



Minutes of the Oberlin City Council Retreat
Held at 36 S. Prospect Street, Oberlin, Ohio
September 16, 2025

Council Retreat – 8:00 a.m. – OEAC Large Conference Room
Purpose: to align Council on strategic goals to be achieved by the close of the 2024-2025 term and to begin planning for long-term priorities in 2026-2027

A meeting of the Oberlin City Council was held on September 16, 2025, at the Oberlin Enrichment and Activity center, located at 36 S. Prospect Street, Oberlin, Ohio. The meeting was called to order at 8:00 a.m. by Presiding Officer Michael McFarlin for the above-stated purpose. *Roll Call was taken as follows:*

Council Members:	Present	Absent
Eboni Johnson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Michael McFarlin	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ray English	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Libni Lopez	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jessa New	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Joseph Waltzer	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Kristin Peterson	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

- Appointees:**
 Belinda Anderson, Clerk of Council
 Jon Clark, Law Director
 Marin Fowler, Finance Director (Arrived at 10:45 a.m.)
 Greg Holcomb, City Manager

Members of Council met for the purpose of aligning Council on strategic goals to be achieved by the close of the 2024-2025 term and to begin planning for long-term priorities in 2026-2027.

The Key points from the discussion are summarized as follows:

COUNCIL BUSINESS

- **Setting expectations and norms for how we work together**
 - Concern was expressed that information had previously been funneled through the Council President and Vice President.
 - It was emphasized that information should be shared with all members of Council.

- Council discussed assigning specific priorities or projects to members who have expressed interest, allowing them to serve as point persons.
- **Working with our new City Manager**
 - Council -Manager Roles
 - The discussion referenced the importance of understanding the respective roles of the City Council and the City Manager.
 - An ICMA resource explaining these roles was mentioned as a helpful reference for both Council and the public. The City Manager agreed to share this resource with Council.
 - Council-staff Communication Preferences
 - Council should avoid directing staff to perform specific tasks.
 - All requests for action should go through the City Manager to ensure clear communication and accountability.
 - Council acknowledged that direct communication with staff for informational purposes is appropriate, but should include the City Manager in correspondence.
 - Including the City Manager in correspondence allows for better tracking and follow-up on issues.
 - Tracking and Transparency:
 - Members agreed it is helpful to receive status updates on pending matters.
 - Council emphasized the importance of transparency and responsiveness in rebuilding community trust.
- **Space Study Needs**
 - Discussed the need to conduct a Space study to determine the location of permanent office spaces.
 - The Clerk of Council was asked to share the Master Plan Study with the City Council and the City Manager.
- **Appointee Evaluation Process**
 - A group is reviewing and updating Council rules, including procedures related to appointee evaluation and Council orientation.
 - Discussed creating a more uniform and aligned evaluation process to occur in the fall, prior to Election Day, allowing all appointees to be evaluated at the same time, regardless of anniversary dates.
 - Any resulting salary adjustments would take effect on January 1st.
 - The goal is to make the evaluation process more informed and supportive.
 - Members were asked to share ideas and feedback on the evaluation process by September 22, 2025.
- **Boards and Commissions**

- A working group is reviewing the Boards and Commissions ordinance and handbook.
- Planning to create a welcome and orientation session for all board and commission members to be held at the same time. The session will be held by the City Manager, Law Director, and Clerk of Council.
 - According to Resolution No. 24-12 CMS, the chair and staff liaisons are required to conduct the training,
 - Discussed inviting presenters to provide Open Meetings Law and Ethics training.
 - Online Public Records training will also be made available as an option.
 - Parliamentary procedure training can be provided by the City Law Director.
- Planning an end-of-year recognition celebration to thank volunteers for their service on city boards and commissions.
 - Noted per Resolution No. 24-12 CMS, the Nominating Committee is responsible for this event.
- Next Steps
 - Meet with City Law Director to review legal parameters.
 - The subcommittee will continue reviewing the ordinance and handbook.
 - The goal is to present an updated ordinance with proposed changes at the second Council meeting in October.
- **Liaison Assignment Process**
 - Reviewed the role of Council liaison, noting that responsibilities have evolved over time.
 - Some liaisons function as a de facto sixth member on certain boards and commissions, and they should refrain from doing so.
 - Historically, liaisons did not participate in discussions or attempt to direct committee decisions.
 - Place emphasis on neutrality, as liaisons convey information to the Council and vote on matters that come before it.
 - The handbook will be reviewed to clarify the defined role of liaisons.
 - Discussed the current liaison selection process and how assignments will be made moving forward.
 - An appointment can be based on individual interests and expertise.
 - New Council members should be engaged prior to the selection of liaison
 - A list of interests will be circulated among members to guide assignments.
 - Clarified expectations for liaisons:
 - Serve as a resource.
 - Should not act as a member or advocate for the committee.
 - Act as an informational bridge and a tool for the committee.
 - Agreed to formalize the process for assigning liaisons to boards and commissions.
- **Council Rules**

