GREENVILLE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes
Committee of the Whole Meeting
November 3, 2026
4:03 p.m.

Committee Meeting Room
301 University Ridge
Greenville, South Carolina

Council Members
Benton Blount, *Chairman, District 19*
Rick Bradley, *Vice-Chairman, District 26*
Liz Seman, *Chairwoman Pro Tem, District 24*
Joey Russo, *District 17*
Kelly Long, *District 18*
Stephen Shaw, *District 20*
Curt McGahhey, *District 21*
Frank Farmer, *District 22*
Alan Mitchell, *District 23*
Ennis Fant, Sr., *District 25*
Garey Collins, *District 27*
Dan Tripp, *District 28*

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, notice of the meeting date, time, place, and agenda was posted online, at 301 University Ridge, Greenville, and made available to the newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and concerned citizens.

Council Members Absent

None

Council Members Remote Participation

Curt McGahhey, *District 21*
Garey Collins, *District 27*

Staff Present

Joe Kernell, *County Administrator*
Chris Antley, *County Attorney*
Regina McCaskill, *Clerk to Council*
Julie Wallace, *Deputy Clerk to Council*
Julie Confer, *Administrative Assistant III*
Bob Mihalic, *Governmental Affairs Officer*
Terrence Galloway, *Information Systems*

Others Present

Sheriff Hobart Lewis

Call to Order Chairman Blount

Invocation Vice-Chairman Bradley

Item (3) ***Approval of Minutes***

a. October 20, 2026 – Regular Committee Meeting

Action: Chairwoman Pro Tem Seman moved to approve the minutes of the October 20, 2026, Regular Committee meeting.

Motion carried.

Item (4) ***Reopen Special Application Period for Board of Tax Assessment and Appeals***

Chairman Blount stated a special application period was needed to fill vacancies and to allow some members whose terms were expiring to reapply. Those individuals failed to do so during the most recent application period.

Action: Chairwoman Pro Tem Seman moved to open a special period for the Board of Tax Assessment and Appeals.

Motion carried.

Item (5) ***Executive Session*** *(Personnel Matter)*

Action: Chairwoman Pro Tem Seman moved to go into executive session for the discussion of employment, appointment, compensation, promotion, demotion, discipline, or release of an employee regulated by the County Council, or the appointment of a person to a public body, as it pertained to the County Administrator search.

Motion carried and the Committee of the Whole entered into executive session at 4:07 p.m.

Reconvened

The meeting reconvened at 5:03 p.m.

Attorney Antley stated the Committee of the Whole went into Executive Session for the discussion of employment, appointment, compensation, promotion, demotion, discipline, or release of an employee regulated by the County Council, as it pertained to the County Administrator search.

Mr. Antley stated no action was taken during the session.

Item (6) ***Approval of County Council's Public Response Regarding Sheriff's Office Compensation and Budget Funding***

Chairman Blount stated Sheriff Lewis recently issued a statement indicating his office continued to lose deputies. Consequently, deputies were being reassigned from community action groups to patrol duties. Mr. Blount expressed concern regarding Sheriff Lewis's request to amend the current budget to provide additional compensation for his staff. He noted that members of the media had contacted him for comment, but he was reluctant to respond before discussing the matter with his colleagues, as he believed the Council needed to respond publicly to Sheriff Lewis's request. Mr. Blount stated he had prepared a proposed statement and would respect his colleagues' decision if they chose not to use it. He wanted to ensure the body made the decision collectively.

Councilor Farmer asked whether the chart listing the advertised annual earnings included "baked-in" overtime.

Mr. Antley stated the chart indicated overtime must be shown separately.

Sheriff Lewis stated the chart included overtime. The salary of $59,273 applied to a deputy with a high school diploma or GED and included overtime. The actual starting salary, before overtime, was $53,497.60. He stated the third paragraph indicated the Sheriff's Office was advertising a starting wage of $25.72 per hour for non-certified deputies with a high school diploma or GED. Based on 2,080 hours per year, that hourly rate equaled an annual salary of $53,497.60 before overtime. Sheriff Lewis stated he did not have the salary figure for an individual hired with an associate's degree.

Councilor Farmer asked whether deputies had guaranteed overtime.

