

Kinston City Council



Minutes

Tuesday, January 6, 2026

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Kinston City Council
City Hall · 207 East King Street
Tuesday, January 6, 2026
Regular Meeting at 5:30 pm

This meeting was held in person and live-streamed on
YouTube Channel:@thecityofkinston
Available for viewing on KTV, the local government channel 2

Call to Order

Mayor Don Hardy called the city council meeting to order at 5:40 pm.

Prayer

Mayor Don Hardy led the invocation, which was followed by the recital of the Pledge of Allegiance by attendees.

Council Members' Roll Call

City Clerk Debra Thompson conducted roll call. Council Member Solomon was present, Council Member Swinson was here, Council Member Suggs was here, Council Member Seaforth was present, and Mayor Pro Tem Hardy was present. All members were present and accounted for. Present also were City Manager Rhonda Barwick and City Attorney James Cauley.

Citizen Comment

Mayor Hardy outlined the citizen comment procedures, explaining that citizens must sign in before the start of the meeting if they wish to address the city council, should state their name and address before beginning their comments, and may speak up to a maximum of 3 minutes. He noted that citizens seeking assistance or asking questions will be contacted by a member of the governing body or appropriate city staff.

Robert Jones (2209 Riley Road) began by saying he wanted to make his comments as quickly as possible and mentioned seeing something about a lobbying firm, though it wasn't on the actual agenda. He stated emphatically, "I'm against it, and I wanna tell you why." Jones expressed strong opposition to last year's tax increases, which he called "unheard of." He criticized the city for taking tax money and giving city workers a 5 percent cost of living adjustment, while also giving council members, the mayor, and others what he characterized as excessive raises. He specifically mentioned, "In addition to that, you gave yourself a 300 dollar a month pay increase."

Mr. Jones revealed he had "dug a little deeper" and found unsigned change orders and other concerning financial practices. He argued that the average cost of living adjustment nationally was 2.8 percent, not 5 percent, stating, "If you show a deficit reduction, then that explains you can give a 5 percent, why you can give yourselves a 300 dollars a month raise and all that good stuff. But if you don't show nothing, then you shouldn't be taking our money."

Mr. Jones then addressed what he called the "lame duck" period with a new administration coming in and the old administration going out, saying, "You guys continue to just govern. Don't know, I think, probably become a little complacent and all that good stuff. But who am I to say?" Regarding the lobbying firm, Jones stated that without input from the incoming

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officials, the council was looking at approving "40,000 dollars of debt." He emphasized there was a conflict of interest clause in the lobbying firm contract, concluding with, "I say no, and I hope the people Kinston sticks with me and say no... maybe you guys need to be able to take more transparency and let us know."

Hinda Moore was called but did not speak.

Tonyu Marshall (1109 Cary Road) spoke next, expressing concerns about both the lobbying firm and the transition. She made a direct request: "My request as a citizen is that there not be any further business transacted until our duly elected mayor has been sworn in." She questioned the urgency and transparency of the lobbying firm's decision, stating, "Just like the lobbying firm, that was not on the agenda. It's not clear what other companies were considered. It's not clear what the urgency was that it needed to be voted on immediately."

Ms. Marshall questioned the financial aspects, saying, "I have not seen what other companies were considered, how this company was vetted, or what the need was for." She challenged the necessity of the lobbying firm, given Mayor Hardy's previous travel efforts: "I've heard repeatedly that a lot of the travel of Mayor Hardy was to bring money into the city. So if that's what he was doing and that's effective, then why do we now need to pay 90,000 dollars plus? Because it's 90,000 dollars plus fees, plus reimbursements, we don't really know what the cap is."

