



JANUARY 6, 2026, CITY COUNCIL MEETING

The City Council of the City of Clinton, North Carolina, met in a regular session at 7:00 PM on January 6, 2026, in the City Hall Auditorium. Mayor Starling presided. Councilmembers Rose, DuBose, Corbett, Strickland, and Mayor Pro Tem Becton were present.

City Attorney Joel Starling, Jr., of The Law Office of W. Joel Starling, Jr., PLLC, was present.

Also present were City Manager James Duncan, Finance Director Rhonda Sommer, HR Director Natalie Blue, Planning Director Lyle Moore, Recreation Director Garrett Bryant, Public Safety Director Chief Adrian Mathews, Assistant Police Chief Jesse Kittrell, Fire Chief Hagan Thornton, Main Street Manager Tyler Wise, and Interim Public Works Director Travis Anderson.

Noah Britt of The Sampson Independent was present.

Mayor Starling called the meeting to order and asked Councilmember Joel Rose to give the invocation.

CITY COUNCIL—APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES

Upon a motion made by Councilmember Rose, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, the minutes of December 2, 2025, regular session were unanimously approved.

RECOGNITION

Public Safety Director Mathews appeared before the council to announce the 2025 Police Officer of the Year. He stated that Detective Matthis joined the force in October 2016 and has demonstrated exceptional performance and leadership over the years. He explained that the Police Officer of the Year award is nominated by peers and asked Mayor

Starling to assist him in presenting the 2025 Police Officer of the Year Plaque to Detective Matthis.

Fire Chief Hagan Thornton appeared before the council to announce the 2025 Firefighter of the Year. Chief Thornton stated that Firefighter Gregory joined the Fire Department in June 2023 and has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to service and has become an integral part of the team's success in a short period of time. Chief Thornton stated that Firefighter Gregory was also selected to be Firefighter of the Year by his peers. Chief Thornton then asked Mayor Starling to join him in presenting the plaque to Firefighter Austin Gregory.

PRESENTATION

Public Safety Director Mathews appeared before the Mayor and Councilmembers to acknowledge the individuals who responded to a medical emergency on December 22, 2025. The emergency occurred at 105 Wall Street in Clinton, NC, where a male was found unresponsive. Director Mathews stated that the City of Clinton Firefighters arrived on scene within 4 minutes of receiving the call and immediately started CPR and administered a shock with an AED device. He announced C-Shift: Captain James Blackmore, Lieutenant Nathan Lawson, Fire Marshall Ronald Williams, and Firefighters Austin Gregory, Jeffery Ray, and John Johnson. Mayor Starling, Council, Public Safety Director Mathews, and Chief Thornton thanked C-Shift as they appeared before Council.

AMENDMENT—ARTICLE IV OF THE PERSONNEL POLICY

City Manager James Duncan informed the council that the text amendment added language to the personnel policy. He stated that Article IV must be updated to comply with the changes made to North Carolina General Statute G.S. 160A-164.2(b). He added that recently, it was passed that if a position being filled requires an applicant to work with children in any capacity, that applicant will be subjected to a criminal record check conducted by the SBI. He also stated that all other changes in Article IV are minor housekeeping items with no significant changes.

Upon a motion made by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, seconded by Councilmember Rose, the amendment to Article IV of the Personnel Policy was unanimously approved.

BUDGET—ORDINANCE AMENDMENT

Rhonda Sommer, Finance Director, appeared before the council to request the approval of a Budget Ordinance Amendment. Finance Director Sommer stated that the City Council approved pay increases for the Utilities & Public Works Departments at the

December 2, 2025, City Council meeting. She added that the request for the amendment is to fulfill the increases by appropriating the funds from the General and Water Sewer funds.

Upon a motion made by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, seconded by Councilmember Rose, it passed unanimously to adopt the following budget ordinance amendment:

FY2025-2026 BUDGET ORDINANCE AMENDMENT #6

#2026.01_____

BE IT ORDAINED by the City Council of the City of Clinton, NC, that the following amendment be made to the Annual Budget Ordinance for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2026, is hereby amended as follows:

Section 1. To amend the General Fund, the expenditures are to be changed as follows:

Account #	Account Title	Increase	Decrease
10-5600-0200	Salaries	\$23,666	
10-5600-0500	FICA	1,810	
10-5600-0700	Retirement	3,396	
10-5600-0701	401k	237	
10-6400-0200	Salaries	5,612	
10-6400-0500	FICA	429	
10-6400-0700	Retirement	805	
10-6400-0701	401k	56	
10-5900-0200	Salaries	17,020	
10-5900-0500	FICA	1,302	
10-5900-0700	Retirement	2,442	
10-5900-0701	401k	170	
10-5610-0200	Salaries	4,427	
10-5610-0500	FICA	339	
10-5610-0700	Retirement	635	
10-5610-0701	401k	44	
	TOTAL EXPENDITURES	\$62,390	\$0

Section 2. To amend the General Fund, the revenues are to be changed as follows:

Account #	Account Title	Increase	Decrease
10-3990-0000	Appropriated Fund Balance	\$62,390	
	TOTAL REVENUES	\$62,390	\$0

Section 3. To amend the Water Sewer Fund, the expenditures are to be changed as follows:

Account #	Account Title	Increase	Decrease
30-8100-0200	Salaries	\$8,786	
30-8100-0500	FICA	\$672	
30-8100-0700	Retirement	\$1,261	
30-8100-0701	401k	\$88	
30-8200-0200	Salaries	\$2,945	
30-8200-0500	FICA	\$225	
30-8200-0700	Retirement	\$423	
30-8200-0701	401k	\$30	
30-8300-0200	Salaries	\$15,867	
30-8300-0500	FICA	\$1,214	
30-8300-0700	Retirement	\$2,277	
30-8300-0701	401k	\$159	
30-8400-0200	Salaries	\$8,033	
30-8400-0500	FICA	\$615	
30-8400-0700	Retirement	\$1,153	
30-8400-0701	401k	\$80	
TOTAL EXPEN DITURES		\$43,828	\$0

Section 4. To amend the Water Sewer Fund, the revenues are to be changed as follows:

Account #	Account Title	Increase	Decrease
30-3990-0000	Appropriated Fund Balance	\$43,828	
TOTAL REVENUES		\$43,828	\$0

Section 5. Copies of this budget amendment shall be furnished to the City Clerk, City Manager, and Finance Director for their direction.

Adopted this the 6TH day of January, 2026.

Lew Starling, Jr., Mayor

ATTEST:

Rhonda Sommer, City Clerk

UPDATE(S)—DOWNTOWN STAGE COMMITTEE

Mayor Starling stated for the record that the City of Clinton received a \$237,000 grant to build a stage downtown. He stated that engineering fees will be approximately \$100,000, with a likely construction cost of \$300,000 to \$400,000. He added that a committee had been established to recommend the direction the City should take.

Mayor Starling called City Manager James Duncan to speak on behalf of the staff, followed by anyone in the audience who wished to speak.

City Manager stated that the Stage Committee included: Ray Jordan, Debbie Roberts, Councilmember Joel Rose, and Greg Thornton. He added that, after speaking with staff and meeting with members of the committee, it was determined that the proposed stage location was not ideal. He also stated that the City would have to fund approximately \$200,000 in costs. He acknowledged his uneasiness about returning the grant funds, but after careful evaluation of the circumstances, the staff recommended not proceeding with the stage construction.

Mayor Starling welcomed questions from the Councilmembers. No questions were asked.

Mayor Starling welcomed public comments, and Kay Raynor wished to speak.

Mrs. Raynor acknowledged that she appeared on behalf of the Promotion Committee as its Chairperson. Mrs. Raynor requested that all members of the Promotion and Design Committee and individuals present in support of the construction of the permanent downtown stage and Phase IV stand. Mrs. Raynor then read a letter of support. Copies of the letter were distributed to the Mayor and the Councilmembers.

Mayor Starling welcomed public comments, and Wendy Carr wished to speak.

Ms. Carr announced her position as chairperson of the Design Committee and read a letter of support.

Mayor Starling welcomed public comments, and Denise Rentz wished to speak.

Mrs. Rentz, owner of the Historic Herring House in Downtown Clinton, thanked the council for their continued efforts and stated that recently, visitors from Raleigh and Holly Springs gave wonderful compliments on Clinton. She added that business owners in Downtown Clinton would benefit from the proposed placement of the stage. Mrs. Rentz stated that during a Committee Meeting, the owners of Matthews Gifts shared that events downtown boost sales. She continued by informing the council that some downtown storefronts are closed and that a permanent stage would bring business to the area.

Mayor Starling welcomed public comments, and Greg Thornton wished to speak.

Mr. Greg Thornton, Vice President of the Clinton Development Corporation, thanked Mayor Starling and Councilmembers for establishing the Stage Committee. He acknowledged that the meeting was productive and raised important points. He expressed regret about having to return the grant money and hoped the council would consider moving forward with the project.

