

**MINUTES OF THE TOWN OF FRANKLIN TOWN COUNCIL
REGULAR MEETING
MARCH 2, 2026**

THE FRANKLIN TOWN COUNCIL held a regular meeting on Monday, March 2, 2026, at 6:00 p.m. in the Town Hall Board Room located at 95 East Main Street Franklin, NC.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Stacy Guffey called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. with the following members present: Vice Mayor Mike Lewis, Council Members: Joe Collins, Travis Higdon, Rita Salain, Robbie Tompa, and Jeff Berry.

Mayor Guffey thanked the Council for their participation in the recent signing ceremony at the Nikwaski Mound.

2. PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Vice Mayor Mike Lewis.

3. ADOPTION OF THE MARCH 2, 2026 TOWN COUNCIL AGENDA

Vice Mayor Mike Lewis made a motion, seconded by Council Member Robbie Tompa to approve the Town Council Agenda for March 2, 2026 as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

4. APPROVAL OF THE CONSENT AGENDA FOR MARCH 2, 2026

- A.) Approval of the February 9, 2026 Regular Town Council Meeting Minutes
- B.) Budget Amendments
- C.) Tax Releases and Refunds

Council Member Rita Salain made a motion, seconded by Council Member Joe Collins to approve the consent agenda for March 2, 2026 meeting as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

5. RECOGNITION/PRESENTATIONS

- A.) Recognition of Denton Higdon for his years of service to the Town of Franklin Planning Board – presented by Mayor Stacy Guffey, Councilman Travis Higdon and Town Planner Justin Setser
Council Member Travis Higdon recognized his father, Denton Higdon, for 18 years of service on the planning board as the longest-serving member. Town Planner Justin Setser presented the award, expressing honor in working with Denton for the past 12 years as Town Planner and noting they had previously served together on the Macon County Planning Board.
- B.) Vecinos, Inc. Update – Marianne Martinez, Chief Executive Officer
Marianne Martinez provided an update on Vecinos, noting the organization opened their new building on Highway 441 in May 2025. She explained their mission remains providing equitable, culturally centered healthcare and wellness services, focusing on Spanish language services with all bilingual staff.

Ms. Martinez detailed their patient qualifications: household income at 250% of federal poverty level, no health insurance or underinsured status, no other regular primary care provider for medical patients, and

no other therapist for behavioral health patients. They serve adults only, not pediatrics, and don't accept Medicaid.

Ms. Martinez highlighted their hours: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10 AM to 9 PM with last appointments at 8:30 PM to accommodate working families. They are accepting new patients with no waiting period and offer telehealth services.

She mentioned concerns about projected health insurance losses affecting approximately 600,000 North Carolinians and emphasized the importance of ensuring neighbors do not go without healthcare. The Community Health Hub includes partnerships with other organizations including Physical Legal Services, and they're seeking a dental partner to utilize their four-operatory dental suite.

Ms. Martinez discussed their collaboration with International Friendship Center, Smoky Mountain Harm Reduction, and Franklin Farm Hub on food kiosks with solar-powered refrigeration to provide barrier-free food access.

Council members asked about funding sources and Ms. Martinez explained their main sources of funding are from foundations including Dogwood Health Trust, Leon Levine Foundation, Direct Relief, Fund for Health Equity, and the Office of Rural Health through North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

C.) Main Street Visioning Plan- Allison Smith, NC Department of Commerce

- Approval of Memorandum of Understanding and Resolution from Town Council

Allison Smith from the North Carolina Department of Commerce presented information about pursuing a downtown-focused economic development plan. She explained that to be admitted to the Main Street program, Franklin must first participate in the Downtown Associate Communities (DAC) pre-Main Street program, with applications opening in Spring 2027.

Smith outlined her role as one of eight rural planners covering Western North Carolina's 13 counties, providing strategic economic development planning, technical assistance, training, and grant programs focused on downtown facade improvements and sidewalk infrastructure. The proposed downtown economic development planning process would focus on activating local business and facade improvements, potentially working in conjunction with the streetscape plan. She emphasized three key areas: capacity building to ensure plans don't sit on shelves, economic advancement supporting local businesses and entrepreneurs, and place making leveraging existing assets like the Appalachian Trail, Bartram Trail, and historic downtown buildings.

Ms. Smith detailed the planning process, beginning with preliminary conversations and moving through formalization via Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Resolution. The local work group would consist of 8-10 people representing business community, town, nonprofits, and farmers market. The process would include community engagement, stakeholder interviews, community surveys, and a community visioning workshop, taking approximately one year.