Ms. Marshall then made a personal and pointed statement directly to Don Hardy: "I will say to you personally, Don Hardy, this was a difficult decision to me to support Kareem in the election because you and I were friends, and I have been very disappointed in what has happened. And our election has now been delayed for 2 months over some BS that you all know is not true, you and your campaign manager." She concluded forcefully: "And that is not fair. While it may hurt the feelings of those who voted for you, it is not fair to the ones who voted for Kareem. And I say that this needs to end now, and the very next order of business needs to be swearing in our new mayor."

Derek Middleton was called but did not speak.

Adoption of the Agenda

Mayor Hardy explained that if a council member wished to revise the agenda, a motion to add or delete an item would be entertained before the adoption of the agenda.

Council Member Felicia Solomon requested the council consider making deletions in consideration of the certification of the councilman-elect and mayor-elect. She acknowledged some items were time-sensitive, particularly those involving receiving grant funds: "There are some items on this agenda that are time sensitive that I would like to keep. It has to do with receiving grant funds. And so when we can get that grant money in here, want that."

Ms. Solomon also recognized the importance of items related to the transitioning of the city manager and interim appointments, noting the need for people in place to carry out duties such as co-signers of checks. She then specifically requested: "I would like for the council to consider deleting items number 1 or tabling items number 1 from the action agenda, Number 2 under the action agenda." Regarding the operating budget amendment, she requested to suspend "the budget amendment funds for the lobbying firm."

When asked if this was in the form of a motion, there was some back-and-forth about proper terminology. The city attorney James Cauley clarified that she was proposing to delete items 1 and 2, but modify number 5. After discussion about whether to use "delete" or "table," Ms.

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Solomon made a formal motion: "I would like to make a motion to table items 1 and 2 under the action agenda and to modify the operating budget amendment to not include funding for the lobbyist firm."

Council Member Solomon moved to table items 1 and 2 under the action agenda and to modify the operating budget amendment to not include funding for the lobbyist firm. The motion died for lack of a second.

Ms. Solomon then made an extended statement to her colleagues about the lobbying firm. She recalled that when the lobbyist's information was presented, "it wasn't on the agenda." She emphasized her concerns about the incoming council being responsible for funds being allocated and that when she asked about urgency, "it wasn't given." She noted that "all of us left here thinking 5,000 dollars" and explained her yes vote: "Why? Because if we're working with a lobbyist firm, I don't wanna be in bad relationship with that which has already been approved."

Ms. Solomon detailed how the revised contract was given to them on a Monday and wasn't brought up in the Tuesday meeting, leading her to believe it wasn't moving forward. She expressed surprise at learning through news reports that it had been approved. She raised specific concerns: "Who determined the amount? Who agreed upon the amount? And the commencement date. That commencement date was February, and no one on the council, you know I'm saying? We it was not rehashed before it was said, let's go forward with it."

She emphasized fiscal responsibility, noting that "under the leadership of our current city manager, Barwick, our fund balance is in a real good place. We haven't seen that in years." Solomon calculated the monthly cost at "\$7,500 a month" and compared it to other potential uses: "That's another person in code enforcement. That's a whole entire of the salary of where we could add to the planning department."

She concluded by asking for reconsideration, stating, "Delay is not denial," and emphasized the incoming council should have the opportunity to work with the lobbyists and present their priorities.

Mayor Pro Tem Antonio Hardy responded to Ms. Solomon's concerns, acknowledging he had been "beaten down to the ground about the funding of the city and where the money is going." He argued that "when you have new people coming into an organization of any type, there comes a price with it." He defended the council's travel and connections, stating those relationships "play a valuable role in what we do here in the city of Kinston."

Mr. Hardy acknowledged the community's concerns about spending but defended the council's record: "We have tried to do everything that the community has asked." He encouraged future public participation in town halls. Regarding the lobbyist issue, he admitted: "You admitted it. We didn't get all the information. I thought that when they said it was 5,000, and that's what I voted on, I thought it was 5,000. But as we move forward and saw all the information that was provided, I think it was 5,000 to 7,500."

