements.

Council Member Whitaker asked how long it would take to find out if the truck could be approved.

City Manager Garner stated within a week.

Council Member Whitaker said she agreed with replacing the planters and getting a new sanitation truck, and asked whether the grant would cover that and the remaining amount for water lines. She asked about the cost of the previously approved Rapid Flashing Beacons for the crosswalks.

City Manager Garner stated it was in the $80,000 range, allocated from the $600,000 grant.

Assistant City Manager Holland said the lights had been purchased and that about $20,000 remained that could be applied.

Council Member Chin suggested combining the money with the $350,000 to upgrade the waterlines.

Mayor Dickey said she spoke with Representative Riddell, and another pot of money is waiting for the City to apply for it and could be used for the waterline enhancement. She stated she agreed the waterlines are in desperate need of repair and needed to be prioritized, and that those funding mechanisms are easier to come by than a grant source that would allow for wayfinding and planters.

City Manager Garner said the money was for eight or nine counties impacted by Tropical Storm Chantal, not just Graham or Alamance County, and it is not guaranteed. She stated the Utilities department would apply for something related to the water plant for that money since it had been earmarked for Chantal damage. She shared that the top priority was unlikely to be a downtown waterline replacement with that funding, but rather something plant-related that insurance did not cover or FEMA would not reimburse.

Council Member Young stated if the money Representative Riddell mentioned was not guaranteed, then waterline replacement would make more sense. He stated he did not think that wayfinding signs would make a difference and that the planters need to be replaced.

Council Member Chin shared that the City's communications person planned to begin highlighting businesses downtown, which would be more beneficial than a sign.

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to approve planters for downtown and use the rest for waterline improvements, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed 4-1. Mayor Dickey voted no.

Assistant City Manager Holland asked for clarity: planters are not to exceed $40,000, and the remaining funds go to the waterline project and paying off the $20,000 for Flashing Beacon lights.

Council stated that was correct.

ITEM 6: FALL FEST EVENT – STREET CLOSURE – W. ELM STREET

City Council will consider an amendment to include the closure of W. Elm Street on Saturday, September 19, 2026 from 8:00 am to 6:00 p.m. for the Fall Fest event. (Rain date of October 18, 2026)

Assistant City Manager Holland stated Ms. Cheryl Rich submitted an amendment to the approved Special Events application for the Fall Fest event scheduled for Saturday, September 19 (rain date: October 18) to include the closure of W. Elm Street. The event is expected to run from 8 am to 6 pm (includes setup and cleanup).

Council Member Whitaker asked why the street needed to be closed.

Cheryl Rich stated the festival gets really busy with a lot of people, and the sidewalks do not provide enough room for everyone to place food trucks or do line dancing. She said it would be a great space for arts and crafts vendors, food trucks, and room for dancing.

Council Member Whitaker asked if they had spoken to the businesses on West Elm.

Ms. Rich stated they had not, but most of them are closed on that day and did not think it would affect anyone on that street. She said she assumed it would help anyone who was open on that street because there would be a lot of foot traffic.

Council Member Whitaker said she could not imagine all these businesses being closed on a Saturday and that Council had heard from many business owners who did not want streets closed because people could not get to certain places. She mentioned C & Z was mostly a take-out, and people would want to park near there to pick up take-out orders, so she did not see a need to close the street.

Motion by Council Member Young to approve the amendment to include the closure of W. Elm Street on September 19, 2026 (rain date October 18th) from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm for Fall Fest, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed 3-2. Mayor Pro Tem Hall and Council Member Whitaker voted no.

Mayor Dickey asked about providing 18 hay bales for Fall Fest to place in the downtown green space for a pumpkin patch. She asked if Public Works could place an extra 18 bales to use as part of the downtown fall decorations, which would stay up through the month.

Council Member Whitaker shared that Public Works had not been putting out the hay bales.

City Manager Garner stated we thought Public Works was providing the hay bales but found out recently that there was a local business that had been donating hay bales and putting them out.

