

**MINUTES**  
**REGULAR CITY COUNCIL WORKSESSION**  
CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF YUMA, ARIZONA  
CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS - YUMA CITY HALL  
ONE CITY PLAZA, YUMA, ARIZONA  
**February 3, 2026**  
**5:30 p.m.**

**CALL TO ORDER**

**Mayor Nicholls** called the Regular City Council Worksession to order at 5:33 p.m.

Councilmembers Present: Martinez, Morris, McClendon, Smith, Morales, Watts, and Mayor Nicholls  
Councilmembers Absent: None  
Staffmembers Present: Acting City Administrator, John D. Simonton  
Deputy City Administrator, Jennifer Reichelt  
Communications Manager, Jennifer Miller  
Director of Community Development, Alyssa Linville  
Various department heads or their representatives  
City Attorney, Richard W. Files  
Deputy City Clerk, Janet L. Pierson

**I. ELEVATE SOUTHWEST**

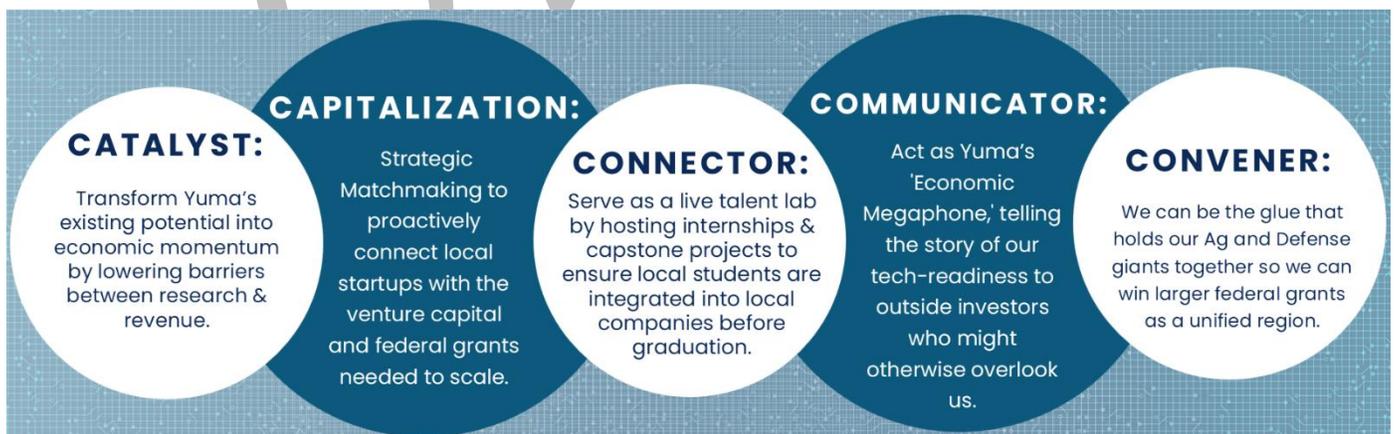
**Jerry Cabrera**, President and Chief Executive Officer, provided the following update on Elevate Southwest:

- The Price of Inaction: Yuma’s Growing Opportunity Gap
  - Elevate Southwest is creating an incubator space for high-tech companies in areas such as agricultural technology (ag tech), aerospace and defense, clean technology, biotechnology (biotech), and biomedicine.
  - The initiative aims to address Yuma’s low bachelor’s degree attainment rate of 16.7% for residents aged 25 and older, compared to Arizona’s 32.6%.
  - Increasing educational attainment is critical because individuals with a bachelor’s degree earn about \$37,000 more annually than those without one.
  - Despite significant research and development (R&D) activity at Yuma Proving Ground (YPG) and other facilities, Yuma faces a “brain drain” as graduates leave due to limited local career opportunities.
  - Partnerships with Arizona Western College (AWC) and satellite campuses of major universities are helping promote careers in health, engineering, and related fields, but more research and development integration is needed.
  - The region’s economic growth rate has been 3.2% in recent years, but improving degree attainment and retaining talent are key priorities for future development.
- The Solution: A Hub for High-Wage Growth
  - A key strategy to grow local talent is developing a 60,000-square-foot facility that includes wet labs, dry labs, and space for R&D.
  - Such a facility could generate significant revenue for the City and support innovation, similar to successful technology parks (planned areas for tech-focused business and research facilities, often called a tech park) nationwide.