Mayor Starling acknowledged that Mrs. Raynor wished to speak.

Mrs. Raynor questioned the Stage Committee Members and the Staff about the proposed location of the stage. She asked where a good location for it would be, and why the proposed location was unfit.

Mayor Starling asked Ray Jordan, Sampson County's Economic Developer, to answer Mrs. Raynor's questions.

Mr. Jordan stated that the total impact of the construction must be evaluated. He stated that the evaluation would include the costs of operating, maintenance, asphalt, and parking lots. He stated that at this moment, there are more questions than answers. He expressed uncertainty about an alternative location due to the shortage of open space. He assured Mrs. Raynor of his support for the stage or any large venue to host events.

Mrs. Raynor stated that the Council's previous approval of Phase IV included no questions about the stage's location and requested an explanation from staff or the stage committee.

Mayor Starling acknowledged that Mrs. Debbie Roberts wanted to speak.

Mrs. Roberts identified herself as a member of the Stage Committee and acknowledged the meeting that Mrs. Raynor mentioned. She stated her hesitancy about returning the grant funds and the projected increase in the cost to build the stage in the future. Mrs. Roberts added that during the stage committee meeting, members brainstormed an alternative location for the stage, but no location was suggested, and she believed no conclusion was reached.

Mayor Starling emphasized that taxes would have to be increased by approximately 3 cents to complete this project.

Councilmember Strickland complimented the Downtown Committees and conveyed his support. He stated that he, along with the other council members, is responsible for making the best decisions for the City of Clinton and for the use of taxpayers' funds. He added that it also troubled him to return the grant funds. Councilmember Strickland stated that renting a stage would cost less and include no maintenance, and that upon removal, the space could be used for another event.

Councilmember Strickland made a motion. Mayor Starling requested a second.

Councilmember Corbett asked if the stage could be reduced in size to lower costs.

Mr. Thornton stated that a stage must be built to accommodate the community's needs.

Councilmember Dubose expressed his support for the stage but is hesitant about the costs. He stated that the city has alternative funding priorities, such as a Fire Ladder Truck.

Mayor Starling requested a second motion.

Upon a motion made by Councilmember Strickland, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, it was unanimously passed to not move forward on the construction of the downtown stage.

APPOINTMENT(S)

Mayor Starling acknowledged the reappointments of Dee Bryant, Stephanie Graham, Sherry Matthews, Cyndi Cherry Sankey, Pastor Matt Seals, and Patty Cherry for an additional term on the All-American City Committee. Mayor Starling also acknowledged the appointments of Amy Knowles Ruiz and Ron Carter to the All-American City Committee.

Upon a motion made by Councilmember Strickland, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, the appointments and reappointments to the All-American City Committee were unanimously approved.

Mayor Starling acknowledged appointments to the All-American City Auxiliary Committee to include Nettie Pernell, Victor Fryar, Pastor Regina Monroe-Lucious, Shirley Williams, Pastor Thaddeus Godwin, Patricia Herring, Susan Bristow, Dr. Jamie King, Dr. Westly Johnson, and Austin Smith.

Upon a motion made by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, seconded by Councilmember Strickland, the appointments to the All-American City Auxiliary Committee were unanimously approved.

Mayor Starling acknowledged the reappointment of Anthony Worley for an additional term on the Cemetery Board. He also acknowledged the appointment of Nick West to replace Vernon Clifton on the Cemetery Board, whose term had expired.

Upon a motion made by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, seconded by Councilmember Strickland, it was unanimously approved to reappoint Anthony Worley and appoint Nick West to the Cemetery Board.

Mayor Starling acknowledged the notification to replace the expired term of Charles Justin Lane, District 2, on the Planning and Zoning Board.

Councilmember Strickland made a motion to appoint Horace Bass as a replacement on the Planning and Zoning Board. Mayor Pro Tem Becton seconded the motion, and it was unanimously approved.

REPORTS

The City Council acknowledged the combined monthly staff report.

STAFF REPORTS

No reports were given.

CITY MANAGER REPORTS

City Manager Duncan informed the Council that, in the past, district meetings were held in March and April and requested that council members contact him to schedule a date and time for the 2026 District Meetings.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

No one appeared to be heard by the council.

OTHER BUSINESS

No one appeared for other business.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a motion made by Councilmember Dusbose, seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Becton, it passed unanimously to adjourn the January 6, 2026, City Council meeting.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 7:45 PM.



Rhonda Sommer, City Clerk



Lew Starling, Jr., Mayor