Motion by Council Member Young to purchase the hay bales from the Appearance Commission budget.

Amy Wilkinson, Main Line, 134 S Main Street, shared that the fall decorations would stay up through the week before Thanksgiving. She said the Graham Area Business Association (GABA) would give them money for decorations, but it did not include hay bales. She also asked if they could begin decorating earlier.

City Manager Garner said it would help to clarify who would be responsible for clean-up.

Council Member Young stated that it would fall under the Appearance Commission.

Mayor Dickey shared that the Appearance Commission cleans up the decorations.

City Manager Garner said they had not cleaned up the hay bales in the past and asked whether that was going back to staff or the event organizer.

Mayor Dickey said the commission discussed involving the Boy Scouts in cleanup.

Mayor Pro Tem Hall shared that once the hay bales get wet, they are extremely heavy. He also shared that Public Works had to use forklifts and load them into dump trucks.

Mayor Dickey stated that if that was the precedent, it would be a great idea to leave it with City staff to be used as fertilizer.

Council Member Young stated as long as the Appearance Commission was helping.

City Manager Garner pointed out that Staff would have to pick up the front end of this, which they have not done in the past. She asked for clarification on whether this was moving forward as a staff function and what the expectation was.

Council Member Young stated it should be the Appearance Commission.

City Manager Garner stated that if that would include the hay bales moving forward, the City would take care of it this year, and then the City would be out of it completely in the future.

Mayor Dickey agreed that moving forward, the Appearance Commission would take care of it.

City Manager Garner asked if Council would like to continue the $1,500 allocation into the upcoming budget year. Council agreed.

Motion by Council Member Young to purchase the hay bales from the Appearance Commission budget, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Hall.

Council Member Chin asked how many hay bales would be purchased.

City Manager Garner stated 30 bales from the $1,500 allocation that is given to the Appearance Commission, and moving forward, fall decorations, while they still may be funded, would be 100% the

responsibility of the Appearance Commission, and that includes hay bales moving forward. Council agreed. The motion stated above passed 3-2. Council Members Whitaker and Chin voted no.

ITEM 7: CITY OF GRAHAM'S BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS APPOINTMENTS

City Council considered appointments for the following boards and commissions due to recent resignations:

ABC Board – 1 Appointment
Applicants: Stacy Koon, Glenn Patterson

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to appoint Glenn Patterson to the ABC Board, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed unanimously.

Graham Historical Museum Board – 1 Appointment
Applicants: Corbin Craig, Brooke Flood, Jillian Lea

Motion by Council Member Young to appoint Brooke Flood to the Graham Historical Museum Board, seconded by Council Member Whitaker. The motion passed unanimously.

Graham Housing Authority – 1 Appointment
Applicants: Sonya Carter, Jeffrey Rieman, Nicole Cousin

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to appoint Nicole Cousin to the Graham Housing Authority, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed 3-2. Mayor Dickey and Council Member Whitaker voted no.

ITEM 8: ETHICS AND CIVILITY STATEMENTS DISCUSSION

City Council discussed and directed Staff to implement Council's intent to adopt Ethics and Civility Statements.

City Manager Garner stated after the July City Council meeting, she emailed City Council and proposed two items for their future consideration. She shared that the first was to reestablish the ethics statement to be read at the beginning of each meeting and provided verbiage used in the past. The second item was to consider adopting a civility statement, also read at the beginning of each meeting, similar to the ethics statement. She stated that at last month's meeting, the Mayor provided ethics and civility statements that she drafted and provided to each Council member. She asked Council for direction on whether Council wanted to proceed and which version.

Council Member Whitaker asked the City Manager to read the statement she proposed.

City Manager Garner read the following statement, "Members of Council, it is my responsibility to remind you of your duty to avoid conflicts of interest, and I ask if there are any potential conflicts concerning tonight's agenda items." She also said that, in the past, the City Clerk read the statement. She did not have a statement for the civility statement.