Devon Dupuis, NC Main Street non-profit organizer, explained preparations for reentering the Main Street program, including registering documentation for a North Carolina Main Street nonprofit. The

next steps involve appointing a board of directors including representation from Town Council, staff, downtown business owners, and stakeholders.

Town Manager Amie Owens noted the benefits of utilizing a nonprofit structure, explaining that over 80% of North Carolina's 70+ Main Street communities use nonprofits because they can access different funding sources and operate under different requirements than towns.

Ms. Smith noted that this is a free service for the Town.

Council Member Rita Salain made a motion, seconded by Council Member Robbie Tompa to approve the Memorandum of Understanding and the Resolution, as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

6. PUBLIC SESSION

None signed up for public comment.

7. ITEMS FROM COUNCIL

A.) Request approval of Resolution designating Main Street as Uptown and establishing the areas of Downtown East and Downtown West Franklin for Official and Promotional Use – Vice Mayor Mike Lewis
Vice Mayor Mike Lewis introduced the proposal to rename the downtown area, calling Main Street "Uptown" instead of "Downtown" and creating East Downtown Franklin and West Downtown Franklin districts. He explained that Main Street literally sits on top of Town Hill, making "uptown" geographically accurate. He noted he had discussed this casually with merchants over the years without encountering opposition and suggested putting the proposal on the town website for public review before taking action at the next meeting.

Mayor Guffey supported the proposal, noting it came from good discussion at their retreat and would help think about different redevelopment and entertainment activities in various districts. He acknowledged that while downtown receives significant focus due to density and infrastructure return on investment, business owners in other districts make valid points about needing attention, and this designation would facilitate more activity in those areas.

B.) Other items from Council

Vice Mayor Lewis mentioned that Bryson City (Swain County) had adopted a Resolution against Data Centers.

Councilman Tompa said he would like to see community members get involved.

8. NEW BUSINESS

A.) Request approval of Ordinance the Town Code Enforcement Officer to cause the dwelling located at 574 Womack Street to be vacated and closed, and demolished – Town Attorney John Henning, Jr.

Town Attorney John Henning, Jr. explained this minimum housing matter involves a property that falls below the 50% value threshold for code compliance improvements, requiring demolition. The property issues date back to 2023 under previous code enforcement officers, providing a long runway for compliance attempts. The property is located in the ETJ and is not in city limits.

Town Attorney Henning emphasized this is not a taking of property but rather nuisance abatement for public health, safety, and welfare, as the property admits vermin and has parts ready to fall down. Property owners had ample opportunity to show compliance was possible for less than 50% of value or demolish it themselves. There will be a lien against the property for the cost of the demolition.

Mayor Guffey commended Code Enforcement Officer Angela Greene's work, referencing community feedback about how such actions improve neighborhoods, with Hillside Street as a prime example of successful enforcement.

Council Member Rita Salain made a motion, seconded by Council Member Joe Collins to adopt the Ordinance to cause the dwelling at 574 Womack Street to be vacated, closed and demolished, as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

B.) Requested approval of contract for purchase of Fire Attack Apparatus Tanker – Town Manager Amie Owens and Interim Fire Chief Justin Setser

Town Manager Amie Owens explained the Request for Proposal (RFP) was posted; the first bid opening was on November 6 with only one vendor responding. The RFP was reposted on December 1 through January 9 with the same vendor responding. Melton Fire Group, who provides Toyne fire apparatus, was the sole respondent.

The fire department's truck committee reviewed submissions and determined the respondent met all qualifications. Town Manager Owens noted that the fire department has funds available for the contract price of \$599,592.67. The purchase requires a budget amendment moving money from the fire department's fund balance to capital outlay vehicles.

Vice Mayor Lewis asked about delivery time and Town Manager Owens noted the 775-day contract timeline. Interim Fire Chief Justin Setser explained this would be a Kenworth chassis with 3,500-gallon tank. The truck will replace their current tanker, which will move to the substation while older 1991 and 1994 trucks become reserve units.

Vice Mayor Mike Lewis made a motion, seconded by Council Member Travis Higdon to approve the contract with Toyne and the approve the budget amendment to appropriate funds from fund balance for payment, as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

C.) Request approval of scope of service for Main Street Redesign – Town Manager Amie Owens

Town Manager Amie Owens reported receiving nine proposals for the Main Street redesign RFQ, conducting interviews with four firms, and selecting John R. McAdams Company as prime consultant with Toole Engineering as sub-consultant. The project is structured as task orders for easier Council review across budget years. Task Order 1, costing \$98,856, runs through June 30 and requires a general fund balance appropriation.

