

**Official Minutes of the City of Mount Rainier**  
**Mayor and City Council**  
**Legislative Meeting**  
**January 6, 2026, Virtual Meeting**

**Call to Order**

7:00 pm

**Presiding Officer**

Mayor Celina Benitez

**APPROVED**  
**MARCH 3, 2026**

**Officials Present**

Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall

Councilmember Danielle Carter

Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir

Councilmember Joseph Jakuta

**Staff Present**

City Manager Kourosch Kamali

Director of Code Compliance Alma Ferrufino

City Clerk Melissa Sam

Media Production Coordinator Jared Alindogan

**Minutes provided by:**

City Clerk

**Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance**

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm, and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**Reading of Agenda**

The agenda was read by Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall and accepted with the removal of number 11, Discussion and Vote on Support for the “Help Us Stop The Landover Data Center” Community Outreach.

**Mayor and Councilmember Event Announcements**

Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir stated that the ribbon cutting was scheduled for the following day at 11:00 a.m. at Potts Hall, 1 Municipal Place, Mount Rainier, and expressed hope that residents would attend.

Councilmember Joseph Jakuta encouraged residents to visit the City’s website and sign up to join the Mount Rainier Green Team. He stated that applications were being accepted and that an environmental background was not required, though preferred. He noted that individuals who simply wanted to help benefit the environment in

Mount Rainier were welcome to apply. He added that approximately three additional applicants were still needed to reach full membership.

Councilmember Danielle Carter mentioned the following:

- She thanked everyone who participated in the Parade of Lights in December, noting that it was a great success, and extended special thanks to the four residents who provided cider stations.
- She encouraged residents to participate in the City's Compost Program and advised them to visit the City's website to complete the form to request a compost bin. She stated that residents with questions could reach out to any member of the Council.

Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall announced a vacancy on the Arts Commission and encouraged interested residents to apply through the City's website.

Mayor Celina Benitez read the upcoming events listed on the agenda and stated the following:

- The waste management schedule was available on the City's website, and live Christmas trees were scheduled for collection on January 13 and January 27.
- She thanked staff and volunteers for their work on the Holiday Basket Distribution and the Breakfast and Photo with Santa.
- The Police Department held a Shop with a Cop event, during which many children received toys.
- She thanked the Mount Rainier Volunteer Fire Department for hosting Santa Run and noted that the Police Department escorted the event. She expressed appreciation for the continued collaboration.
- She congratulated Ms. Wala Blegay on being sworn in as the new at-large County Councilmember on Monday.
- She gave a shout-out to Speaker Joselyn Peña-Melik for becoming the first Afro-Latina immigrant Speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates.
- She stated that the legislative open session would take place the following week.

### **Presentation from the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area (ATHA)**

Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall recused herself from the presentation.

Megan Baco and Grace Hearnese presented on the following:

- (Re) Introduction
- Community Tourism
- Example Heritage Area Projects & Programs
- Grant Opportunities

Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir asked about small businesses and their preservation, noting that the City had many small businesses in its historic downtown core, and inquired whether they were able to access grant funding through ATHA. Megan Baco stated that the funding they had available was not something small businesses could use. She explained that they had seen partnerships take place in the Gateway Arts District in which a business benefited significantly as the buildout tenant of a property owned by a nonprofit. She also noted that Prince George's County was unique in that the County Historic Preservation Commission had a grant program for which private property owners were eligible.

Motion to add three minutes  
Moved by Mayor Celina Benitez  
Seconded by Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir  
Vote Recorded: 4-0-0, Motion Passed

The Mayor and Council thanked Megan Baco and Grace Hearnese for their presentation and stated that they wished the trail extended all the way to the City.

### **Presentation of Building Application for 3803 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, Mount Rainier, Maryland**

The owner of the property explained the scope of the project.