Council Member Whitaker said she preferred the ethics statement the City Manager provided and that the other one was too wordy.

Council Member Chin stated that every Council member had taken the ethics-mandated class and that all members were well versed in ethics, integrity, and civility. He asked why it needed to be brought up at each meeting.

City Manager Garner said the July meeting was not as productive or civil as it could have been, and it frustrated staff, citizens, and Council to walk out of the meeting without accomplishing much. She said she did not expect all five to agree on everything and that disagreement was fine, but there was a civil way to disagree and still walk away and maintain professional relationships. Additionally, there were also non-civil ways to disagree. She shared her goal was to make meetings smoother even when there was dissension, which was no problem, but to have a more positive interaction for people who attend the meetings or watch them on YouTube. Even if they didn't agree with a decision, they understood the thought process behind it and felt they had a chance to speak and be heard.

Council Member Chin suggested the following civility statement: As the City Council draws those present, we have the responsibility and duty to conduct tonight's meeting with civility, professionalism, and respect.

City Manager Garner stated that since the Mayor had a vote, it would be helpful for someone else to read the statements, whether it be the City Clerk or someone else.

Mayor Pro Tem Hall agreed with the City Manager's statement and would like to appoint the City Clerk to read the statements.

Council Member Young stated he did not think we needed reminders. He shared that everyone had taken an oath when they took office. He also did not think we needed reminders to be decent human beings and be nice to each other. He said he thought they all could find some balance with each other but did not think they needed a reminder each meeting. He also shared that decency is a two-way street; if you read the comments people post on YouTube, it is not very decent. He said if the Council voted to read the statements, then the City Clerk should read them.

Mayor Dickey stated that whatever would work best for this board. She said the City Manager suggested it, so she drafted something for review; it came back around in emails, and everyone said we did not need it anymore.

Council Member Whitaker stated she did not see anything wrong with a gentle reminder at the beginning of the meeting as long as it is short and to the point.

City Manager Garner read the following statements for approval:

> *Ethics: Members of Council, it is my responsibility to remind you of your duty to avoid conflicts of interest. I ask if there are any potential conflicts concerning tonight's agenda items.*
>
> *Civility: As the City Council and to all those present, we have the responsibility and duty to conduct tonight's meeting with civility, professionalism, and respect.*

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to approve the ethics and civility statements as stated by the City Manager, which are to be read by the City Clerk, seconded by Council Member Whitaker. The motion passed 3-2. Council Members Young and Chin voted no.

City Manager stated a change to the Rules and Procedures to incorporate the statements would be on the next agenda.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Keith Westbrook, 604 Trockwilder Ct, Graham, thanked the Police Department for being present during the first few days of school to help with traffic and prevent kids from being picked up on the side of the road. He inquired about the Pedestrian Plan and when it would be implemented. He also asked again for a sidewalk on Elm Street, for downtown flags to be replaced, and to fix the trash truck.

Richard Wright, 236 South Marshall Street, commented on 9/11. Shared he was a leader for the Sesquicentennial Park purchase. He shared that they had 60 pledges ranging from $5,000 to $10. Dr. Powell will match donations. The committee completed LLC paperwork and established an EIN. He said the committee would not ask the City for a penny.

Eric Chrismon, 208 Albright Avenue, said it was nice to have a green space and be able to decorate it. He asked what the difference was between a citizen complaint and a citizen request. He then asked about Flock cameras, who approved them, whether the information collected goes to a private company, and whether he was being surveilled without his consent. He asked what the purpose was and how much it cost to get information from the company.

Corbin Craig, 404 Eden Court, Graham, shared how much he appreciated the City's goal of repairing waterlines. He shared that after a visit to California, he saw firsthand what happens when you fall behind on repairing or replacing old infrastructure and how it caused devastation within the city. He encouraged Council to keep water line replacements as a priority.