Council Member Chris Suggs interjected to correct both Solomon and Hardy: "I hate to have to correct both of you, but we got an email on November 26th with an original with the lobbying contract saying \$8,500 a month. Then Mayor Hardy sent us the email saying he negotiated it down to \$7,500 a month. We had that full contract in our email a week before the meeting." He expressed frustration: "So just because you guys don't read your emails does not mean we gotta keep holding up stuff. Like, this is ridiculous."

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Mr. Suggs continued his criticism: "This is like in addition to the chaos we've seen this election cycle, which is completely despicable, there is no reason in the world that we are just now having the transition of power in the city of Kinston. No reason in the world this has been a hot mess." He characterized this as "a symptom of a longer history of complacency by elected officials at every level in Kinston and Lenoir County, a lack of due diligence and people doing their work before meetings and showing up unprepared."

Ms. Solomon responded to Mr. Suggs' criticism about not reading agendas and grandstanding, stating, "The one thing about the members on this council is that posturing and grandstanding, that's not in our nature. We don't have to move that way." She emphasized that council members had sought transparency and that questions weren't always answered: "When questions are asked, you do realize that my questions weren't always answered."

After more back-and-forth, Mayor Hardy called for order and attempted to move forward with adopting the agenda. When he entertained a motion to adopt the agenda, that motion also died for lack of a second. Council Member Swinson eventually made a motion to adopt the agenda, which was seconded by Suggs.

Council Member Swinson moved to adopt the agenda. Council Member Suggs seconded. The motion carried with a roll call vote of (4-1) Council Members Seaforth, Swinson, Suggs, and Mayor Pro Tem Hardy voting yes, and Council Member Solomon voting no.

Minutes

The minutes for December 2, 2025, December 16, 2025, and December 23, 2025, were to be considered for approval at the next meeting.

Public Hearing and Action

1. Consider Approval of Rezoning a Property from I-1 to RA-5 (Residential Office)

Director Elizabeth Blount presented the rezoning request from Kevin Faison for property at 519 Tower Hill Road. She explained that staff received a request to rezone this parcel from industrial to residential. Currently, the property houses a single-family dwelling. The RA-5 zoning district is established to allow high density of residential land uses along with other uses compatible with residential uses, primarily in older sections of the city.

Ms. Blount detailed the surrounding zoning: all RA-5 to the north and west, industrial to the south, and industrial and RA-5 to the east. Surrounding developments include empty lots and single-family dwellings to the north, single-family dwellings to the south and west, and an empty lot to the east.

She confirmed that the property is located within the mixed-use future land use sectors and that the proposed rezoning is in compliance with the city's comprehensive land use plan, which recommends a mixture of land uses including residential. The planning board recommended approval of the request and its consistency with the comprehensive land use plan at their regular scheduled meeting on December 9, 2025.

During the public hearing, Kevin Faison addressed the council. He introduced himself as one of the property owners and explained: "We purchased the property back late October, early November. We just wanna restore it and turn it into a rental property. We work in Kinston, come here every day, and we got opportunity to purchase property and it's pretty cut and dry."

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Faison expressed his belief in Kinston's potential: "We wanna rehab it and make a nicer part of the community. We're looking at investing in more properties in the city of Kinston. We think Kinston has a lot of potential and growth. I currently reside in Greenville, but like I said, I work here as a substance abuse counselor in peer support."

He also shared his experience with planning and zoning, stating, "I've served on the planning and zoning committee for the city of Greenville for 6 years. I'm very familiar with the processes and how this goes. Would like to say Kinston's process is a lot simpler than Greenville's and I greatly appreciate that."

Council Member Swinson moved to approve the rezoning from I-1 to RA-5 with the consistency statement that it is consistent with the comprehensive land use plan for the city of Kinston. Council Member Solomon seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Action Agenda

1. Consider Approval to Amend Section 18.4.1.1. Historic Overlay District Regulations of the City of Kinston Unified Development Ordinance

Director Blount explained that staff is currently updating the rules of procedure for the historic preservation commission. In doing so, staff realized that section 18.4.11 concerning the submission of a certificate of appropriateness does not give staff enough time to review the application and fulfill the 160D general statutes about notice.