Kristy Carter from McAdams explained the community-driven approach, coordinating with Allison Smith, from NC Department of Commerce, on visioning language. Task Order 1 involves initial NC DOT conversations, community engagement including surveys and focus groups, and a two-day community design workshop in May.

Ms. Carter described their approach, starting with broad community input about business needs, parking issues, pedestrian crossing problems, and speed concerns. They will filter ideas through multiple rounds of community engagement and NC DOT discussions, ultimately producing a concept plan with implementation guidance. She emphasized transformative change beyond simple improvements, requiring significant community involvement. The engagement process includes stakeholder analysis, multiple community touch points, and various communication methods learned during COVID.

Council Member Rita Salain inquired about implementation details, funding sources, and business owner requirements. Ms. Carter explained the "how" will become clearer through the process, with different responsibilities for the Town, business owners, and Main Street program. Implementation might occur in phases, potentially coordinating with NC DOT repaving projects. Councilwoman Salain emphasized engaging with Macon County as major downtown landowner and involving churches as significant community stakeholders.

Vice Mayor Mike Lewis made a motion, seconded by Council Member Robbie Tompa to approve the scope of work and budget amendment, as presented. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6 – 0.

9. DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES

- A.) Human Resources – Nicole Bradley Human Resources Director: reported current job openings including a firefighter position, a utility maintenance mechanic, and a successfully filled street maintenance position. She announced posting the Fire Chief position for 60 days until May 1, with herself and Town Manager Owens planning the interview panel process. She stated that the benefits open enrollment is scheduled for May, with meetings held with Wayah Insurance representatives Emily West-Deal and Shelley Norris. She also noted that department supervisors are working on annual employee evaluations using a new format, with most completed and returned for supervisor-employee discussions.

- B.) Tax Collections/Events – Sabrina Scruggs, Tax Collector/Event Coordinator reported a 93% collection rate, collecting \$27,000 over budget requirements for the current year. Total collections reached \$3,102,000 against a \$3,075,000 goal. She sent 370 late notices this week, with properties unpaid by March 31 to be advertised in the paper. Ms. Scruggs noted receiving two quick responses already and aims for 97-98% collection rates.

For events, July 4th planning began in November, expanding to a two-day celebration. July 3rd at Parker Meadows will feature 3-on-3 basketball, cornhole, kickball, and evening activities downtown with food trucks and performer Jason Passmore. July 4th continues with expanded downtown activities during the morning and early afternoon and finishing at the recreation park with a fireworks display.

Pickin' on the Square has five of eleven dates booked, with applications continuing for varied musical styles beyond the recent trend toward Americana/old country rock. Pumpkin Fest applications are arriving for the 30th anniversary celebration.

- C.) Fire Department – Interim Fire Chief Justin Setser reported the department underwent ISO rating evaluation on January 21, expecting results within 60-90 days. Their current split rating is Class 3 inside town limits and Class 4 in the district, with lower ratings providing better insurance rates for commercial properties.

In 2025, the department responded to 1,978 calls for service including medical calls, structure fires, fire alarms, hazmat calls, and accidents. Thirty-eight members completed 6,148 training hours.

The department must transition to ImageTrend reporting software due to federal compliance requirements, funded by Macon County. This requires re-entering all current year calls, adding significant workload to their current 327 calls this year.

Part-time shift coverage improved significantly through a volunteer program marking available shifts weekly. Since implementation, only one shift remained unfilled (Valentine's Day), demonstrating volunteer commitment to coverage.

The department held their 82nd annual oyster dinner with strong attendance from 27 firefighters, 8 retired firefighters, police, council members, and EMS personnel.

Mayor Guffey thanked Mr. Setser for stepping up to additional responsibilities as Interim Fire Chief.

11. ANNOUNCEMENTS

- A.) Next Town Council Meeting is Monday, April 6, 2026
- B.) Special Called Meeting – Budget discussion – Monday, April 20, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. in Town Hall Board Room – notice will be posted

12. ADJOURNMENT

Vice Mayor Mike Lewis made a motion, seconded by Council Member Travis Higdon to adjourn the meeting at 7:29 p.m. The motion carried unanimously. Vote: 6-0.

Stacy J. Guffey, Mayor

Nicole Bradley, Town Clerk