CITY STAFF COMMENTS

Assistant City Manager Holland asked for no parking on a portion of Whitsett Street where water meter boxes are located and are being run over by cars parked there. He asked for Council consensus and would bring back an amendment to the traffic schedule to have no parking along a portion of Whitsett at the next Council meeting. Council agreed.

Assistant City Manager Holland informed Council that staff could not obtain three commercial appraisals for Sesquicentennial Park but had secured one, and a second appraiser who asked to work jointly with the commercial appraiser. He asked Council to approve one appraisal or have the two appraisers work together to produce two opinions. Council agreed to have two appraisers work jointly to produce a stronger, more valid single number.

Mayor Dickey asked the attorneys about the correspondence received from Carolina Holdings and whether it would implicate the process of declaring the park surplus.

City Attorney Coleman stated the City of Graham had provided all documents to Mr. Cox and that the City was selling the property as is. He said that as long as the City discloses any known defects and allows the buyer to inspect, we would have the protection of an "as-is" condition. He said if we conceal defects or misrepresent, we would not get the protection of "as-is."

Assistant City Manager Holland also shared that the parking over sidewalks that Mayor Pro Tem Hall brought up at last month's meeting had been addressed, and also found a third area that needed addressing.

CITY COUNCIL COMMENTS

Council Member Chin shared the NC Hall of Fame BBQ Cook-off would be held October 9th and 10th and asked the Pork Council to support a first responder challenge team to represent Graham. He said if the Pork Council agreed, we would need someone from Police and Fire to participate in the cook-off.

Council Member Young brought attention to the Mayor's website, where she continued to host a Graham Community Committee using her campaign website. He read the following statement:

"Mayor, members of Council, City Manager, City Attorney, and citizens of Graham: I want to return tonight to an issue I have previously raised concerning the Mayor's Graham Community Committee, the use of her political campaign website to operate and promote it, and the collection of information from Graham citizens through that campaign infrastructure. I want to begin by making an important distinction. I am not standing here tonight claiming that I have proven a violation of law. I have asked the North Carolina League of Municipalities and election officials for guidance because I want the legal questions answered by the appropriate authorities. But while we wait for those answers, there are facts sitting directly in front of us that I believe deserve attention. And frankly, my concerns have increased rather than decreased."

WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I RAISED THIS ISSUE:
"When I previously raised my concerns during Council comments, the Mayor responded that if the City would allow her to put the Community Committee on the City's website, she would not have to put it on her campaign website. I found that response troubling. The reason a privately created committee cannot simply be placed on the City website and presented as a City committee is fairly obvious: This Council did not create it. To my knowledge, the Graham City Council has never voted to establish the Graham Community Committee. We have never defined its purpose. We have never established its membership. We have never adopted rules governing it. And we have never authorized it to act as an official advisory body of the City of Graham. The Mayor certainly has the right to organize a private group of citizens. I told the Mayor during that discussion that there are plenty of other ways to do that. She could, for example, create a Facebook group or another private community forum completely separate from her political campaign infrastructure. Instead, this committee continues to be promoted through Chelsea Dickey for Graham, her political campaign website."

THE MAYOR SAID SHE WOULD ADD A CLARIFICATION:
"During that same discussion, the Mayor stated that she would put a statement on the website addressing the campaign donation issue and providing clarification. I took her at her word. As of my latest review of the website, I have not found that promised clarification. The Graham Community Committee remains on the Chelsea Dickey for Graham website. The page continues to describe it as an application-based committee and asks interested citizens to apply. The same page continues to provide links for political campaign donations. That is no longer a hypothetical concern. I raised the concern publicly. The Mayor acknowledged the concern. The Mayor said she would provide clarification. And as of my latest review, that clarification is not there. I believe the public deserves better than that."

WHAT EXACTLY ARE CITIZENS APPLYING FOR?