- Tech parks have proven effective in fostering high-tech careers, with examples like California Polytechnic State University and Arizona State University (ASU) contributing to billions in economic impact.
- Establishing a regional tech park would strengthen Yuma's position in ag tech, defense, and other emerging fields, reducing brain drain.
- YPG conducts over \$2 billion in R&D annually, and retaining this work locally through an Innovation Hub would maximize economic and educational benefits.
- The goal is to unify agribusiness and defense sectors while creating a home for R&D in Yuma to drive transformation and growth.
- The Roadmap: Scaling Yuma into a Regional Powerhouse
  - Developing an Innovation Zone in Yuma requires a mixed-use model and significant initial investment, similar to Phoenix's Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company project, which began with \$205 million.
  - While Yuma cannot match Maricopa County's revenue scale, prioritizing infrastructure and ecosystem development is essential to unlock economic growth.
  - Such projects have the potential to generate billions in economic impact and create thousands of construction jobs.
  - The Innovation Hub and Zone aim for a 15-year projection focused on economic growth, job creation, and talent retention.
  - Talent retention and higher educational attainment drive revenue and attract funding, enabling success for companies beyond research and development.
- Work, Learn, Play, Live, Stay
  - Creating an Innovation Hub fosters a "work, learn, play, live, stay" environment that supports local economic growth.
  - AWC reports that every public dollar spent generates \$1.10 in economic return.
  - High-wage workers in these sectors earn about \$13,000 more annually, with an overall increase of \$3,000 in average wages.
  - The initiative aims to raise the 16.7% bachelor's degree attainment rate while also recognizing the need for credentialed technical jobs.
  - Technicians skilled in robotics, fiber optics, and related technologies remain essential to support advanced systems across the county.
- Future-Proofing Yuma: Beyond Agriculture and Defense
  - Future growth strategies include expanding into sectors such as artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, transportation logistics, biomedicine, biotechnology, and clean technology.
  - Partnerships like Onvida's collaboration with Medtronic and Dr. Husnu Kaynak provide hands-on experiences for students, such as working in a catheterization lab.
  - These opportunities encourage students to remain in Yuma by offering real-world exposure to high-tech careers and innovative projects.
- The Catalyst Effect
  - A catalyst effect refers to creating a ripple effect that drives synergy and collaboration across different sectors.
  - The goal is to build a strong talent pipeline and address the recurring issue of brain drain, where local students leave due to limited opportunities.
  - This requires community-wide efforts to unify skills and foster partnerships within an ecosystem like an Innovation Hub or Elevate Southwest.



- The Five Cs: Catalyst, Capitalization, Connector, Communicator, Convener
  - Creating an Innovation Hub alone will not attract companies; the key draw is the R&D activity within the facility.
  - Yuma can expand beyond agriculture and defense to become a test bed for sectors like semiconductors and artificial intelligence.
  - Partnerships extend beyond Arizona universities to include institutions across the border, such as the University of Sonora and universities in Mexicali and Baja California.
  - Four companies from Mexicali have already committed to joining the Innovation Hub, focusing on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other advanced fields.