She explained that certificates of appropriateness are requests to modify or rehab the exterior of historic properties in historic districts. These requests require evidentiary hearings, meaning evidence is presented during the hearing. North Carolina general statutes require that notice of evidentiary hearings must be deposited in the mail at least 10 days prior to the date of the hearing.

The current language states that certificates of appropriateness shall be filed with the UDO administrator 10 working days prior to the next regularly scheduled meeting. If applications are received only 10 days prior, there wouldn't be time to meet the mailing requirements, potentially pushing requests back a whole month. The proposed text amendment would change the requirement from 10 days to 20 days prior to the next regularly scheduled meeting.

During the public hearing, no citizens spoke in favor of or in opposition to the amendment.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy moved to approve the text amendment to change the filing requirement from 10 days to 20 days. Council Member Seaforth seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

2. Demolition Update

Director Blount provided an update on the demolition of condemned properties. She gave background information, explaining that when she arrived at the end of 2022/beginning of 2023, there was a condemnation list with 170 properties. Of those, 49 had been demolished, with 23 done by property owners themselves.

In July 2025, the council approved the demolition of 6 properties, with 3 awarded to one contractor and 3 to another. One contractor did not accept the award, requiring re-advertisement. They didn't initially receive the required 3 bids and had to re-advertise again.

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On December 2, 2025, at 9 AM, they conducted a bid opening with 3 contractors present for the demolition of three properties: 909-912 Tower Hill, 1015 Hicks, and 1510 Parker. The demolition of 909-912 Tower Hill Road will be awarded to Carolina Earth Movers for \$23,200. The demolition of 1015 Hicks Street and 1510 Parker Street will be awarded to TNC Construction for a total price of \$18,000.

Ms. Blount noted that once demolition is complete, the staff proposes to place a lien against the properties. She reported that staff is still working with the city attorney's office for the remaining 118 properties on the condemnation list, stating, "So we're working at it bit by bit."

She confirmed that the first 3 properties awarded in July have already been demolished, and they're ready to award these 3 additional demolitions.

Mayor Hardy thanked Director Blount and the planning department for their efforts with limited staff.

3. Consider Acceptance of a NCDOT Multimodal Network Plan Grant in the Amount of \$65,000 and Authorize the Finance Director to Prepare a Budget Amendment for a Future Meeting

Director Blount presented the city's award of a North Carolina Department of Transportation multimodal network grant to develop comprehensive bicycle and pedestrian plans. The grant covers 80 percent of project costs, with the city responsible for the remaining 20 percent. Though they received official notice in July, the federally funded grant funds weren't released until December 12.

She explained that this grant will allow the planning department to identify areas with the greatest need for sidewalks, bike lanes, and safe crossings while improving connections between neighborhoods, schools, parks, businesses, and downtown. The updated plan will provide a clear framework for future projects and strengthen the city's ability to compete for additional funding for infrastructure improvements.

With NCDOT support, the city will engage professional planning services, collect community input, and develop an actionable plan to guide investments in sidewalks, trails, crosswalks, and other multimodal connections. The plan will align with initiatives from the city's Safer Streets project and Lenoir County's Riverwalk project.

The total grant is \$65,000, which includes a \$13,000 local match provided by the city. Ms. Blount emphasized that the project is almost ready to kick off, and their decision is due by Monday, January 12.

Council Member Swinson moved to formally accept the grant and instruct the finance director to prepare a budget amendment for a future council meeting. Mayor Pro Tem Hardy seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

4. Consider Approval to Establish Historic Preservation Fund Grant (C2127)

Director Donna Goodson presented an ordinance to establish a special revenue project fund for the Historic Preservation Fund Kinston Design Standards Update project. The award was given to the city on November 12. The project consists of a total grant amount of \$32,000, with \$22,000 coming from the Federal Historic Preservation Fund and requiring a \$10,000 match from the city of Kinston.