"The website says: "Graham Community Committee." It says the committee brings neighbors together to help shape what's next for our town. It tells citizens there is a seat at the table. And then it says: "This is an application-based committee." That wording matters. Because if an ordinary Graham resident sees a Graham Community Committee promoted by the Mayor of Graham, I believe it is entirely reasonable for that person to think this has some official connection to the City or the Office of the Mayor. But it apparently does not. So why isn't that stated clearly? Why doesn't the page simply say: "The Graham Community Committee is a privately organized group created by Chelsea Dickey. It is not a committee of the City of Graham, has not been authorized by the Graham City Council, and participation does not constitute appointment to a City board or committee." That would resolve a large part of this issue immediately."

THE CAMPAIGN CONNECTION:

"My concern becomes greater because of where all of this is happening. This isn't being operated through a neutral community website. It is being operated through Chelsea Dickey for Graham. That is political campaign infrastructure. The website contains campaign material. It contains political contribution links. It directs contributions through ActBlue. And elsewhere on that same website, citizens are told: "Chelsea wants to hear from you! Your voice matters in shaping Graham's future." They are then directed to: vote@chelseaforgraham.com. That is not a City of Graham email address. That is a campaign email address. So I think we need to ask a question that has become impossible to ignore: Where does the information collected from Graham citizens actually go?"

MY CONCERN ABOUT CITIZEN INFORMATION:

"I want to be very precise here. I do ***not*** *presently have evidence proving that information collected through the Community Committee is being transferred to ActBlue, campaign consultants, campaign volunteers, or anyone else. Therefore, I am not going to stand here and claim that it is. But I am concerned about the possibility. Given how this system has been structured, I believe that concern is reasonable. Citizens are being recruited for something called the Graham Community Committee through a political campaign website. They are being asked to apply. The same website solicits political contributions. The same website directs citizen communications through an email address beginning with the word* ***"vote."*** *And despite my previously raising this exact concern, I still do not see a clear disclosure explaining what happens to the information citizens provide. So I want some straightforward answers. Who receives the applications? Where are they stored? Who has access to them? Are they maintained in a campaign database? Are campaign consultants or campaign workers able to access them? Can the names and contact information be used for future political communications? Can they be used for fundraising? Can they be used for voter outreach? Can they be shared with ActBlue or another political organization? And if none of those things are happening: Then say so. Put it directly on the application. Tell citizens exactly who receives their information and exactly how it will—and will not—be used. That is transparency."*

THE EXPLANATION DOESN'T SOLVE THE PROBLEM:

The Mayor's explanation that she is using the campaign website because the committee cannot be placed on the City's website does not resolve my concern. It actually highlights it. If this is not a City committee, don't make it look like one. If this is a private organization, identify it as a private organization. If this is mayoral outreach being conducted personally by the Mayor, say that. And if political campaign infrastructure is collecting the information, tell citizens that before they submit it. The answer cannot simply be: "The City wouldn't let me put it on its website, so I put it on my campaign website." Those are not the only two choices. There are countless ways to create an independent community organization without mixing it with a political campaign.

LEGALITY IS NOT THE ONLY STANDARD:

"I have said this before, and I will say it again: Everything I am describing may ultimately be determined to be legal. If the League of Municipalities and election officials tell me that North Carolina law permits it, I will acknowledge that. But public officials should aspire to something beyond simply asking: "Can I legally do this?" We should also ask: "Is this transparent?" "Is this clear to the public?" "Could a reasonable citizen misunderstand what this is?" And: "Would I be comfortable explaining exactly where this citizen's information goes?" Something can be technically legal and still be a bad practice. Something can be legal and still create an appearance of impropriety. And something can be legal while still unnecessarily damaging public trust."

THIS CAN BE FIXED VERY EASILY:

"The remarkable thing about this situation is how easily much of it could be resolved. Put a clear disclaimer on the Community Committee page stating that it is not a committee of the City of Graham and was not created or authorized by Graham City Council. State exactly who operates it. State exactly who receives the applications. State whether information collected through the committee is maintained separately from campaign information. State whether the information can be used for campaign communications, fundraising, or political outreach. And provide a separate method of communication for residents who want to discuss City business without submitting their information through political campaign infrastructure. That's not an unreasonable burden. That's basic transparency."