- Elevate Southwest: Turning Potential into prosperity
  - Advocating for and supporting the Innovation Hub is essential to transform the region into a global destination for high-tech industries.
  - The hub will generate significant revenue, not only for technology-related projects but also for local banks, construction companies, and other sectors that benefit from economic growth.
  - Increased revenue will provide funding for additional City projects, reinforcing the hub's role in regional prosperity and development.
- Elevate Southwest Startup Launch
  - There are 11 new startup partnerships across clean energy, artificial intelligence, advanced manufacturing, biotech, ag tech, and financial technology
  - If these ventures succeed, they project approximately 503 additional local jobs, including technical roles, engineers, biomedical, and radiation-related positions.
  - These job figures are projections provided by the startups themselves and reflect the skills they anticipate needing in Yuma.
  - Partnerships and collaborations include:
    - University of Arizona (U of A) Center Innovation
    - U of A Tech Parks
    - ASU Faculty
    - Northern Arizona University (NAU)-Yuma Engineering
    - Sonora State University
    - U of A Intellectual Property Law program
    - Startup Science Software & Founder Network
    - Institute for Defense Analysis
    - The Business Doctor
    - Flinn Foundation
    - Arizona Tech Investors
    - Angel Capital Association
    - Local First Arizona
- Current Impact: Internship, Podcast, Camps, School Partnerships
  - The organization has actively promoted Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers through internships and podcasts designed to engage students and the community.
  - Partnerships have been established with multiple local and state organizations, including Arizona Business and Education Coalition, Southwest Technical Education District of Yuma, NAU Yuma, Cibola High School Skills USA, Ronald Reagan Elementary, Switch Workshop, Arizona@Work, Center for Future of Arizona, and SciTech Institute.
  - Over the past two years (two podcast seasons), the team has produced podcasts highlighting STEM opportunities and career pathways.
- Internships
  - Internship outcomes have been highly successful, with over 80% of interns securing jobs or continuing in STEM-related fields.
  - Internships serve a dual purpose: providing hands-on experience and helping students determine whether a STEM career is the right fit, preventing wasted years in unsuitable fields.

## Community Partners

Paul Rouff Engineering	The Regimen Club
Humane Society of Yuma	Barkley Company of Arizona
Thompson Architects	Best Health Care
Midwives Kitchen	Power Joule
Yuma Orthopedic Physical Therapy	Cradic Chiropractor
Keithly Williams Seed	Elemental Lif Spa
Yuma Investment Group	Nicholas Engineering
Core Engineering	KAP Organic Agro
Yuma Veterinary Clinic	Pa'l Mundo Designs
Desert Veterinary Clinic	WDF Services
Desert Premium Farms	Acacia Medical of Yuma

- Additional community partners include Onvida and Sunset Community Clinic, who play a role in outreach.
- The Student Advisory Board originated from an internship initiative where students wanted to make a broader impact beyond their own experience.
- Its mission is to promote STEM careers across Yuma County, aligning with the vision of Elevate Southwest and supporting community growth.

**Andrew Reyes**, President of the Elevate Southwest Student Advisory Board, explained that the board's mission is to expose local students to internship opportunities offered by Elevate Southwest. He emphasized that many students are unaware of these opportunities in Yuma and the desert southwest, and the goal is to increase awareness to help retain the local workforce through internships and career exposure.

**Cabrera** concluded his presentation by extending an invitation to Arizona Tech Week, scheduled for the week of April 6, and encouraging creative events that incorporate technology, noting that almost any idea can include a technology element.

### Discussion

- The innovation hub currently has about 15 companies, including universities, showing interest in participating. There is a strong focus on expanding beyond agriculture into areas like R&D, biotech, biomedicine, and national security. Partnerships are forming with organizations such as U of A and Onvida, including work on grants and initiatives tied to YPG, signaling significant growth opportunities and projects in the pipeline. **(Mayor Nicholls/Cabrera)**
- The student advisory board consists of about eight students from various educational levels. It includes local high school students from schools such as Cibola and Gila Ridge, as well as college students who were born and raised in Yuma but now attend college outside the area. Overall, it is a diverse group representing different backgrounds and institutions. **(Mayor Nicholls/Cabrera)**
- It's difficult to measure tangible progress for Elevate Southwest because key attainment data from the Arizona Board of Regents has not been released, and collecting information on degree completion is a six-year process. Success depends on collaboration across the entire community, including local colleges and organizations. **(McClendon/Cabrera)**

