

MINUTES OF THE CITY OF SKY VALLEY COUNCIL WORK SESSION HELD ON FEBRUARY 17, 2026, AT 8:30 A.M. THE MEETING TOOK PLACE AT 3608 HWY. 246 (CITY HALL) AND VIA TELECONFERENCE (ZOOM) SKY VALLEY, GA 30537

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Cotton-Orr, Councilors Allred, Pence, Price, Beasley, and Curtis

STAFF PRESENT: City Manager Streetman, City Attorney Kidd, City Clerk Fleming, Building Inspector Pyburn, Police Chief Baumes, Sergeant Maloney, Lieutenant Edwards, and Communication Specialist Van Camp

1. Call to Order

Mayor Cotton-Orr called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m.

2. Adoption of Agenda

Councilor Curtis made a motion to amend the item "Discussion of the proposed Sky Valley Sewer Project" into three phases: (1. Public Hearing 2. Hearing from invited guests 3. Council Statements). The amended motion was seconded by Councilor Pence, and was unanimously approved. Mayor Cotton-Orr stated that more than one meeting will be needed to discuss this subject

Mayor Cotton-Orr stated that she had asked City Manager Streetman to invite representatives from each of the three entities: Time Shares of Sky Valley, Sky Valley Country Club, and Valley View Condominium Association. Each of these entities have reported having critical septic issues and be given the opportunity to speak on the issues along with past measures that have been taken to rectify the situation. Also, the guests that were invited to speak on behalf of the proposed septic to sewer project are: Dylan Parker, Parker Environmental, and John Everett Dolan, Environmental Scientist, in the wastewater industry.

3. Discussion of the proposed Sky Valley Sewer Project

The protocol for the meeting was set by Mayor Cotton-Orr as follows:

Mayor and Council will give their comments/statements for up to five minutes each.

Public Comments each speaker will be allowed to speak for up to five minutes each and 30 minutes have been allotted for comments.

Invited speakers will give a presentation then be open to questions.

Mayor Cotton-Orr stated that during her campaigning she had stated that she had serious doubts about the need for a sewer system, and still feels the same way, but this is a City Council decision. Today's work session is about one thing "due diligence". There needs to be a clear need of a municipal sewer system which a needs assessment would provide. EMI, Engineering Management Inc., done exactly what was asked concerning the scope of the project, but further studies need to be conducted. Grants have been secured, totaling five million, but funding

doesn't establish necessity. She stated that conversations with GEFA, Georgia Environmental Finance Authority, had indicated that five million would not be enough to fund a septic to sewer project in Sky Valley. She then asked the question where would the additional funding come from, taxpayers? Have the entities that have reported septic challenges done all that could be done to remedy their issues? She read portions of the May 1, 2020, Mayoral Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes. "The members talked about different incentives that could be offered to Merrill. Mr. Bill Oliver went over the feasibility study and economic development study that Merrill wants Sky Valley to help fund. These studies would help show the feasibility of the potential projects and the measurement of benefit to Sky Valley economically. Mr. Tim Darrah had checked on the sewer cost, which would entail about a 13% increase across the board, over the cost quoted on the 2017 sewer survey assessment. The County sees no problem in connecting to their sewer system. Merrill is requesting a commitment from the City on funding the sewer system before any developing begins. Different sources of funding might be available, as far as grants." Mayor Cotton-Orr stated that there was no mention of a sewer crisis only a developer's need. The decision for the proposed septic to sewer project needs to be made carefully, transparently, and based on facts.

Councilor Allred stated that he didn't have much more to add other than it was mentioned that the residents that were against development were a part of the decision, but he totally disagrees as he feels they were a driver for this activity.

Councilor Pence stated that the Council's decision is for the community. She quoted statements from the grant applications that involved septic failures for decades that are a health concern. Tests have shown high counts of phosphorus, ammonia, and suspended solids in the Mud Creek for the past three years. Another quote was given stating that the construction of a septic to sewer system would significantly increase public health as it will eliminate saturated drain fields and the wasted water will be treated, protecting the environment.

Councilor Pence went on to say that the Sky Valley residents wouldn't want the current Council to make a decision based on five-to-six-year-old data that is incomplete. Many more sessions are needed to discuss the proposed septic to sewer project before the May deadline.

Councilor Price has serious questions concerning the proposed septic to sewer project. "Is it truly necessary"? He understands there are strong opinions on both sides of the issue. The Council needs to make thoughtful well-informed decisions concerning this project for the future of Sky Valley. The project would allow for substantial growth in Sky Valley, and he feels slower organic growth would be more beneficial but is open to hearing additional information concerning the proposed project along with hearing feedback from the community.

Councilor Beasley acknowledged the passing of David Spears and sent her condolences to the family. She went on to say that she welcomes feedback from the community concerning the septic to sewer projects as the decision needs to be made on factual information. She would like for a forensic soil and water test to be completed such as a (MST), microbial source tracking test by a third party such as the University of Georgia not an entity that could profit from the installation of a system. Decisions shouldn't be made on grant funding but only if there is true need and if the property owners have exhausted all options not just wanting to be relieved of the ownership responsibility. Free money along with wanting facilitated development shouldn't be the driving force of moving forward with the project. She also feels like a costly needs assessment is not needed. Testing along with meeting with environment

specialists that can provide data in real time to the Council along with the citizenry, for consideration of a septic to sewer project, would be sufficient.