Councilmember Joseph Jakuta stated the following:

- The city had a noise ordinance (Code Section 10-121), construction activities were to be limited to 8 am to 8 pm to avoid violating it.
- There was a tree ordinance (Section 12B-7) that protected private trees measuring 56½ inches or more in circumference at 4½ feet above the ground. If any work was planned involving a tree of that size, even if it was in poor condition, Code Enforcement needed to be consulted. Additionally, any pruning needed to be reviewed in advance.
- Care should be taken when digging, moving, or grading soil to prevent stormwater from running into neighboring yards or the rain garden.
- When in doubt, the Code Compliance Director should be contacted.

Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall asked whether the owner planned to live in the home, sell it after renovations, or rent it. The owner stated that he was planning to rent the property.

The Mayor and Council thanked the owner for the presentation and for the project.

### **City Manager's Report**

City Manager, Kouros Kamali presented on the following:

- Weekly meeting with directors.
- FY27 Operating Budget
- Potts Hall/Welcome Center
- ARPA Funding –
  - (1) Newton Street Green Infrastructure Improvements (Between 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 37<sup>th</sup> Street)
- SS4A Grant Funding –
  - (1) High Visibility Crosswalks, Curb Ramp Improvement, and Speed Humps
  - (2) Sidewalk Maintenance
- Installation of Stop Sign Enforcement Cameras
- Installation of Solar Panels on the Five City Buildings
- 31<sup>st</sup> Street and Perry Street Green Street Project
- Façade Improvements and Mural Projects
- Grant Activities

Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir expressed frustration that they were not meeting in person, questioned why the furniture had not been ordered earlier, and asked for an explanation for the delay. Mr. Kamali explained that they had to wait until the council chamber was finished to obtain accurate measurements for the furniture. He also stated that if they had proceeded with the original plan to furnish the chamber, it would have cost the City more than \$100,000. Therefore, he had shopped around to find a better price. He eventually found a vendor who provided a reasonable quote, but they were out of state, and it would take two months. He also mentioned that the City was better off waiting the two months rather than paying an additional \$50,000.

Councilmember Joseph Jakuta stated that some of the businesses he had spoken with on 34th Street were concerned about how the parking meters had been removed. A report provided previously indicated that this would be about the time the parking meters were to be reinstalled, and he asked about the status. Mr. Kamali explained that they usually held weekly meetings with the vendors. He noted that although the process had been promised to be quick at the beginning, it was taking longer than anticipated. They had received all the signs for the parking area, but were still waiting for the program to be installed, which was somewhat sophisticated, and staff also needed to be trained.

Councilmember Danielle Carter asked the following questions:

- In this situation with the Barking Lot, were mediation services offered to the residents and the business owner to mitigate the situation.
- Did he, as City Manager, or one of his designated staff, investigate the petition to ensure all signers were 18 years or older and that the 60 percent threshold had been met.

Mr. Kamali stated that he believed the matter should be addressed in a different meeting, such as a community conversation, where the Director of Code Compliance could also be present. He explained that she had forwarded information to Councilmember Carter that afternoon, and because a County investigation was ongoing and a court date was scheduled for the following Thursday, some information could not be released as it was not public. He added that he had reached out to the City Attorney after receiving the emails from her. He also noted that most of the email correspondents did not live on that block. He reiterated that a community conversation involving the owner, the residents who signed the petition, and city staff would be the appropriate forum.

### **Public Comment**

Ms. Julie Chamberlain, 3700 block of 37th Street, stated that she was two months away from her twentieth anniversary of living in Mount Rainier and that she had always heard the narrative of supporting residents and local businesses. She said it was baffling to her the situation being discussed. She noted that a resident who had invested in the community and gone through the permitting process to establish her business was now coming up against this wall, with seemingly no engagement from the entity in this body. She stated that no one had talked about any actions taken directly by City personnel. She said she had been under the understanding that it was partially the City undertaking this action, not just residents complaining about barking. She stated that she would definitely like some answers regarding what City involvement had been in the issue, not just complaints from residents. She added that the meeting on Thursday was coming awfully quickly for the turnaround on information, given that the matter had been going on for quite some time.