- The region faces challenges in keeping pace with rapid technological change, and Yuma is currently absent from Arizona’s “silicon desert” map. The goal is to position Yuma as a hub for research, development, and skilled talent to avoid falling behind and to create a stronger presence in the state’s technology landscape. **(McClendon/Cabrera)**
- Progress in engaging students and retaining local talent is still in early stages. Efforts now begin in elementary school, with advocacy for high-tech careers and partnerships that provide opportunities in areas such as imaging, radiation, AI, and web design. However, there is a need to better inform counselors and parents, as misconceptions about technology can influence decisions. Community-wide involvement is essential to prepare students for future opportunities and position Yuma as a competitive hub for R&D. **(McClendon/Cabrera)**
- The strategy focuses on aligning workforce development with industry growth. Companies involved are not limited to research; they are actively developing technologies in areas such as battery storage, financial technology, biotech, and biomedicine. Support includes helping startups with business strategies, pitch events, and connections to investors and venture capitalists. Students gain internships that often lead to local employment, while efforts continue to expand university programs so graduates can build long-term careers in Yuma. Both workforce development and industry establishment must progress together for success. **(Morris/Cabrera)**
- The Student Advisory Board’s mission is to advocate for students by exposing them to higher education and internship opportunities to help retain local talent. They visit schools, starting at the middle school level, to give presentations about these opportunities. Most internships are available in Yuma and are open to both high school and college students, with applications starting at age 16. The board is primarily composed of high school students, with some college students involved as well. **(Watts/Reyes)**
- Internships were initially paid through a grant, but funding ended, so most are now unpaid. Despite this, students remain eager for the experience and exposure. Some funding is available through Arizona@Work for those who qualify. The innovation hub is not just an idea; it is a collaborative effort involving the City, Elevate Southwest, universities, and the broader community, aimed at creating real opportunities and retaining local talent. **(Watts/Cabrera)**
- Any company that joins the Elevate Southwest ecosystem is required to accept interns. This approach helps ensure local students have access to opportunities, which is especially important for families concerned about the high cost of college. Internships provide valuable experience and exposure, supporting efforts to retain talent in the community. **(Smith/Cabrera)**
- Elevate Southwest fills gaps that traditional institutions cannot address by supporting individuals and startups that do not fit into a college-based model. Many entrepreneurs, including those with advanced degrees or those who do not wish to return to school, need guidance, resources, and a roadmap to succeed without pursuing further education. Elevate Southwest provides that support while partnering with universities and other organizations to complement – not duplicate – their efforts, ensuring a collaborative approach to fostering innovation and business growth. **(Mayor Nicholls/Morales/Cabrera)**
- There is an urgent need to build a 60,000-square-foot innovation hub to attract and retain companies and talent in Yuma. Consultants have warned that delaying action will cost the community more in the long term, as startups and existing businesses require specialized facilities such as labs and collaborative spaces to grow. The plan is to secure funding, complete engineering designs, and break ground within 18 months, with project completion targeted in two years. **(Morales/Cabrera)**

## II. YUHSD CAREER TECHNICAL EDUCATION

**Nereida Lansman**, Director of Career and Technical Education (CTE) for the Yuma Union High School District (YUHSD), introduced CTE students **Emily Valtierra** from Kofa High School, **Ayana Logan** from Yuma High School, and **Karidee Ellsworth** from Gila Ridge High School to share their experience with the CTE program as follows:

- What is CTE?
  - CTE is an educational approach that combines traditional academic instruction with hands-on, career-focused learning.
  - It provides high school students with real-world readiness by offering practical workplace experience alongside classroom learning.
  - Through CTE, students develop valuable skills and participate in activities that prepare them for future careers.
- YUHSD CTE Snapshot
  - YUHSD consists of seven high schools: Cibola, Gila Ridge, Kofa, San Luis, Somerton, Vista, and Yuma High School.
  - The district offers a total of 77 CTE programs of study.
  - These programs include pathways in health, science, information technology, manufacturing, agriculture, business, public safety, construction, and more.
- Why CTE Matters to Our Community
  - Builds a skilled local workforce aligned with regional industry demand.
  - Reduces skill gaps by preparing students early for careers.
  - Strengthens economic development and creates robust talent pipelines for the community.
  - Enhances student engagement through hands-on learning experiences in classrooms, labs, and job sites.
- Dual Credit Opportunities
  - CTE students have the opportunity to participate in dual credit enrollment with Arizona Western College.
  - This allows students to earn both high school and college credit simultaneously while completing coursework aligned to their chosen career pathway.
  - Dual credit reduces costs for high school students and helps them gain college credit early.
  - It prepares students for college and gives them an academic advantage compared to peers who are not enrolled in CTE courses.
- Industry Credentials
  - YUHSD provides students with access to industry-recognized credentials that align with regional workforce needs.
  - Examples of these credentials include CPR, First Aid, OSHA 10-Hour, Health Care General, Stop the Bleed, ServSafe Manager and Food Handler, and Adobe Photoshop.
  - These certifications help students gain practical skills and qualifications that are valued by employers in the community.
- Career and Technical Student Organizations
  - A major component of CTE classes is the availability of Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), which are student-led organizations.
  - CTSOs include:
    - Health Occupation Students of America for health science
    - SkillsUSA for trades, IT, public safety, and digital media.