- Clarification needed on when liaisons and committee members should approach Council; orientation process will reinforce this.
- Role of liaison defined in Council rules adopted by Resolution No. R24-09.
 - “The role of the Council Liaison to a Commission, Board or Committee is to serve as an informational bridge between Council and that group. The Council member may participate in discussion, but he or she should make no attempt to control the discussion or subsequent votes. The Council member does not vote at the Commission, Board, or Committee meetings.”
 - The key phrase “...engage in discussion” requires clarification: liaisons act as resources and advisors, not as participants who steer discussions or votes.
 - Suggested language: “The Council Member may participate in discussions *as a resource*, but should make no attempt to control the discussion or subsequent votes.”
- All Council members should be equally informed about ongoing matters.
 - Consider rotation of Council members in leadership roles.
 - Improve communication of discussions from agenda-setting meetings, including items that do not make the formal agenda.
 - Concerns raised about leadership responsibilities being concentrated in the Council President role; research needed to find out what the actual duties of the President are per the Charter and other resources.
 - Emphasis on providing all members opportunities to experience leadership and be empowered to act responsibly.
 - Accountability structures recommended to support effective Council operations while preserving organizational structure (hierarchy).
 - Council Orientation Handbook requires updating to reflect these clarifications.
- Next Step
 - Consider addressing standing committees within the Council Rules of Order.
 - Clerk of Council tasked with researching duties that historically have fallen under the Council President.
 - Discussed the potential deadline for having the Council Rules revision completed.

Ten-minute recess taken at 9:40 a.m.

PUBLIC WORKS

- **Sidewalk and Curb Overgrowth:**
 - Concerns were raised about grass, weeds, and low-hanging tree branches obstructing sidewalks and curbs, including overgrowth from private property.
 - Determined this is a general public works concern, not a retreat item.
 - Next Steps

- City Manager will consult with the Law Director on property owner responsibilities regarding overgrowth in the right-of-way.
- City Manager will review the process for sidewalk maintenance and inventorying.

- **Disposition of City-owned property**
 - Status update on City-owned properties, noting legal issues delaying prior projects (e.g., properties transferred to Michael Bowen).
 - Bate Canteen: OCIC is working on plans which are still in development.
 - City Manager House(205 Morgan Street) :
 - Renovation estimate: ~\$100,000.
 - Cost to demolish (including asbestos remediation): \$18,000.
 - Concerns about optics due to affordable housing needs; residents on the east side lack park space and resources.
 - Options discussed:
 - Renovate the City Manager residence (CM could fund renovations).
 - Section 121.04 of the City Code stipulates that the City Manager shall receive free living quarters.
 - Convert into office space or information center.
 - Renovate and sell (potential revenue ~\$200,000).
 - Convert the area to a formalized park or green space.
 - Financial constraints and political optics must be considered before deciding to renovate or demolish.
 - Next Steps
 - Financial constraints and public perception must be carefully considered before deciding whether to renovate or demolish.
 - City Manager will visit the house and provide input on preferred use.
 - Law Director will keep Council informed regarding discussions on Land Bank properties.
 - An update on OCIC initiatives regarding Bate Canteen will be provided.

- **Oberlin Road/SR 511 intersection**
 - Community concerns raised about safety at the intersection, with residents asking whether it needs reevaluation.
 - Public Works Director and City Engineer have engaged GPD Group to review the intersection again.
 - Ongoing communication has been provided to residents regarding traffic flow, safety measures, and study materials.
 - A conference call with GPD Group is scheduled to discuss next steps.
 - Long-term planning considerations include:
 - Developing Green Acres as a neighborhood.
 - Integrating wetlands to the northeast with trails and neighborhood access.

- Ensuring safe pedestrian connections, including sidewalks on Lorain Street and safe access to trails.
- Temporary measures such as updating signs may help while a long-term plan is developed.
- Discussed why a previously installed flashing beacon was removed after GPD identified it as creating more problems than benefits.
 - Removal has not improved safety; further evaluation is planned.
- Accident data and analysis are available from the City Engineer for review.
- A 4-way stop is not feasible because it is a State Route; regulatory proof is required for changes.
- Emphasis on adhering to regulations to avoid increased liability for the City.
- Next Steps
 - A full-scope study of the intersection will be conducted.