Mr. Jon Pattee, 3200 block of Shepherd Street, mentioned that he wanted to express deep concern, noting that he was sure that no group of people who packed food baskets for kids and did things for families was anything but good-hearted. He stated that he also knew the business owner had lived in the community for what he believed was coming up on twenty years and that she was a decent and kind person.

He said it surprised him that no common ground could be found in this situation and that it was a deep concern to him. He stated that he trusted they would all find the same compassion and common sense and make it possible for her to continue a business that she had poured her life savings into as a single mother, a veteran, and someone investing in the community that was desperate to avoid blight, closed businesses, and the social consequences that came when people tried to do something good in their community and ran into obstacles.

He stated that his understanding of what was happening was not that there was something significant involving the County, but rather that the City had moved the goalpost on her and that there was something about a foot issue. He stated that, from what he had heard, he thought it was not going to turn out well. He said he was sad for his City and sad for his neighbor, and he hoped that the matter would be taken very, very seriously, noting that he knew they were good-hearted people.

Ms. Heather Ware, 3700 block of 35<sup>th</sup> Street, said that she had concerns because she received a notice from the County without any mediation or conversation with the City Council, City staff, or neighbors. She stated that she thought the matter would have been handled in house rather than being fast-tracked to the County. She asked the Council to consider having a dialogue, at least initially, either with her or with the main person who had the complaint. She stated that instead, they had only been yelling at them at their business and at her while she was walking to her job, along with emails sent by a particular individual. She stated that she then received a noise notice from the City and felt a disconnect, questioning why the issue had not been addressed in house before being taken to the County.

Ms. Ayelet Hines, 3200 block of Shepherd Street stated that she was there to speak on behalf of the business and that she sometimes took her dog there. She stated that she understood the neighbor in the immediate vicinity might have had concerns and that, of course, the City needed to look out for their interests. Her request was that the City stand up equally and fight equally for the interests and concerns of the business owner.

She stated that the owner was a lone proprietor, a veteran, a single mother, and someone known throughout the community for being an active member who helped shape the future of the community. She said her hope was for the City to stand up for her as much as it did for the people who lived on that block. She noted that while it was true she did not live on that block, the town center was important to her and she did not want it to become blighted or for the only businesses that could thrive to be those that sold drugs. She stated that she knew the business owner had been dealing with the matter for months and that this was what it had taken to finally have this conversation. Even if the explicit intention was not to shut the business down, placing roadblocks in front of a small business owner was essentially the same thing.

Ms. Valerie Silensky, 4100 block of 31<sup>st</sup> Street, mentioned that she had lived there for almost twenty-one years. She said she had seen many businesses struggle to come to the area and that there had been numerous attempts to attract businesses that ultimately did not succeed. She stated that the community needed businesses, and here they had someone who had been so dedicated to investing in the community, moving there, making it her home, and raising a child there. She noted that all of these actions were deliberate and intentional.

She stated that the business owner had started the business there and, as others had said, had gone through all of the onerous and difficult challenges of opening a business. She said it was clearly a popular and beloved business that helped build community. As a dog owner herself, she stated that her dogs had never actually been to the business other than to visit and say hello, and she had always found it to be clean and well-managed.

She said it seemed that some were letting the best be the enemy of the good. She noted that there had been some great ideas in the discussions about having a community dialogue and addressing issues at the community level to mitigate any problems. She stated that she would like to know why that had not been done before it got to this point. She said, as others had noted, that the matter had been going on for months and seemed to involve issues that could have been addressed earlier, especially given who the owner was and her investment in the community. She stated that other businesses had been far more troublesome and problematic, yet had not risen to this level, particularly not so soon. She expressed hope that their voices and logic would have an effect.

