

ROBERT LLOYD: To help business, the Legislature must support fairness, growth, schools, workers

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By Casmira Harrison

Affordable housing, Volusia ECHO and Forever, as well as who will replace the outgoing county attorney are all topics set for Thursday's Volusia County Council meeting.

While there's no solid agenda for the Volusia County Council workshop set for Thursday, there is a list of 18 topics elected county leaders have asked to discuss, including revisiting charging for off-beach parking, "charter amendments for 2020," and possibly selling the county's Earl Street Ocean Walk parking garage.

Among other topics for the workshop — that's set to immediately follow the first regular meeting of 2020 — also include the current status of SunRail, how to tackle affordable housing shortages, what happens once outgoing County Attorney Dan Eckert leaves his job at the end of the month and what to do about the expected sunset date of Volusia Forever and Volusia County ECHO funding.

The regular County Council meeting is set to begin at 9:30 a.m. at the Thomas C. Kelly Administration Center, 123 W. Indiana Ave. in DeLand on Thursday. Some topics, such as the SunRail presentation and the county attorney discussion are listed on both the regular agenda and the workshop list.

Here's a look at the topics slated so far:

Future of ECHO, Forever unclear

While environmental groups have moved to urge county leaders to renew the two taxpayer-imposed taxes that sustain Volusia Forever and Volusia ECHO, which collectively fund land purchases, preservation, parks, culture and history, among other green initiatives, the two taxes are scheduled to sunset in 2021.

Some leaders have suggested the county allow the taxes to sunset, others, like the Sierra Club and Gemini Springs Alliance, are pushing to put the issue on the ballot this year for voters to decide on.

Affordable housing limited

Back in June, Volusia County Council members reviewed the results of a 285-page study by the National Low Income Housing Coalition that states by federal standards, residents are considered "cost-burdened" when more than 30% of their income goes toward rent and utilities.

The report, "Out of Reach," concluded that a Volusia County resident would need to earn \$43,320 a year — or \$20 an hour, well over the state minimum wage of \$8.46 — to afford a two-bedroom apartment here without being cost-burdened.

At the time, county leaders agreed that something needed to be done to alleviate financial strain on Volusia County's workforce.

Councilwoman Barbara Girtman, a former real estate agent, said at the time she saw her clients pushed out of the housing market, often due to constantly rising rent rates and stagnant income levels.

“Workforce housing is critical to Volusia County,” she said in June. “We’ve got to work on creating more options for the workforce.”

But how to get it done was murky at best.

County Chair Ed Kelley said he’s hoping his colleagues on the dais will consider discussing the possibility of tiny houses — or those that are less than a third of the size of an average home in Volusia County and presumably much less expensive. Kelley said tiny houses are an idea he has been thinking about pitching as a county project for over a year.

“I’d like to get the council to endorse that,” said Kelley in a phone interview Tuesday. But if he can’t, he said he still plans on pursuing the idea with a small group of others as a private enterprise.

Kelley said in any case, creating solutions to provide an affordable environment in Volusia “needs to be done.”

In the meantime, county leaders aren’t the only ones set to weigh housing affordability.

A fund that is supposed to be set aside to build affordable housing throughout the state, but which has been raided by legislators over the years, could get some help this legislative session.

If passed, Senate Bill 306 and House Bill 381 would slap away lawmakers’ hands from the Sadowski Housing Trust Fund cookie jar, mandating that lawmakers stop pilfering revenue from fund.

The legislative session begins next week.

Legal Limbo

Among the high-profile discussions set for Thursday’s regular meeting - as well as the workshop agenda - is what county leaders want to do about filling County Attorney Eckert’s shoes when he officially leaves his post Jan. 31.

While Councilwoman Barbara Girtman asked for the “search for county attorney” be put on the workshop topic list, Councilwomen Deb Denys, Billie Wheeler and Heather Post have all requested to discuss the “county attorney’s department.”

While not on the document, Wheeler stated in a phone call Wednesday she expects to bring up written evaluations as she had planned to last year.

Eckert, who began working for the county in 1978 and has been the county attorney since 1989, resigned suddenly by letter just prior to the Dec. 10 County Council meeting.

Captain said the discussion was about the process for replacing Eckert.

Among the other subjects council members have asked to discuss are: “revisit council travel policy,” “Marine Science Center,” “alternate beach parking on Peninsula,” “citizens academy,” “county employees pay study,” jointly discussing smart growth with municipalities, increasing number of veterans service officers, “follow-up process when council gives direction” and “Votran bus stops.”

Article last accessed [here](#) on January 9, 2020.