Council Member Solomon moved to adopt the ordinance to establish this project. Council Member Swinson seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

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5. Consider Adoption of Ordinance for FY2025-2026 Operating Budget Amendment

Director Goodson presented the operating budget amendment, consisting of three different aspects:

First, the rolling stock installment purchase contract - at the November 3, 2025, meeting, City Council adopted a resolution to execute an installment purchase contract for \$1,850,000 with First Citizens Bank and Trust. The annual budget ordinance for fiscal year 2025-26 had already included proceeds from borrowing in the general fund (\$1,049,401) and in the water fund (\$955,401) for a total of \$1,805,000 to purchase capital outlay vehicles. The additional \$30,000 was the projected amount related to the cost of issuance of the debt for consulting attorney services. The entire \$1,850,000 has been received, and actual costs have been calculated for payment.

Second, the amendment included funding for lobbying expenses - \$40,000 for fiscal year 2025, prorated at \$7,500 per month, plus the annual lobbyist registration fee and reimbursable expenses related to representation.

Third, transfer of \$10,000 to the special revenue fund for the Historic Preservation Fund Kinston Design Standards Update Project.

Council Member Solomon made a motion that the budget amendment items be voted on individually, but the motion died for lack of a second.

Council Member Suggs moved to adopt the 2025-2026 operating budget amendment. Council Member Seaforth seconded. The motion carried with a roll call vote of (4-1) Council Members Swinson, Seaforth, Suggs, and Mayor Pro Tem Hardy voting yes, and Council Member Solomon voting no.

6. Consider Adoption of Resolution Appointing Assistant Finance Director for Signing Pre-Audit Certificate and Checks

Director Goodson explained that this resolution would appoint the assistant finance director for signing pre-audit certificates and checks. She noted they are cleaning up some ordinances and preparing new signature cards for the bank, putting on record that the assistant finance director has the ability to pre-audit purchases and sign checks in the absence of the finance director.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy moved to approve. Council Member Seaforth seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

7. Consider Adoption of Resolution Appointing Public Services Director for Countersigning Checks

Director Goodson presented a resolution to appoint the public services director for countersigning checks. Currently, the city manager is the official with the duty to countersign checks and drafts. Checks disbursed for amounts less than \$50,000 are signed by the city manager via facsimile signature. Checks disbursed for amounts exceeding \$50,000 require an actual signature. Since there are times when an actual signature may be required and the city manager may not be available, she recommended appointing the public services director for countersigning checks in the city manager's absence.

Council Member Swinson moved to approve. Council Member Solomon seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

8. Consider Approval of COPS Grant -FY 25 Community Policing Development: Supporting Agencies Seeking Accreditation Grant in the Amount of \$51,270

Chief Keith Goyette presented two grant acceptances from the Department of Justice through the COPS program. The first was the FY 25 Community Policing Development Grant for agencies seeking accreditation in the amount of \$51,270. He explained it requires no match and is a 2-year grant. They had applied for this grant the last 2 years without success, but were successful on the third attempt.

Chief Goyette explained these funds will help upgrade their storage facility with evidence to meet accreditation standards. The department is currently in the process with two different accreditation agencies - CALEA and the North Carolina Law Enforcement Accreditation Agency. He anticipated going before CALEA in 4 months and hoped to be accredited by both agencies by the end of the year.

The funds will help with improvements to their evidence storage facility and provide mandatory trainings that would otherwise come from their budget funds.