Ms. Margaret Boozer-Strother, 4000 block of 34<sup>th</sup> Street, stated that she had been a business owner in Mount Rainier since 2003 and that it was not easy to be a business owner. She emphasized that the City had a lot of vacant properties and that they had expressed a desire for businesses to come to the area. She stated that Heather's business was exactly the kind of business they wanted, someone who lived in the community, was responsible, an upstanding citizen, and invested in the neighborhood.

She noted that when pets were lost, people called Heather because she knew everyone and their pets, reuniting pets with their owners. She stated that it was an important business in the neighborhood, as people needed it to care for their pets while they worked. She said the community needed the business and questioned why a process could not be followed, as others had suggested, where they could sit down, talk, and work things out, instead of going from zero to one hundred and suddenly having a hearing.

She stated that she had not personally experienced this, but she had run into many situations where her first interaction felt like a slap instead of a handshake. She said she thought the City could do better and should not treat their valued citizens and businesses this way.

Mr. Derek Reynolds, 4000 block of 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, said that he did not know one hundred percent of the background regarding what had happened with this business. He said he understood there had been a noise complaint and that the City had apparently taken it to the County, with some rapid communication happening regarding the complaint. He stated that he had lived in the community for about eight years and that at almost every meeting he attended, he heard people complaining about the businesses at the traffic circle—being disruptive, having liquor licenses at 8 a.m., and all kinds of things happening downtown at the bus circle. Yet he said he had never heard of the City taking any of those issues to the County. He questioned whether he was missing something and why the City had never acted on the liquor stores, yet was now targeting another business that did not have any “drunk things” or disruptive behavior occurring.

He stated that he was confused why the community and the City were suddenly attacking this small business owner. He said he had been hearing for years that there was nothing the City could do about all the other businesses that people had complained about over the past eight years.

Mayor Celina Benitez stated that they had heard their concerns and that what limited what they could say at this time was that it was an active investigation. She stated that they had received a large number of documents that

needed to be reviewed. She explained that when they sometimes discussed businesses and licenses, it was largely handled by the County, not the City, as the County cleared most of the permits.

She noted that about four years ago, there had been a petition regarding a business that residents were upset with and wanted removed. She stated that the Council did not grant licenses, nor did it approve or dictate the hours certain businesses could operate. She said the City could request that residents take certain actions, but it was ultimately up to the residents what they chose to do, and the City was not the only outlet for complaints when residents were unhappy with certain issues. She stated that they would review the information and have a discussion with the team.

### **Second Reading and Adoption of Resolution No. 10-2025**

Motion to adopt Resolution No. 10-2025, Proclaiming December 10<sup>th</sup> as Human Rights Day  
Moved by Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall  
Seconded by Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir  
Vote Recorded: 5-0-0, Motion Passed

### **Vote on Approval of Minutes**

Motion to approve the minutes for:

- November 18, 2025, Special Legislative Meeting and Work Session
- December 2, 2025, Public Hearing and Legislative Meeting

Moved by Vice Mayor Valerie Woodall  
Seconded by Councilmember Joseph Jakuta  
Vote Recorded: 5-0-0, Motion Passed

### **First Reading of Resolution No. 10-2026**

Mayor Celina Benitez read Resolution No. 01-2026, Authorizing Participation in the Prince George’s County Planning Assistance for Municipalities and Communities (PAMC) Strategic Action Plan Project.

**During the discussion, Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir made a point of order concerning a statement she noted as a disparagement, but no determination was made on the point of order.**

**Councilmember Danielle Carter made a motion to reconsider and hold a vote on N0. 10-2025. Councilmember Joseph Jakuta seconded the motion.**

**Mayor Benitez later stated that the motion was not following protocol, and Councilmember Danielle Carter then withdrew her motion to vote on Resolution No. 10-2026.**

### **Presentation of Minutes**

The City Clerk presented the December 16, 2025, Work Session Minutes to the Mayor and Council.

## **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:44 pm.

Motion to adjourn the meeting:  
Moved by Councilmember Jenny Hoffpauir  
Seconded by Councilmember Danielle Carter  
Vote Recorded: 5-0-0, Motion Passed