

A Special Meeting of the Apalachicola City Commission was held on September 10, 2025 at 1:00 PM at the Commission Meeting Room located at 74 6<sup>th</sup> Street, Apalachicola, Florida.

Present: Mayor Brenda Ash, Commissioner Anita Grove, Commissioner Despina George, Commissioner Donna Duncan, Commissioner Adriane Elliott, Interim City Manager Chris Holley, Finance Director Lee Mathes, Chief of Police Bobby Varnes, City Clerk Sheneidra Cummings, Attorney Dan Hartman, Emily Colon (Southern Group)

Meeting was called to order by Mayor Ash followed by invocation and pledge of allegiance.

### **Agenda Adoption**

Motion was made by Commissioner Grove to adopt the agenda, seconded by Commissioner Elliott. None opposed. Motion carried, 5-0.

Emily Colon, with the Southern Group facilitated the interview process and began by explaining the process to the Commission. She noted that each commissioner had been assigned a specific category of questions to ask each candidate, and the same questions should be asked of all candidates to ensure an "apples to apples comparison." Following the initial questions, commissioners were free to ask follow-up questions. The goal was to get through each candidate in about 30 minutes. Emily also explained that after the interviews, commissioners would rank the candidates from 1-4, with 1 being the best candidate for Apalachicola, as a basis for discussion to build consensus. Emily introduced the candidates and each Commissioner had the opportunity to ask questions etc.

### **Interview #1: Charles Anderson**

Charles Anderson introduced himself as the first candidate. Originally from the Bronx, New York, he served 27 years in the United States Air Force, rising to the rank of Chief Master Sergeant (E-9). During his military career, he completed a bachelor's and master's degree and traveled extensively. After the military, he worked as Public Works Director in Steamboat Springs, Colorado for 5 years, managing 115 people with a \$15 million budget. He then served as Deputy City Manager in Great Falls, Montana for 7.5 years, where he had 500 employees and a \$140 million budget. Most recently, he was the City Manager of Treasure Island, Florida, where he dealt with three consecutive hurricanes (Debbie, Helene, and Milton). Anderson shared that he is married with six children and four grandchildren.

Commissioner Grove asked about his leadership through significant change. Anderson described leading a project in Great Falls to partner with the Department of Defense to build a \$20 million community recreation center. He secured a \$10 million DOD grant and then successfully advocated for a \$10 million community bond to match it. He noted that while the

project was successful, he would have engaged federal delegation earlier and involved community groups sooner in the planning process.

Commissioner George asked about effective city commission-manager relationships. Anderson emphasized that trust and communication are fundamental. He noted that a city manager has the unique position of overseeing all city employees while having five supervisors. He stressed the importance of meeting one-on-one with commissioners to understand their communication preferences and ensuring all commissioners receive the same information. He suggested weekly meetings with commissioners, sharing information requested by one commissioner with all commissioners, and providing regular reports on department achievements and upcoming activities.

Mayor Ash asked how he would connect with residents and build credibility in Apalachicola's unique, close-knit community. Anderson emphasized getting out to meet people in the community, introducing himself to civic groups, businesses, volunteers, and other entities within the first 30-45 days, and noted the importance of collaboration and teamwork.

Commissioner Duncan asked about managing a limited budget while meeting community needs. Anderson discussed his extensive budget experience in the military, as a Public Works Director, Deputy City Manager, and City Manager. He emphasized the importance of financial stewardship, prioritizing needs over wants and providing transparent explanations when funding requests cannot be accommodated.

Commissioner Elliott asked about Apalachicola's most pressing challenges. Anderson identified infrastructure needs (water, sewer, wastewater, resiliency), economic challenges related to the Bay and potential shifts from traditional industries to more tourism focus, and the need for state support as an "area of critical concern".

In closing, Anderson expressed his genuine interest in Apalachicola, noting that he and his wife visited a month and a half ago and were drawn to the community's unique character. He emphasized that he was excited by the opportunity to help the city at its "turning point."