- Future Farmers of America for agriculture
- Family, Career and Community Leaders of America for culinary and human services
- Students regularly compete and place at regional, state, and national competitions through these organizations.
- Participation in CTSOs helps students develop leadership, communication, and presentation skills while fostering passion for their chosen career pathways.
- Work-Based Learning in Yuma County
  - CTE students in Yuma County participate in work-based learning opportunities that connect classroom instruction to real-world experience.
  - Opportunities include internships, job shadowing, and other hands-on experiences aligned with students' chosen career pathways.
  - These experiences allow students to apply technical and employability skills in professional settings, explore local career options, and contribute to the economic vitality of the community.
  - Students often earn certifications that enhance workplace readiness and provide a competitive advantage in their careers.

**Valtierra, Logan, and Ellsworth** spoke about their personal experience with CTE, highlighting how the program provided valuable opportunities for career development and personal growth. They emphasized gaining leadership experience, earning multiple industry certifications, and competing at regional, state, and national levels through organizations like SkillsUSA. CTE helped them clarify career goals, build confidence, and develop practical skills through internships, credentials, and hands-on learning, ultimately preparing them for future success in both education and the workforce.

#### Discussion

- The students delivered strong presentations and demonstrated leadership skills, reflecting confidence and professionalism gained through SkillsUSA. Their consistent success at national competitions is a proud tradition for Yuma, showcasing individual accomplishments and the community's commitment to excellence in CTE programs. **(Mayor Nicholls)**
- Students are often introduced to CTE programs through advisors who encourage and guide them toward opportunities they might not initially see for themselves. Awareness is also spread through presentations at middle school fairs and high school freshman orientations, where students learn about CTE pathways and their impact on future careers. **(Smith/Valtierra/Ellsworth/Logan)**
- Dual credit opportunities allow students to complete significant college coursework while still in high school, often finishing an associate degree just months after graduation. This accelerated path can reduce the time to earn advanced degrees, such as nursing or law, and provides a strong foundation for careers that are in demand locally. **(Watts/Valtierra)**
- A construction technologies program is offered at two campuses as a two-year course. Students participate in SkillsUSA competitions judged by industry professionals. The Southwest Contractors Association collaborates by providing on-campus training and supporting competitions. There is a strong focus on promoting the program to attract young talent to the construction industry. **(Morris/Lansman)**

**Mayor Nicholls** read a proclamation declaring February 2026 as Career and Technical Education Month, and encouraged all citizens to recognize the contributions of CTE to students' futures and the workforce.

### III. YOUTH GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

**Reichelt** noted that the City has a strong commitment to supporting CTE programs and has hosted CTE students for several years. A new Youth Government Program is being launched to provide students with real-life skills such as public speaking and problem-solving, alongside exposure to local government. The program was developed through collaboration with Councilmembers and input from high school students. It is expected to grow significantly and will include opportunities for students to present during a dedicated City Council Worksession.

**Miller** provided the following overview of the Youth Government Program:

- The Logo
  - The logo features a flame surrounded by laurel leaves, symbolizing leadership, inspiration, civic responsibility, and the passing of the torch to the next generation.
  - The laurel leaves represent achievement, honor, growth, accomplishment, and civic pride.
  - The color teal references the Colorado River, symbolizing connection, flow, and shared progress.
  - The color gold represents excellence, achievement, and civic pride, reinforcing the importance of public service and leadership.
  - The logo was designed in-house by a member of the communications team, showcasing creativity and commitment to the youth program.
  
- What is the Youth Government Program?
  - The City of Yuma's first youth government program is a free six-week summer leadership experience for 20 high school juniors and seniors.
  - Participants will go behind the scenes to learn how local government operates and how they can make a difference in their community.
  - The program will begin in the first week of June and conclude around mid-July.
- Course Overview
  - Students will tour City Hall, meet City leadership, and learn how departments serve the community, including opportunities to shadow staff.
  - The program will build leadership, civic understanding, public speaking, and teamwork skills.
  - Participants will work in groups to identify community challenges, develop youth-led solutions, and present their proposals at a future Council Meeting.
  - The experience will conclude with a graduation celebration for all participants.