Sheriff Lewis stated not necessarily all of them. Most worked 42.5 hours per week; however, many worked substantial overtime, as they could be required to remain on duty to handle a case or an emergency, such as a stabbing. He explained that deputies arriving at a scene near the end of their shift could not leave when their scheduled hours ended. Typically, six to eight deputies might be required to remain, generally to transport individuals to jail or the hospital. Sheriff Lewis stated the deputies required to stay were usually more experienced, with three to five years of service. Newer deputies would be in training and accompany them to gain experience. He added that deputies could adjust their schedules to take equivalent time off. The Sheriff's Office had already used 40% of its overtime budget due to calls for service.

Councilor Farmer asked whether they could volunteer to work overtime.

Sheriff Lewis stated deputies could not volunteer for overtime work. In special circumstances, such as protests, deputies could volunteer to serve on the field force and would receive overtime pay. He stated it depended on the situation and added staffing was generally sufficient to handle nearly all required responses.

Councilor Tripp recommended against publishing the proposed statement prepared by Chairman Blount. He questioned what benefit publication would provide and felt the matter could be addressed most effectively through the discussion at hand.

Chairman Blount stated that although he agreed with Mr. Tripp, the comments continued to be made, and Council had not responded, allowing the matter to "get stirred up in the public."

Councilor Tripp stated Sheriff Lewis had a constitutional duty to do what he did in terms of reassigning deputies.

Sheriff Lewis stated his office had recently investigated a sexual assault case involving six victims, some in the City of Greenville and others in the County. He held a press conference, after which a WYFF reporter asked him to comment on a call the station had received from a Council Member. The caller stated that the Sheriff's Office was reassigning deputies from the community to road patrol due to a staffing shortage. Sheriff Lewis stated WYFF aired only a brief excerpt from the full interview. He added that he had contacted Councilor Farmer and the Chairman to provide advance notice of the news article, and then emailed Council to explain the situation. Sheriff Lewis stated some members of the area Crime Watch groups were dissatisfied with the reassignments.

Sheriff Lewis stated he met with approximately 46 deputies assigned to the Community Action Team and traffic patrol and informed them they were being reassigned to road patrol. He stated calls for assistance had to be answered and, his office was working to move personnel out of training and hire additional deputies. Sheriff Lewis stated he did not know which Council Member had contacted WYFF and had not seen any posts about the issue. After the article appeared on WYFF, Councilor McGahhey contacted him and asked what was happening. Sheriff Lewis stated that was the sequence of events and nothing was done on his part by design.

Chairman Blount acknowledged Sheriff Lewis had contacted both him and Mr. Farmer; however, he was more concerned about the public perception that Council could amend the budget mid-year to accommodate the Sheriff's requests for additional compensation for his staff.

Sheriff Lewis recalled a previous Council meeting during which his staff discussed salaries. They were told they could return during the budget year and, if Council had identified additional funding, the budget could be amended. Sheriff Lewis stated Council had not been aware of that option and he had been under the impression they would need to wait until the next budget year. He believed that contributed to the public perception. Sheriff Lewis said he had received numerous calls and emails about reassigning deputies and other suggestions. To his knowledge, Councilor McGahhey was the only Council member who had received calls and emails from the public; he had not been informed whether any of the other members had.

Councilor Tripp stated there was an old adage in politics: "If you're explaining, you're losing." He stated Mr. Blount's proposed response was a page of explanations, setting up a direct confrontation between Council and the Sheriff. If a statement needed to be made, he trusted Chairman Blount to contact the media and issue one. His colleagues had afforded him the same opportunity when he served as Chairman.

Chairman Blount stated he agreed with Mr. Tripp; however, he did not believe it was productive for the Sheriff to make public comments that angered people, prompting them to contact Council without giving the body an opportunity to respond. Chairman Blount stated he would not make statements unilaterally and planned to bring issues before the body each time. The last thing Greenville County needed was to see the Chairman of Council and the Sheriff arguing with one another.

Councilor Tripp stated Council needed only to issue a statement expressing its support for Sheriff Lewis and his office in their efforts to ensure the community's safety, while retaining the authority to authorize expenditures as it deemed appropriate. Mr. Tripp stated that was the heart of what they were trying to convey.