BUDGET AND FINANCE

- **Pre-budget meetings can be challenging to schedule, but are useful for Council to discuss priorities and guide staff budget submissions.**
- **Some members expressed skepticism about financial projections, noting that the Finance Department tend to be overly conservative.**
- **Recommendations included:**
 - Establishing a standing budget committee.
 - Holding a pre-budget meeting to set priorities based on available revenues.
 - Priorities discussed:
 - Completion of the multi-use path.
 - Splash pad (desirable but not urgent, but a decision needs to be made).
 - OEAC building (assess long-term priorities and spending).
 - Street maintenance (urgency increasing due to deteriorating conditions).
 - Implementing a Capital Budget plan to allow Council input before the budget is finalized.
- **Other matters discussed**
 - Bicentennial Budget/Planning:
 - Form a bicentennial committee to manage planning, sponsorships, and partnerships with stakeholders.
 - Short-Term Rental Bed Tax:
 - Council expressed interest in pursuing legislation for a short-term rental bed tax; legislation will be forthcoming.
 - Oberlin Community Improvement Corporation Funding:
 - Suggestion to create a line item to support OCIC projects.
 - Consider Funding through the Community Organization Funding process.
- **Next Steps**
 - The City Manager will develop a capital plan that highlights priorities.

UPDATES

- **Affordable housing project (Michael Bowen – discussion revisited)**
 - Challenges in transferring five lots to Mr. Bowen due to new statutory constraints on property disposition.
 - Recent statute amendment limits disposal to either:
 - Public auction conducted by the Sheriff, or
 - Sealed bid auction using forms prepared by the municipality.
 - The purpose of the amendment is to ensure the county recovers foreclosure costs before property transfers.
 - Since the law was passed after the agreement with Mr. Bowen, retroactive application does not generally apply, but the statute does not explicitly address property acquired on or after January 1, 2025.
 - This legal constraint has caused delays in completing the property transfer.
 - Legal counsel has been consulted to explore options.
 - Previously transferred properties remain unaffected as they occurred before the statute took effect.

- **New website Update – Finance and Ordinance Issues:**
 - Finance Software integration: *(Clerk Note: Fowler entered meeting at this time)*
 - Current challenge: connecting online payment forms to the new website.
 - Existing forms would need to be disconnected and reconnected, incurring additional costs.
 - Previously populated content is outdated; staff will need to retrain and repopulate information.
 - Huntington Bank provided the City with a Snap Pay referral that has been unresponsive for over a month; awaiting a response from a second vendor.
 - Options under consideration:
 - Seek a refund from the current web vendor and find a company compatible with existing financial software.
 - Maintain the current website for payments and gradually transition forms to the new site with a linking system.
 - Updating payment software is necessary, but cost for new finance software would be extremely high, and implementation could take years.
 - Clerk/Ordinance Logs:
 - Ordinance logs did not transfer correctly; archived forms display only the number without the title.
 - Proposed solution: keep the old website and link from the new website to access the ordinance log; nominal fee expected.
 - Staff is working on resolving the issue and awaiting final guidance.

- **Next Step**
 - City Manager will try to figure out what it will cost to cut the forms for anything new and figure out how to keep the solution for the utility. He will provide an update on this to Council.
 - Council members attending the NLC City Summit will meet with vendors to see if there is an alternative solution out there that can meet the City's needs.

- **Parking and Maintenance Enforcement**
 - Council emphasized the need to improve parking and property maintenance enforcement in the downtown area.
 - Law Director and City Manager will discuss parking enforcement issues with the Police Chief.
 - Code updates were suggested to address downtown private property maintenance enforcement issues.

- **Additional items for Immediate Consideration:**
 - Council Chambers Live Streaming:
 - Livestreaming issues persist despite troubleshooting efforts.
 - Determined that a new encoder is required, estimated cost \$8,600–\$8,700.
 - Council authorized the Clerk to proceed with the purchase.

 - Green Acres Infrastructure Lots:
 - Disappointment was expressed over the lack of an identified developer for the project.
 - Concerns were raised about proceeding with site infrastructure without a comprehensive development plan.
 - General disappointment with RFP results; suggestions that the City had not engaged firms aligned with social equity and sustainability goals.
 - Consideration of incentives for energy-efficient home construction on the lots.
 - Some members advocated moving forward with infrastructure despite no confirmed developer.
 - It was explained that having no confirmed developer allows future homeowners to select their own developer, offering more flexibility.
 - Options to delay or stop infrastructure work were discussed.
 - Council members expressed being torn about changing the process at this stage.

 - **Next Steps**
 - Public Works Department is ready to proceed; bid advertisements have been prepared, and project funds have been budgeted.
 - Members of the Green Acres Subcommittee supports moving the infrastructure project to the bidding phase.

Adjournment: Since there was no additional information to come before the Council the special meeting adjourned at 11:16 a.m.

Attest:



BELINDA B. ANDERSON, MMC
CLERK OF COUNCIL

APPROVED: 11/03/2025



EBONI A. JOHNSON
PRESIDENT OF COUNCIL

POSTED: 11/04/2025