

**SPECIAL JOINT MEETING OF THE CITY OF SUFFOLK and SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL
BOARD**

Wednesday, April 9, 2025 ~ 5:00 P.M.
City Council Chamber, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Heather Howell, *Chair*
Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*
Dr. Dawn Brittingham
Valerie Fields
Karen Jenkins
Tyron Riddick
Kimberly Slingluff

City Council Members Present:

Michael Duman, *Mayor*
Lue Ward, *Vice Mayor*
Leroy Bennett
Shelley Butler Barlow
Ebony Wright
John Rector
Timothy Johnson
LeOtis Williams

Administrative Staff Present (Suffolk Public Schools):

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*
Wendell M. Waller, *School Board Attorney*
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*
Wendy Forsman, *Chief Financial Officer*
Dr. Okema Branch, *Chief Academic Officer*
Dr. Rodney Brown, *Chief of Administrative Services*
Dr. Stenette Byrd III, *Chief of Schools*
Dr. Jessica Avery, *Director of Human Resources*
Anthonette Dickens, *Communications and Community Engagement Officer*
Dr. Katelyn Leitner, *Director of Curriculum and Instruction*
John Littlefield, *Director of Technology*
Dr. Casaundra McNair, *Director of Special Education*
Terry Napier, *Director of Facilities and Planning*
Dr. Catherine Pichon, *Director of Elementary Leadership*
Dr. Andre Skinner, *Director of Career and Technical Education*

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**Administrative Staff Present (City of Suffolk):**

William Hutching, Jr., *City Attorney*  
Al Moor, *City Manager*  
Erika Dawley, *City Clerk*  
Kevin Hughes, *Deputy City Manager*  
Aziz Felder, *Deputy City Manager*  
James Buie, *Police Chief*  
Gerry Jones, *Director of Capital Projects*  
Charles Meeks, *Director of Finance*  
Mark Furlo, *Director of Parks and Recreation*  
Kevin Wyne, *Director of Planning*

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## OPENING OF JOINT MEETING

### ➤ **Call to Order / Welcome / Introductions:**

The meeting was called to order by Mayor Duman at 5 p.m. He welcomed everyone in attendance indicating that the meeting was an opportunity for city council and the school board to collaborate and improve communication as they work together to serve the citizens of Suffolk and educate our children.

City Council and School Board Members introduced themselves and Al Moor, City Manager, Dr. John Gordon III, Division Superintendent, introduced their staff in attendance.

## DISCUSSION

### ➤ **Proposed SPS School Board FY 2025-2026 Operating and Capital Budget Request**

Dr. Gordon provided an overview of the following: (1) budget timelines and process; (2) common themes from stakeholder input; (3) coordination of the budget and the Strategic Plan 2028; (4) history of teacher raises (23% over the last five years); (5) proposed budget challenges (minimal increase); (6) unfunded mandates (instructional and other totaling \$7.56 million); (7) the Governor's All-In Grant funding cliff (\$5.8 million ending June 30, 2025); (8) cost of transportation (special education students); and (9) inflation.

Wendy Forsman, Chief Financial Officer, explained the structure of the budget book consisting of three columns (actual, revised, and proposed). Mrs. Forsman stated that a significant portion of the budget is for compensation and benefits, which makes up 84.01% of the budget, also included additional positions. The total amount of funding requested from the City is \$7 million and 2.3 million from State. She also explained the operating fund, compensation investments, operational increases, and the total investment (\$10.1 million).

Conversation ensued between board and city council members regarding the following: (1) budget flexibility and budget cuts; (2) school buses; (3) grant funding; (4) attendance vs. accreditation relative to funding; (5) MOU for SROs; (6) the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA); (7) starting teacher salaries; (8) tutoring; (9) teacher raises; (10) and school safety.

### ➤ **Proposed Suffolk City Manager FY 2025-2026 Operating and Capital Budget**

Al Moor provided an overview and background information on the development of the city's budget, which included: (1) budget and timelines; (2) what drives the budget; (3) desired funding; (4) revenues; and (5) meeting school's requests.

Charles Meeks, Director of Finance, explained the city's budget including: (1) budget priorities; (2) fiscal year 26 proposed budget; (3) general fund revenue (where funding is generated to provide support for school operation); (4) proposed budget highlights (real estate tax rate, 3% COLA; (5) forty-six (46) new positions to address workload/service demands; (6) increased funding for community health and safety partners; (7) 5.8 million increase in local funding for school operations; (8) allocations for infrastructure and quality of life improvements; (9) adjustments to monthly refuse rate; (10) utility rate adjustments; (11) compliance with financial policies to preserve the city's financial position; (12) investment in public education; (13) and the next steps (public hearing, budget adoption).