Chairman Blount stated he would agree if there was mutual respect between the bodies and they could refrain from negative language; however, if the tone of Mr. Tripp's suggested statement was not reciprocated, it would be difficult to do so.

Sheriff Lewis stated no one wanted the conversation to be "one-sided," but it seemed more on his side because he was more vocal. He stated Council did not appear to be listening, except for Councilor McGahhey, and they had spoken only about five times. Sheriff Lewis stated he was willing to talk.

Chairman Blount stated Council wanted to discuss the issue. He stated when other local sheriffs were interviewed on local radio programs, they spoke about working with their respective councils to the best of their ability. In contrast, Sheriff Lewis' interview suggested Council had failed to take certain actions and needed to do more.

Sheriff Lewis stated those other counties had provided additional compensation to their law enforcement personnel. Spartanburg County had approved a $5,000 across-the-board increase for each deputy over the next two years. Anderson County approved an additional $10,000 for members of the SWAT team and $8000 for the dive team. Sheriff Lewis stated Anderson County had approved a special millage for its Sheriff's Office and Pickens County had significantly increased deputy pay, thanks to Tommy Blankenship. He added during the most recent budget discussions, a 6% pay increase was on the table but was defeated at third reading in order to provide a 4% across-the-board increase for all County employees. Sheriff Lewis stated he understood other County departments could not request additional pay as he could. He reiterated he was willing to discuss the issue, either publicly or in private.

Councilor Russo stated Council could be upset with Sheriff Lewis' remarks; however, they were responsible.

Chairman Blount stated part of the problem stemmed from the perception that Council had done nothing for the Sheriff's Office. Since joining Council, efforts had been made to secure pay increases exceeding 3%. Mr. Blount stated Council had made such efforts, and claiming it had done nothing for the Sheriff's Office cast it in a negative light.

Councilor Shaw stated the matter was purely political and Council members needed to be prepared to "take the heat."

Councilor Tripp suggested a "law enforcement workshop," inviting Sheriff Lewis and his staff, as well as Mr. Kernell and his staff. He asked whether it would be appropriate to make that motion.

Chairman Blount stated he would fully support that motion.

Councilor Seman stated all County employees were important and it was critical for her colleagues to understand that Sheriff Lewis was the only department head who could address Council directly about salaries. She asked what would happen if Council did not have workshops with the other departments to discuss pay increases.

Councilor Tripp stated highlighting the various groups balkanized the other departments; deputies were "on the front line."

Councilor Seman stated EMS employees were on the front line, alongside several other groups.

Councilor Tripp stated, in the event of some type of melee, Greenville County citizens would want deputies on the street, not sitting at home. He did not mean to minimize others, but they did not face the same dangers as deputies. Mr. Tripp stated there had to be some level of distinction between job classifications.

Vice-Chairman Bradley stated if the proposed sales tax passed, the $27 million FILOT monies would no longer be needed for the roads. He asked whether those funds could be used for something other than roads.

Chairman Blount stated he did not think the funding could be used for salaries, but it could potentially offset other expenses.

Councilor Tripp stated a few years ago, the Council approved a significant increase for the Sheriff's Office, placing it ahead of its peers in law enforcement. Since that time, things had shifted, and they needed to identify a funding source that would keep the office "tit for tat" with other agencies. He asked how Greenville County could keep pace with the competition among law enforcement agencies. They wanted to avoid SLED and other agencies from "picking off" the County's highly talented deputies and law enforcement officials.

Chairman Blount stated a workshop would be a good idea, as the issue of deputy pay was not isolated to Greenville County. He recently attended a meeting with other Council Chairpersons and learned it was a problem in every county.

Councilor Fant stated he agreed Mr. Blount's proposed response was not the answer. Council did not want to engage in a public "back and forth" with Sheriff Lewis. Mr. Fant stated if Council chose to raise the County's millage, they would not get reelected. He asked Sheriff Lewis whether the issue could be resolved if his office had its own millage.

Sheriff Lewis said counties with a separate millage for the Sheriff's Office added 1–2 mills to their base budgets, though Greenville County's rate may be higher. He understood one mill generated about $4 million. He agreed that clashing with County Council each budget year sent a "bad message." He had reviewed Mr. Blount's proposed response and said sending it would prompt calls for his response. His staff had provided all financial information, and he had not been invited to a workshop since 2022.