Council Member Swinson moved to accept the grant. Council Member Seaforth seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

9. Consider Approval of COPS Grant – FY25 Law Enforcement Mental Health and Wellness Act (LEMHWA) Implementation Project in the Amount of \$136,020

Chief Goyette presented the second grant from the Department of Justice, received in October, for \$136,020 in grant funds. This 2-year grant requires no match and will help establish peer groups specially trained in crisis response and emotional first aid, incorporate suicide awareness training, partner with licensed mental health professionals to deliver confidential counseling, trauma-informed care, and intervention services, and launch ongoing wellness education programs throughout the organization.

He noted that part of the grant includes hiring a part-time employee for 2 years to help establish the wellness program. Toward the end of the grant period, they will decide whether to keep the position, though he believes they can likely utilize someone in-house after the program is established. They've reached out to other departments across the state, including High Point Police Department, to mirror successful programs.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy moved to accept the grant. Council Member Swinson seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

10. Consider Approval of Award of a Bid for Structures and Equipment for POD I Substation to Peak Substation Services in the Amount of \$646,900.00

Director Steve Miller explained that the Kinston POD 1 substation was actually Kinston's first connection to Duke Energy to provide power to their electric system when they stopped making their own power in the 1970s. It had run 24/7 as their only source until 2020 when they built the second point of delivery.

The project to replace structures at this station was originally bid in December. The first bid deadline was December 2, but they didn't receive enough bids to open, requiring re-advertisement. The rebid deadline was December 17, when they received 2 bids: one from Peak Substation Services for \$646,900 and one from M.D. Henry for \$673,431.95.

Booth and Associates, the engineers for the project, reviewed the bids and recommended award to the low bidder, Peak Substation Services. The project budget already established is \$690,000, so the award would be within budgeted funds.

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Council Member Swinson asked about contingency fees, and Mr. Miller responded that they weren't requesting any contingency as the order would take place right away, though some components may take up to a year to receive as they're made to order.

Council Member Swinson moved to approve the award. Mayor Pro Tem Hardy seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

Appointments

Consider NCEMPA Appointments

City Manager Rhonda Barwick explained that the city of Kinston is a member of the North Carolina Eastern Municipal Power Agency, from which it receives its electricity. She currently serves on the NCEMPA Board of Commissioners and as an alternate NCEMPA Rate Committee member, positions she's held at different levels since her time at public services.

Preparing for her upcoming retirement, she recommended that Steve Miller, Public Services Director, fill her position as the NCEMPA Commissioner, and that Henry McLean, Assistant Public Services Director, serve as NCEMPA Alternate Commissioner and Alternate Rate Committee member. This would provide representation should Mr. Miller be unable to attend meetings and consider necessary succession planning for public services.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy moved to make the appointments as requested. Council Member Seaforth seconded. The motion carried unanimously.

City Manager's Report

At this point, Mayor Hardy called for a 5-minute recess at 6:55 PM to prepare for the transition ceremony.

When the meeting reconvened, Council Member Suggs noted this was City Manager Barwick's last council meeting before her retirement and invited her to speak. Ms. Barwick, though unprepared with formal remarks, thanked the city and city councils through the years for the opportunities she'd had during her 32 years with the city. She became emotional when discussing the department heads, saying, "Can't talk about them too much. But we have some great department heads. They are very professional, very educated in their specific fields, do a great job, and they do it not for - it's a job to them, they do it because they love Kinston, just like many of those of us up here in this dais." She expressed looking forward to retirement and traveling.

Council Member Chris Suggs then delivered extended farewell remarks, beginning, "I know I shared what I thought were my final remarks a few meetings ago. But since tonight is truly my last council meeting, just wanted to briefly speak again and mostly to say thank you." He expressed deep gratitude to Kinston for electing him 4 years ago, calling it "one of the greatest honors of my life."

Mr. Suggs thanked city staff "who work day in and day out to keep this city going," residents "who show up in good faith to hold us accountable," and colleagues who understand "that service is about stewardship, and that's what we do as council members, to steward the city and its resources. It's about stewardship and not ego."

