A Special Meeting of the Apalachicola City Commission was held on February 24, 2025 at 3:00 PM at the Commission Meeting Room located at 74 6th Street, Apalachicola, Florida.

Present: Commissioner Anita Grove, Commissioner Despina George, Commissioner Donna Duncan, Commissioner Adriane Elliott, City Manager Travis Wade, City Planner Bree Robinson, City Clerk Sheneidra Cummings, Attorney Hartman, Chief Bobby Varnes

Mayor Brenda Ash- recused.

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

## Agenda Adoption

A motion was made by Commissioner

## Public Comment

No public comments were made at this time.

## New Business- City Manager Interviews

Acting Mayor Pro Tem Anita Grove explained that Mayor Brenda Ash had applied for the city manager position and recused herself from the hiring process and any votes related to it, following advice of counsel. The commission received 17 applications for the city manager position after advertising for six weeks on the Florida League of Cities, Florida County Managers Association, Florida Cities Manager Association, the city website, Apalachicola Times, and Indeed website. Six candidates were selected for interviews.

### Brenda Ash Interview

Brenda Ash, the first candidate interviewed, emphasized her 44-year residency in Apalachicola and extensive experience in finance, mortgage lending, management, operations, and government. She highlighted her previous service as General Manager of the St. George Plantation Owners Association for three years and Operations Manager for six years, as well as over 20 years of lending experience as Assistant Vice President at Centennial Bank.

Discussion held.

**Matthew Spuck Interview (Via Zoom)**

Matthew Spuck, participating via Zoom from Virginia, discussed his experience operating a bed and breakfast with his wife for eight years of a ten-year commitment. He explained he initially attended town council meetings as a resident, was appointed to fill a vacancy, then publicly elected.

Discussion held.

**Michael Brillhart Interview (Via Zoom)**

Michael Brillhart, currently serving as interim city manager in Crescent City, Florida, addressed his varied career path when questioned by Commissioner Elliott. He explained his transitions between positions were often at the request of professionals he'd worked with, taking on interim roles that sometimes became permanent. Brillhart emphasized his 27 years of home ownership in Florida and extensive experience in both county and city government. He detailed his current work managing a budget where the general fund represents only 8% of a total budget exceeding $300 million, with $250 million in capital projects.

Discussion held.

**Keturah Ash Interview**

Keturah Ash, a Crawfordville resident and Apalachicola native, brought a unique perspective as someone familiar with the community. She currently manages a statewide program for the Florida Department of Corrections, overseeing help desk operations, security access, court-ordered payment systems, and policy compliance. Regarding experience gaps, Ash candidly acknowledged she lacked specific municipal budgeting and grant writing experience but viewed these as exciting challenges to learn.

Discussion held.

**TJ Fish Interview (Via Zoom)**

TJ Fish, joined via Zoom, stated that he was currently serving as Director of Transportation and Public Works in Groveland, Florida, Fish brought extensive infrastructure experience managing 30-35 employees and a budget where the general fund represents only 8% of a total exceeding $300 million.

Fish emphasized his hands-on approach, and highlighted his experience managing water, sewer, reclaim, storm water, and resiliency programs, explaining that creative layering of funding sources was essential for small municipalities.

Discussion held.

## Commission Deliberations

Following the interviews, the commission engaged in extensive informal discussion about the candidates. The primary concerns centered on salary expectations, availability to start, and fit with the community.

Regarding Matthew Spuck, commissioners appreciated his experience and tourism industry knowledge but were concerned about his $135,000 salary requirement—$50,000 above their budget. Commissioner Duncan noted she "wrote it down when he said" he would cut staff, which raised additional concerns. The April-May start date was also deemed too distant.

For Michael Brillhart, commissioners were initially wary of his job transitions but felt his explanation of taking interim positions was satisfactory. Commissioner Grove ranked him first, appreciating his depth of experience and thorough research of Apalachicola. Commissioner Elliott ranked him second, noting concerns about long-term affordability but appreciating his immediate availability and training of a replacement.

TJ Fish emerged as a strong candidate, with Commissioner Elliott ranking him first due to his infrastructure experience, noting "our biggest weakness is our water and sewer department." His master's in public administration and extensive grant experience were seen as major assets. However, his current $126,000 salary raised affordability concerns, though his motivation to complete his Florida Retirement System tenure was viewed positively.

The commission recognized Brenda Ash's deep community ties and knowledge but had mixed feelings about her transition from mayor to manager. Commissioner Duncan expressed skepticism that Fish or Brillhart would actually accept the position given the salary constraints, making Ash a potentially more realistic choice.

After extensive discussion, the commission reached an informal consensus with Fish, Brillhart, and Ash as their top three candidates, though not in unanimous order. The recurring theme was the tension between finding qualified candidates and the city's $80,000 salary limitation.

## Appointment of City Manager/ Ranking

Public comment was received from Jeanine Gedman. The speaker outlined detailed criteria for evaluating candidates, emphasizing the importance of education in management and local government, professional experience managing similar-sized cities, technological aptitude, communication skills, and collaborative leadership style. They quoted the International City Management Association's description of a chief administrator as "a leader, a coach, and a chief of strategy" responsible for serving the elected body, managing budgets, directing employees, and ensuring quality customer service. The speaker urged the commission not to let salary constraints prevent hiring the best candidate, suggesting creative solutions like providing housing.

Chris Holley, former interim city manager, advised the commission on the selection process. He emphasized the importance of ranking candidates immediately while interviews were fresh, noting "while it's fresh in your mind, if you take a week or 2 to come back to do this, you need to rank now." He recommended negotiating salary within reason, stating "don't throw the baby out... over $10,000 plus or minus to find the right person for you." Holley also stressed the importance of background checks and suggested the normal process would be calling the top-ranked candidate the next day to settle on a contract.

Commissioner George expressed a preference for in-person follow-up interviews, stating "I don't feel comfortable based on the Zoom conference to pick my number 1 and decide to hire them." However, Commissioner Elliott emphasized urgency, noting that candidate applications were sent February 11th, but interviews weren't scheduled until the previous Tuesday due to lack of commissioner responses.

After extensive discussion about process and timeline, the commission focused on creating a ranked list. Attorney Hartman offered to contact all three candidates to determine their salary expectations, earliest start dates, and conduct reference checks.

Following final tabulation of rankings:

- Brillhart received three first-place rankings
- Fish received one first-place ranking and was consistently in everyone's top three
- Ash was in three commissioners' top three
- Spuck appeared in one commissioner's top three

Motion by Commissioner George: To direct Attorney Hartman to gather information for applicants Brillhart, Fish and Ash to determine salary requirements, start date, and to check references, and to direct Chief Barnes to conduct background checks. Motion was second by Commissioner Elliott. None opposed. Motion carried 4-1.

## Mayor and Commissioner Comments

Commission discussion during this period was incorporated into the deliberations above.

## Adjournment

A motion was made by Commissioner Elliott to adjourn, second by Commissioner Duncan. Motion carried, 4-0.

**Meeting adjourned.**

**Brenda Ash, Mayor**

**ATTEST:**

**Sheneidra Cummings, City Clerk**