Sheriff Lewis said he tracked County vacancies weekly and wanted to understand EMS and Parks, Recreation and Tourism's needs, which differed from those of the Sheriff's Office. The Sheriff's Office struggled to recruit despite recently hiring 11 people; he estimated only four or five would remain after a year. Critical vacancies included polygraphers: if another left, the office would have to transport suspects to Columbia for testing. Greenville County had the state's most child pornography cases, requiring staff certified to extract cellphone data for ICAC investigations. Some had left for SLED, which paid $12,000 more. Meanwhile, Greer, Greenville, Simpsonville, Fountain, Mauldin and Travelers Rest had recently raised law enforcement pay, but the County had not.

The Sheriff's Office handled 500,000 calls and made 15,000 arrests annually, figures Sheriff Lewis stated no other South Carolina sheriff's office approached. He attributed a recent 32% crime reduction to deputies' visible presence and said the office had solved all its homicides over the past three years. Sheriff Lewis stated the company conducting the performance audit had expressed that they were amazed at how much the office was doing with the resources available. He stated his employees were somewhat disappointed that the performance audit did not address pay, as many employees had expected a pay study. He requested a pay plan so staff would know what to expect. Sheriff Lewis stated he was aware the County could not always anticipate how much revenue it would bring in; however, it was important for Council to make clear to the people working for them that they were important.

Chairman Blount stated Sheriff Lewis' last comment bothered him.

Sheriff Lewis stated that was the response his office received when employees resigned. He reiterated he was available to discuss the issue with Council. He could not speak for other departments within the County, but he hoped all its employees felt appreciated and wanted.

Councilor Farmer stated he wanted to clarify that Council had three employees: the Clerk, the County Attorney, and the Administrator. He stated he wanted to hear directly from employees if they had concerns and did not want them to fear the Council. Mr. Farmer stated he and his colleagues needed to understand the issues in order to work toward a solution. He supported Councilor Tripp's amendment to hold a workshop. Councilor Farmer acknowledged Sheriff Lewis' dedication to his employees. He recalled an incident during his service in the Army when he had to disobey an order to ensure his squad had adequate water during a training exercise in extreme heat. Mr. Farmer stated leaders had to fight for their people. He stated he was prepared to discuss the issue.

Councilor Shaw stated he believed the public would support an additional millage for the Sheriff's Office. He noted there had been a prior discussion about it and some questions about its legality. He was unsure where the legal department stood on that issue and asked Mr. Antley to weigh in.

Mr. Antley stated he was under the impression his office had delivered an answer; however, it was a few months ago, and he would have to revisit the issue. He stated, at the time, they may have had too narrow a view of the subject.

Councilor McGahhey stated he agreed with Mr. Tripp's amendment proposing a workshop. Council should issue an amicable statement and provide educational information. The primary concern was some members of the public were under the impression there was "tons of money in the budget," and Council did not know how to use it appropriately. When asked how much money was available, they were unable to answer. He stated most people did not understand the County's budget; many were unaware the Sheriff's Office was funded separately and that a significant portion of the budget was allocated to the schools.

Mr. McGahhey stated Council should hold a budget symposium to discuss the budget. Inflation was affecting not only residents but also the County, and the cost of every service it provided was increasing. For the Sheriff's Office, fuel, tires, and other expenses were all becoming costlier. Mr. McGahhey stated there was little support for a millage increase. He stated additional services came at a cost, but no one wanted to assume those costs. He emphasized the County was facing significant challenges. Mr. McGahhey stated he would support a very simple statement but would also like Council to hold a workshop or symposium.

Chairman Blount withdrew his statement and asked Mr. Tripp to make his motion.

Action: Councilor Tripp moved to hold a workshop specifically for law enforcement, with Sheriff Lewis and his finance team in attendance, along with Council and the County's finance team.

Motion carried.

Councilor McGahhey stated the County needed a budget policy as it would help out during the budget discussions.

Item (6) ***<u>Adjournment</u>***

Action: There being no further business, Councilor Tripp moved to adjourn.

Motion carried, and the meeting was adjourned at 5:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted:

Regina McCaskill
Clerk to Council