Conversation followed between board members and city council members regarding the city's rainy-day fund. The unassigned fund balance is over \$100 million. This unassigned fund balance is for unforeseen emergencies. Members also discussed the MOU relative to SROs and cost absorption, school safety grants/safety officer initiatives, new positions in the police, sheriff, and fire departments, and sinkholes.

➤ **Elephant’s Fork Elementary School Relocation**

Mr. Moor, led the high-level discussion regarding Elephant’s Fork Elementary School (EFES). He indicated that several meetings have been held and the recommendation was to keep the school’s location within the current zone. Mr. Moor also stated that the teams have been working together to identify four (4) potential sites for the new school (three of the sites being better than the fourth). They came to the conclusion that the general area of Pitchkettle to 460. Mr. Moor and Dr. Gordon and their teams will continue working together. Mr. Moor stated that they have more details to be worked out. Dr. Gordon stated that the relocation of EFES was a school board top priority due to the number of learning cottages at the school. He added that once a site and designs are finalized, that he is confident that the timelines set by the Board and the City will be reached for this school. He and Mr. Moor will continue working closely to bring it all together. Specific details were not shared at this time, as negotiations are forthcoming.

Board Member Riddick recommended that the new EFES be adjacent to or located within a community (or future community) and for it to be built for anticipated growth.

➤ **Joint Use of Public School’s Recreational Facilities**

Mr. Moor led the discussion regarding recreational facilities. Facilities not as a building, but the possibility of working together to expand recreational opportunities for citizens by using existing school fields. There were also comments regarding field maintenance and parking availability. He indicated that many organizations are looking for places to practice and/or play and is hopeful that the joint use could create those opportunities. Mr. Moor introduced Mark Furlo, Director of Parks and Recreation who provided ideas for consideration.

Mr. Furlo, by use of a PowerPoint presentation, talked about amending the joint use agreement between the City and School Board to include additional recreation facilities. Mr. Furlo highlighted information regarding the Youth Athletic Associations. He explained that they are currently working closely with eight non-profit associations in the city and the shortage of fields for youth sports including diamond fields for baseball/softball and rectangular fields for soccer and football. He also highlighted barriers to using the school fields which include costs and condition of the fields. Mr. Furlo talked about the joint use agreement which governs the shared use of gyms at Mack Benn, Jr., Northern Shores, Oakland, Booker T. Washington, and Creekside Elementary Schools. The agreement also governs the shared use of the fields at Forest Glen, John F. Kennedy, and John Yeates Middle Schools. Parks and Recreation provides school fields to the youth athletic associations through the joint use agreement between the city and schools. Mr. Furlo recommended amending the Joint-Use Agreement to include fields at Southwestern, Florence Bowser, Creekside, and Nansemond Parkway Elementary Schools and King’s Fork Middle School.

Discussion ensued between council and board members regarding: (1) the concept of the agreement; (2) middle school athletics; (3) fields currently in use; (4) rates for use of fields and times requested by organizations; (5) boundaries and barriers; (6) various fields located in the northern area; (7) addition of tennis courts; (8) adding markers or lines to the field at Northern Shores Elementary School; (9) indoor swimming pool at JFKMS; and (10) collaboration of Parks and Recreation with the schools to make fields available. Additional discussion included liability, facility condition, and utilization of land. It was recommended for real discussion and additional exploration of fields and facilities to be had before agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

➤ **New Residential Development**

Kevin Wyne, by use of a PowerPoint presentation, talked about the following: (1) pipeline data; (2) residential development update; (3) key developments throughout the city (including the northern and central areas); (4) pipeline development versus committed development; and (5) planned residential developments and its impact on schools.

Conversation ensued between both governing bodies regarding: (1) UDO projections; (2) school capacity and attendance; (3) school overcrowding; (4) the need for a new high school; (5) the need for a new EFES due to growth; (6) location/development/and the number of students from Oak Terrace, Reid's Place, and Glenwood; (7) approval/timeline for development and rezoning; (8) changes in priorities listed the Capital Improvement Plan; and (9) failure to take into consideration growth of the school division when considering growth of the city.

### **Adjournment**

➤ **Closing Remarks and Adjournment:**

School Board Members and City Council Members were thankful for good, open dialogue and looked forward to working together to produce meaningful results.

There being no further business, Mayor Duman adjourned the Joint City Council and School Board meeting at 8:34 p.m.

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Heather Howell, *Board Chair*

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Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*