## **Interview #2: Tony Mervin Waldrop**

Tony Mervin Waldrop introduced himself as having over 40 years of experience in local government. He was born in Georgia and has been the County Manager in Burke County for 24 years. He emphasized that when he makes a move, he tends to stay for a long time, noting he still maintains connections in Crystal River, Florida where he moved in 1985. Waldrop also expressed that Apalachicola would be a good fit for him.

When asked about leading through significant change, Waldrop described addressing environmental issues with the sewage treatment plant in Crystal River.

Regarding effective city manager-commission relationships, Waldrop emphasized communication, particularly keeping the board informed.

On community engagement, Waldrop said he would get involved in community groups, find a church to attend, develop relationships with the business community, and attend high school sports events. He emphasized his desire to become part of the community and settle here

For financial stewardship, Waldrop stressed that the board sets the budget during workshops, and once established, departments must stay within their budgets. He emphasized using a strong purchasing system where purchases relate back to line items in the budget.

Waldrop identified Apalachicola's biggest challenges as water and infrastructure issues, and the extensive property inventory owned by the city.

When asked why he wanted to serve as Apalachicola's city manager, Waldrop explained that while nearing retirement age, he felt he had too much local government knowledge and experience to retire and has a lot of experience to offer the City.

### **Interview #3: Matthew Colby Goss**

Matthew Colby Goss introduced himself as the current Deputy County Judge Executive for Harlan County Fiscal Court in Kentucky. Previously, he served as Assistant City Manager for Gulf Breeze, Florida, and before that, worked in the same deputy position in Harlan County for four years. Prior to government work, Goss spent nine years in the private sector after college.

When asked about leading through significant change, Goss described implementing a computerized system to better track work orders, particularly important for FEMA documentation during disasters. He emphasized the importance of getting buy-in from stakeholders from the beginning of the process, including their input on what information to track.

Regarding city manager-commission relationships, Goss emphasized trust, credibility, and open communication. He stressed the importance of providing truthful answers to commissioners, even when the information isn't positive, and building a relationship based on honesty.

On connecting with the community, Goss stated that establishing credibility comes through actions rather than words. He acknowledged that he would need to get acclimated to learn about the community's social aspects etc.

For financial management with limited resources, Goss emphasized identifying community needs first, then being careful with expenditures, and putting resources to best use.

Regarding Apalachicola's challenges, Goss mentioned the water issue and redevelopment of properties as long-term problems requiring long-term solutions. He emphasized the need to conduct due diligence, research, and gather input on potential solutions, available funding sources, and the community's willingness to tackle these issues.

When asked why he wanted to be Apalachicola's city manager, Goss shared that he enjoys a challenge and likes this area of the country. He saw this as an opportunity to "make a difference somewhere else." His top priority for the first six months would be getting to know the community well to provide advice to the commissioners for decision-making.

### **Interview #4: Justin Steele**

Justin Steele introduced himself as working for the Apalachee Regional Planning Council in Tallahassee, which provides planning services to the city of Apalachicola and Franklin County.

He has a background in architectural studies from FAMU and a master's in urban and regional planning from Florida State University. Steele began his career reviewing permits for compliance with the state's land development code in areas of critical state concern. He then worked as Growth Management Director for Gadsden County, where he grew the department from 2 to 7 people and helped secure over \$20 million in grants.

When asked about leading through significant change, Steele described taking over as Growth Management Director at Gadsden County when everyone had vacated the department. He had initially been hired as Senior Planner but was immediately promoted on his first day. He explained how he brought the team together to improve things despite the challenges. What worked was building cohesion through open communication, explaining problems and solutions, and helping staff understand the rules and commission direction.

Regarding effective city manager-commission relationships, Steele emphasized communication as the key factor. He stressed the importance of keeping commissioners informed through regular updates, meeting with them before public meetings to discuss issues, and making himself available to answer questions.

On community engagement, Steele acknowledged that while he might be perceived as an outsider, he would make himself available to the community by maintaining office hours, responding to emails and phone calls, and attending public meetings.