- Skills
  - Leadership and teamwork
  - Confidence in public speaking
  - Understanding how local government works
  - Problem-solving and critical thinking
  - Project planning and collaboration
  - Professional communication skills
- Recruitment Timeline
  - The program will accept only 20 students, making it a highly competitive opportunity.
  - Participants will be selected through an application and interview process conducted by the Youth Government Committee.
  - All applications are due by February 28.
  - Interviews and final candidate selections will take place in March.
  - Selected candidates will be notified by April 3.
- How are we getting the word out?
  - The program is being promoted through in-person visits to every high school in Yuma, including public, private, and charter schools.
  - Presentations are primarily given to student council classes, but participation is open to all students regardless of student council involvement.
  - Outreach also includes homeschooled students to ensure they are not excluded from the opportunity.
  - The first presentation was held at Vista High School, where students engaged and shared ideas about community needs.
  - Additional school visits will continue over the coming weeks to raise awareness and encourage applications.

**Miller** concluded the presentation by noting that while the program concludes in mid-July, it offers an additional opportunity for students to participate in Youth Government Day at the League of Cities and Towns Conference in August. Students will represent the City of Yuma, network with peers from across the state, and gain exposure to other youth government programs.

#### Discussion

- The City's leadership and Councilmembers organized and launched the program after years of planning, achieving a long-standing goal. This program creates a unique opportunity for students to grow and learn, and limiting participation to 20 students makes the program highly selective. **(Mayor Nicholls)**
- The program seeks students who are passionate about civic engagement and will be able to demonstrate that commitment throughout their participation. Candidate selection will focus on identifying individuals who show motivation and enthusiasm for contributing to their community. **(Watts/Miller)**
- The program will increase youth awareness of local government and foster civic engagement. Most students currently do not know their mayor or councilmembers, and this initiative seeks to change that. **(Morales)**
- Early classroom visits have generated strong excitement and positive feedback from students. The program is already sparking interest and enthusiasm among youth, with students expressing eagerness to participate and learn more about local government. **(Smith)**

- The initial concept evolved into a well-structured program and meaningful experience through careful planning and collaboration. The effort transformed a broad idea into a tangible initiative that will culminate with students presenting their ideas to City Council, showcasing their engagement and creativity. **(Morris)**
- Creating opportunities for continued engagement after the program ends, such as having participants return as youth leaders or mentors for future sessions, will be explored to ensure the program fosters long-term involvement and leadership development. **(McClendon/Miller)**

**IV. REGULAR CITY COUNCIL MEETING AGENDA OF FEBRUARY 4, 2026**

Ordinance O2026-006 – Approve the Housing Authority of the City of Yuma (HACY) Acquisition, Development and Operation of an Affordable Housing Apartment Complex, Tentatively known as Vista Apartments (for the development of a 200-unit Low Income Housing Tax Credit project located at 221 E. 26<sup>th</sup> Place) (DCD/Nbhd & Econ Dev)

Discussion

- This ordinance is required to allow the Housing Authority of the City of Yuma to acquire property, and it does not involve the City purchasing property or creating any financial obligation for the City. **(Morales/Morris/Files)**

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MC 2026-015 – Bid Award: Livingston Ranch Wall (for the construction of a block wall in the Livingston Ranch subdivision in the amount of \$128,923.50 to Maya’s Construction) (RFQ-25-090) (Eng)

Discussion

- The project costs are primarily for clearing the land, survey work, and constructing a new perimeter wall. Of 19 affected property owners, 14 have signed agreements, and others may join later. The wall will be built as one continuous structure, but owners who have not signed agreements cannot remove their existing walls or use the additional space until they do. **(Smith/Linville)**

**EXECUTIVE SESSION/ADJOURNMENT**

**Motion** (Morales/Smith): To adjourn the meeting to Executive Session. Voice vote: **approved** 7-0. The meeting adjourned at 6:54 p.m.

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Lynda L. Bushong, City Clerk

APPROVED:

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Douglas J. Nicholls, Mayor

Approved at the City Council Meeting of: _____ City Clerk: _____
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