He reflected on the challenges of serving in one's hometown, noting, "They say that the hardest place to grow up is the place where you grew up." He shared personal connections with each council member - Ms. Seaforth was his mom's second-grade teacher, he called Mayor Pro Tem

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Hardy "my uncle Tony" growing up, Councilman Swinson was a distant relative, and Councilwoman Solomon was "my aunt Nikki" for his entire life until he joined the council.

Mr. Suggs acknowledged the difficulties these relationships sometimes created: "Sometimes when I've, you know, in my work on the council, tried to push or steer us a certain way or move things along or simply just, you know, do better... I think sometimes I'm still viewed as that toddler who people have very early memories of." He noted recent improvements, mentioning a colleague had apologized and acknowledged he was "right about some things."

He closed with a reflection on Jeremiah 29:11, emphasizing not just the promise but the instruction that preceded it: "God told the people of Babylon who were feeling stuck and hopeless... to build houses, plant gardens, raise families, and pray for the city that you're in, even while you're waiting." He encouraged everyone to "keep building, keep planting, keep raising, and keep praying for the city that we're in."

Mr. Suggs expressed excitement about continuing to serve without a title: "A lot of people confuse leadership with control, and some people would rather see a ship sink if they can't be the captain of it. But the truth is you don't always have to be the captain to lead." He concluded with optimism about new leadership, stating, "I do believe that Kinston's best days are ahead of us if we don't give up on it. So please let's not give up on Kinston."

City Clerk Thompson congratulated Suggs on his engagement, prompting him to thank his family, friends, and "beautiful fiancée in the audience" for their support.

Council Member Robert Swinson thanked the residents of Kinston who elected him for the last 20 years, calling it "truly an honor, a pleasure, a privilege." He acknowledged the difficulty of the role: "It takes tough skin to sit here because you have to make decisions that sometimes you don't wanna make, but it's in the best interest of the city." He thanked the department heads for their service.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy thanked both Swinson and Suggs for their service, acknowledging, "Like they said, it's been a journey. Some ups and downs, good times and bad, but through it all, we made it through."

Mayor Don Hardy then delivered his farewell address to the community. He expressed appreciation for serving alongside "some of the most prestigious individuals" and thanked the community for their efforts, particularly during natural disasters. He emphasized the need for continued unity: "We are willing to come together. So we must take that same model and come together even more so during the other opportunities that we have."

Mayor Hardy reflected on his 8 years as mayor: "Serving as a mayor for the past 8 years has been one of the greatest honors of my life to be entrusted by the community that raised me, my hometown, to lead, serve, and advocate on your behalf is something I will forever hold close to my heart."

He enumerated accomplishments over his two terms, including major infrastructure investments, flood mitigation efforts, economic development expansions, downtown revitalization, public safety enhancements, and youth and community initiatives. He noted they secured millions in state and federal funding, supported job creation and business growth, and ensured Kinston had "a good seat at the table, locally, statewide, and nationally."

Mayor Hardy expressed faith in the incoming administration and thanked citizens for their trust, support, constructive criticism, and love for the city. He thanked city staff for their dedication and professionalism, and fellow council members for their partnership. He concluded: "As I step away from this role, I do so with gratitude, pride, and unwavering belief

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in Kinston's future. This city's best days are still ahead. And I will always be its advocate, supporter, and proud son."

City Clerk Thompson thanked the three departing members and expressed her intention to continue working with them in the community.

Swearing-In Ceremony

City Clerk Thompson read the official municipal election results for the city of Kinston:

For Mayor: Kareem S. Moore - 1,783 votes; Don Hardy - 1,707 votes

For City Council (top 2): Stanley C. Aiken - 1,461 votes; Les Lipford - 1,250 votes

Ms. Thompson then conducted the swearing-in ceremony. Mayor-elect Kareem S. Moore took the oath of office first, followed by Council Members-elect Sammy Aiken and Les Lipford. Felicia Solomon was then sworn in as Mayor Pro Tem.