Councilor Curtis stated that two different issues have been combined, future development and environmental issues. Septic problems don't solve themselves. There are documented issues on septic failures. The economic feasibility study that was conducted last year showed ECOLI in the water below the dam. From 2017 and through the COVID years, eight water tests were taken and compiled annually, showing two spikes for ECOLI. The minutes for the May 1, 2020, Mayoral Committee Meeting didn't mention the environmental concerns due to the fact that these issues were already been made aware of. The preliminary engineering plans were based on the sub-pumps and piping of the sewer system that would service condo hill along with the valley. The City already has a permit to discharge the treated water into Mud Creek. He suggested for the Council to have a work session again during the first week of March, to gather more information.

Mayor Cotton-Orr asked City Manager Streetman to give a brief update. He stated that the 2021, three-million-dollar, grant was based on the 2017 feasibility study for a septic to sewer system for the existing development only. As this amount of funding would not be enough to move forward with the project, further grants were sought after. In 2025 a two-million-dollar grant which requires a 50/50 match, through ARC, (Appalachian Regional Commission) was applied for and approved, this grant is for economic development. EMI scaled down the plant size to accommodate the five-million-dollar budget. The study costs from EMI, approximately \$80,000 could be reimbursed out of grant funding. The studies have been halted until further notice.

Public Comments:

Jesse Durham, Sky Valley resident, he understands that good research needs to be done. He appreciates that the septic to sewer project is being given thoughtful consideration. He also feels large studies are not needed and that the Council should be able to make an informative decision before the May timeline. Septic's systems on average last 50 years, so this will be a future problem of Sky Valley's, if not addressed now. The grant money should be used for this purpose as taxpayers have already contributed and that is how the grant is funded. Just because development is coupled with the need shouldn't be a reason to forfeit the grant as some development wouldn't be a bad thing.

Dean Talley, Sky Valley resident, stated that his Condo. Association, which consists of ten units, six of them being rental units, has a septic system that is being taxed. He doesn't like the changes in Sky Valley and would like to see the developer, Mr. Merrill, clean up the old lodge area. The housing that was originally constructed, wasn't intended to house full-time residents and therefore issues are arising.

Invited Speakers:

John Everett Dolan, Environmental Scientist, stated that he performs maintenance on wastewater packaging plants like the one being proposed. He has seven years of experience. Questions were asked concerning what kind of problems to expect with this type of system. Mr. Dolan describes the process of the packaging plant and that the bleach used, causes micro tears resulting in having to replace parts. These parts are hard to get as they are supplied from other countries so therefore fines could be issued while the plant is down. He gave an example

of a package plant in Cashiers, North Carolina. Also, he suggested a different option “sub-service septic system” with larger drain fields which requires less operational costs.

Councilor Beasley asked City Manager Streetman if the package plant was the cheaper of the two options that were being considered originally. He stated yes as piping down the mountain was cost prohibited. Beasley went on to ask what kind of terrain is a package plant designed for? Mr. Dolan stated that they are for smaller areas and that shifting in mountainous terrain would cause erosion issues. The question was asked about how many residents the sub-service system would accommodate, and he stated approximately a thousand people. He also was asked about his thoughts on the package plant behind the old Piggly Wiggly in Dillard. He stated that he hadn’t had any experience with that particular location, but the smell was a little off to him which could indicate some issues. Mayor Cotton-Orr asked Mr. Dolan if he could suggest any alternatives for condo associations with failing septic systems. He recommended regular maintenance, maybe even an Ordinance requiring regular maintenance to be preformed on septic systems. Councilor Allred asked Mr. Dolan if he is stating that the packaging plant system would not be a good fit for the City? He answered that packing plants work about 50% of what they are designed to do. Costs along with individual sub-service systems were discussed. He was asked if there is a test to determine if the ECOLI was coming from human or animal waste and he stated that he wasn’t sure.

Dylan Parker, Parker Environmental, was asked what causes failing septic systems? He stated that Mr. Dolan had covered the majority of the reasons such as regular maintenance, density usage, and age. Failed systems could cost 10,000 – 20,000 to repair and the issues that goes along with repairs such as setbacks and current codes. He went on to describe how a proper septic system works and stated that a leaking commode into a system causing it to fail within a year. Questions were asked about installing large commercial systems, which he stated that he has no experience with commercial only residential systems.

Ryan DeBois, Country Club Representative, stated that he could not speak in favor of or against a municipal system. Their septic system, an 8,000-gallon tank, was pumped five years ago and they have not had any issues. Valley View along with the Timeshares Condos have had leaks that ran down onto the golf course causing some issues, but the leaks were fixed timely. Councilor Beasley asked if the Country Club’s drain field is on Mr. Merrill’s property, and the Time Shares along with Valley View’s drain field are on the Country Club’s property and the answer is yes. Councilor Curtis asked if the Health Department could close down the golf course if raw sewage was detected and if the Country Club would allow additional drain fields if necessary. Mr. Debois stated that he couldn’t answer those questions.

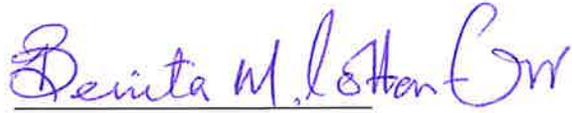
Councilor Curtis read a letter from Henry Fitzgerald the Country Club president, regarding the failing septic system. He wishes that the City would take advantage of the grant funding. He gave examples of what is going on in Florida with failing septic systems. Councilor Beasley stated that due to the terrains being totally different you cannot compare them.

Jim Poole, Valley View, stated a broken water line doesn’t run into a septic tank but can run into a drain field causing issues. Valley View has put on hold any further septic repairs until the City decides on which way they are going. He expressed his appreciation on the City efforts and due diligence.

4. Adjournment

Mayor Cotton-Orr adjourned the meeting at 9:55 a.m.

Respectfully submitted:



Benita M. Cotton-Orr
Benita Cotton-Orr, Mayor

Attest:



Karen Fleming
Karen Fleming, City Clerk