For financial management, Steele emphasized first identifying community needs through community meetings and stakeholder engagement. He would then examine the budget to determine the most cost-effective programs and services.

Regarding Apalachicola's challenges, Steele identified the water system as the most pressing issue, followed by limited housing availability and environmental concerns related to water quality in the Bay, given Apalachicola's status as an area of critical state concern.

When asked why he wanted to serve as Apalachicola's city manager, Steele explained that his career had come full circle - from starting with Apalachicola, moving to county work, and then returning to work with the city through the ARPC. He saw the position as an opportunity to help the city. His top priorities for the first six months would include identifying staff needs, understanding city issues, exploring available grants, keeping the commission informed, creating a plan to address issues, and making himself available to the public. In closing, Steele expressed his admiration for the community engagement he had witnessed in Apalachicola.

### **Public Comment**

Public present, no comments received.

### **Commission Discussion/Ranking following City Manager Interviews**

After the interviews, commissioners completed their individual ranking sheets, with 1 being the best candidate and 4 being the least desired. Emily tabulated the rankings for discussion.

Commissioner Duncan initially supported Justin Steele but ultimately advocated for Charles Anderson, stating she was looking for someone ready to invest in Apalachicola. She acknowledged that Justin lacked the management experience that Chuck had demonstrated.

Commissioner Grove expressed that Charles Anderson had more skills than the other candidates, particularly in staff management experience, which she felt was critical given Apalachicola's deficit in this area over the past five years. She appreciated Anderson's experience with water and sewer infrastructure and noted that staff who had met him thought he would make a good manager.

Commissioner Elliott stated he was torn between Charles Anderson and Justin Steele, as each brought different strengths. He noted Anderson's military background provided rigorous structure and organizational experience, while Steele had relevant education, regional knowledge, and understanding of the state legislation. Elliott ultimately favored Anderson, citing his potential to be "aggressive and proactive" in addressing the city's needs.

Commissioner George said she found all four candidates exceptional and had difficulty deciding. She ranked Anderson first and Steele second, believing both would be good choices but that Anderson would be prepared to "come here day 1 and get going."

Mayor Ash prioritized experience, noting the city needed a culture change. While both Anderson and Waldrop had substantial experience, she felt Anderson's financial and budgetary abilities, utility experience, resourcefulness, and community orientation gave him the edge.

Interim Manager Chris Holley, who had coordinated the recruitment process, confirmed that the commission's rankings aligned with his assessment. He noted that the process offered two types of candidates - experienced leaders like Anderson and promising but less-tested candidates like Steele.

The final ranking was: 1) Charles Anderson, 2) Justin Steele, 3) Tony Mervin Waldrop, and 4) Matthew Colby Goss.

## **Motion & Vote**

Commissioner George made a motion to instruct the city attorney to enter into negotiations with Charles Anderson for the position of city manager. Commissioner Grove seconded the motion. None opposed, Motion carried, 5-0.

Commissioner Elliott moved that if negotiations fall through with the preferred number 1 candidate, to authorize city staff to continue negotiations with the number 2 candidate Justin Steele. Commissioner George seconded the motion. The motion carried 5-0.

Commissioner Elliott moved to adopt the final ranking of city manager candidates as presented: 1) Charles Anderson, 2) Justin Steele, 3) Tony Mervin Waldrop, and 4) Matthew Colby Goss. Commissioner Grove seconded the motion. The motion carried 5-0.

Before adjourning, Chris Holley brought up a request from the county regarding an appointment to an economic development board. The commission agreed to provide names by

September 17 for consideration at their September 23 meeting, when Chairman Jones would be invited to attend.

The commission thanked Emily for facilitating the interview process and providing a well-organized packet that streamlined the process.

### **Adjournment**

A motion was made by Commissioner George to adjourn, seconded by Commissioner Elliott. None opposed. Motion carried, 5-0.

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**Brenda Ash, Mayor**

**ATTEST:**

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**Sheneidra Cummings, City Clerk**