After taking office, Mayor Moore called the meeting back to order and delivered his first remarks as mayor: "I wanna thank the city of Kinston for electing me. It's been a long time coming. Today is the day that we return the chamber back to the people. Today is the day that you'll have your concerns heard and you have your issues addressed."

He challenged those who voted for him to "challenge this city council to work for the people, to work diligently, to answer the phone calls, answer the calls that we have, and listen to our concerns." He referenced the citizens who spoke during the meeting: "I sat here today during a council meeting, and I watched again countless citizens stand up and bring their concerns up towards this council. I got elected so that I could speak with you guys and be the voice for the people."

Mayor Moore then addressed the introduction of the new interim city manager, noting he had just met him outside and would have Mayor Pro Tem Solomon and the city attorney handle the introduction.

City Attorney James Cauley explained that following Ms. Barwick's retirement announcement, the council undertook a search for an interim placeholder while they conduct a larger geographic search for a permanent manager. Mr. Harrell, who has had several interim assignments, agreed to serve as interim city manager starting Monday.

Mr. Cauley also addressed the unusual nature of the evening's proceedings: "This is not the typical organizational process for a local government. I think a hot mess was maybe the most polite way I've heard it described." He explained that typically the organizational meeting is the focus, with occasional business items added, but tonight there was a regular scheduled meeting with the organizational part added, which "is not the norm."

Mayor Pro Tem Solomon added details about the interim manager selection, noting there was "a large consensus that Mr. Harrell was our guy." She addressed concerns about someone going "from job to job," explaining that for an interim position, "you want to put someone in an interim position that is wanted and desired from other municipalities for the transition." She highlighted that Mr. Harrell serves as a senior advisor for county managers and city managers in the state and expressed the council's impression of his desire to work and his experience working alongside those in public services. She emphasized his support for public comment and civic engagement.

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Mayor Moore welcomed the new council members, Sammy Aiken and Les Lipford, noting Ms. Seaforth was also his teacher and Ms. Thompson had been trying to keep him on task. He asked if anyone else had anything to bring before the council.

Mayor Pro Tem Hardy welcomed all the new council members and the mayor, wishing them "the very best as we work through these issues in the city of Kinston." He noted he'd known Les and Sammy all his life and that, as "fellow military fellows, so they know how to hit the ground running."

Council Member Sammy Aiken thanked the Lord for the opportunity to serve, noting he had served previously for 12 years with a 2-year hiatus but "never stopped working." He gave a specific example of recent issues resolved near Biscuitville and Burger King regarding an island without poles, which the city worked on with DOT. He emphasized, "For me sitting the last 2 years in the audience looking this way... this year we have a lot of civilian participation, and we hear you. God gave me ears to hear and a heart for compassion, so I'm ready to do the work."

Council Member Barbara Seaforth welcomed everyone to the city council, noting their various connections through different walks of life. She expressed appreciation for any concerns and her knowledge of their deep roots in the community, stating, "And I know we're going to move forward. So with God's help, we're only going to go one way, and that's up."

Council Member Les Lipford expressed gratitude and excitement about serving. He acknowledged the difficulty of running for office and being in the limelight, thanking everyone on the dais. He emphasized unity: "We all gotta do this together. Can't be separated. We gotta go together, and we'll get a lot of things done. I promise you. Ever need me, phone call away. We all here to help people whether you like it or not. Ugly, bad, good or not, we're here to help. Got it? We do it together. We gotta work this thing together. And we're here for you."

City Attorney's Report

No report was given.

Mayor and Councilmember Reports

Reports were incorporated into the transition ceremony remarks.

Closed Session

No closed session was held.

Adjournment

Mayor Moore moved to adjourn the meeting, stating, "This meeting is now adjourned." The adjournment was at 7:33 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Debra Thompson, City Clerk