WHY I AM CONTINUING TO RAISE THIS:

"I know some people would prefer that I simply stop asking these questions. I'm not going to do that. Not because I have already decided that something illegal is happening. I haven't. I'm continuing to ask because these questions have still not been answered. I raised them directly with the Mayor. I suggested an easy alternative. The Mayor said she would add clarification. I have not found that clarification. Meanwhile, the committee remains on the campaign website, the campaign donation links remain, the campaign email remains, and Graham citizens continue to be invited to provide information through that infrastructure. At some point, "trust me" is not a substitute for transparency."

CLOSING

"This isn't about preventing the Mayor from talking with citizens. She should talk with citizens. So should I. So should every member of this Council. This isn't about preventing the Mayor from creating a private community organization. She has every right to do that. And it isn't about preventing legitimate campaign activity. The issue is much simpler. Citizens should know which one they are participating in. If they're dealing with the City of Graham, tell them they're dealing with the City. If they're dealing with a private organization, tell them it's private. If they're dealing with the Mayor individually, tell them that. And if their personal information is being collected through political campaign infrastructure, tell them exactly what happens to that information before they hit "Submit." I have asked outside authorities to tell us where the legal lines are. I will respect those answers when they come. But regardless of where the minimum legal line is drawn, I believe Graham's citizens deserve a higher standard: Clear disclosure. Clear boundaries. Accurate information. And no reason to wonder whether civic participation is being mixed with political campaign activity. Until those questions are answered, I will continue asking them. Because that's part of the job I was elected to do."

Thank you, Council Member Young

Mayor Dickey:

- Benches will be placed back in downtown this week.
- City Staff is finalizing the downtown flag designs.
- Discover Graham Instagram, which would highlight local businesses, will launch at the end of October.
- Facade and Downtown Beautification grants are live on the Graham Facebook page.
- Railroad closings will start soon – check the City's website for closings.
- Weekly movies in the park – check the Recreation and Parks Facebook page.
- 9-11 Run Walk - September 12th.
- Esperanza – September 26th.
- Fall Fest Downtown – September 19th.
- She shared that the Police Department had an agreement with Flock, and would get more details
- She asked where citizens could call about a broken water meter. City Manager Garner stated they could call the main customer service number at City Hall.
- She suggested having all Boards and Commissions, including the ABC Board and Graham Housing Authority, make presentations to Council. Council was not in favor.
- Inquired about the PED Plan, where we were, and whether there was any funding for projects. She would like updates on all strategic plans and which items have been checked off. Assistant City Manager Holland stated these plans are used when seeking funding for projects. He replied to Mr. Westbrook's comment that East Elm Street was a project the City had tried to get on DOT's radar, but because it was a State Highway, the City was at the mercy of the State.
- Mayor Dickey suggested the Council meet a week before Council meetings to discuss the agenda. The Council decided to discuss it further at the October Council meeting.

CLOSED SESSION:

City Council considered going into closed session in accordance with North Carolina General Statute 143-318.11(a)(3) to consult with an attorney employed or retained by the public body to preserve the attorney-client privilege between the attorney and the public body for current litigation (Steven B. Wall and Todd Dean v. The City of Graham, et al. File 26CV004657-000).

Motion by Council Member Young to go into closed session in accordance with North Carolina General Statute 143-318.11(a)(3) to consult with an attorney employed or retained by the public body to preserve the attorney-client privilege between the attorney and the public body for current litigation (Steven B. Wall and Todd Dean v. The City of Graham, et al. File 26CV004657-000), seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Hall. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Council Member Young to end closed session, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

Motion by Council Member Young to return to open session, seconded by Council Member Chin. The motion passed unanimously.

No action was reported.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion by Mayor Pro Tem Hall to adjourn, seconded by Council Member Young. The motion passed unanimously. (8:50 pm)

Renee M. Ward, CMC
City Clerk