

City of Freeport Florida
State of the City Address-2025

Good evening, city council, staff, residents, community partners and honored guests.

It is my privilege to present the 2025 State of the City Address for the City of Freeport, with updates through June of 2026. This report reflects a year of growth, investment, infrastructure, advancement, and continued commitment to improving quality of life for our residents while maintaining responsible stewardship of public resources.

The city continued its commitment to sound fiscal management and strategic planning throughout 2025.

The highlights include adoption of a city budget totaling \$95,429,130 and an approval of the mileage rate of 4.7302.

An election was required for 2025 with the incumbent Heather Hurst and TJ Kemp and Councilwoman Hurst won the election and Judge Jeffery Lewis administered the oath of office for me as the Mayor and Councilwoman Elizabeth Brannon and Councilman Tracey Dickey and Councilwoman Heather Hurst

The council elected to renew membership with the Florida League of Cities to help keep the city updated on actions being taken by the legislature throughout the state and continuation of insurance coverage through the Florida Municipal Insurance trust. They also established a policy requiring all nonprofit fee waiver requests to be submitted together at one time for the council's consideration.

Beth Brendlinger was approved by the council to serve on the Planning board representing Councilwoman Elizabeth Haffner and Joe Ribaudo was selected as the city representative to the library board.

Approval of legislative priorities for 2026 with Liberty Partners included- Marquis Way, County Road 3280 Well Project and a water storage tank.

Budget workshops reflected positive projections, with anticipated revenues expected to exceed expenditures. Salaries and benefits were updated with an increase of \$4.00 per hour for each of our city employees.

The city continued major investments in public facilities and community infrastructure and achievements include Grand Opening of the new Community Center on November 14, 2025, representing an investment of approximately \$3 million and the council approved the fee structure and operational policies for use of the new Community Center.

Renovation of the former city hall including installation of new front glass and interior office improvements for the Mosquito Control operations.

A government Complex Lighting Project was initiated: Phase I- Casey Park/Veteran's Memorial which has been completed and Phase II- City Hall (approved and moving forward) and Phase III Community Center being planned.

The city also adopted a policy to purchase AED equipment for all city properties to strengthen emergency preparedness.

Freeport continued expanding recreational opportunities and community engagement.

Major accomplishments included continued development planning for the Ronnie Brannon Sr. Park following the land donation and The City Council allocated \$181,000 to begin the design work for the park.

Opening of new pickleball courts at Freeport Regional Sports Complex with ribbon cutting was held on March 30, 2026, which opened additional recreation facilities for the public to enjoy.

Additional Installation of new shades for Fields 4 and 5, a new spider climbing equipment and netting at the Sports Complex and a new Parks and recreation sound system. The Swimming pool repairs were completed prior to this year's seasonal opening and the council approved a baseball tournament and contract with the Freeport Little League Association.

The Holiday programming included the annual Christmas Parade, Christmas Tree Lighting, Festival of Trees and new holiday decorations installed throughout the city and adding to the Barrier Free Park the illumination with additional seasonal décor.

Trunk or treat events continued to strengthen community engagement as well at the Night in the Park event which helps bring our community together.

The city council also aligned holiday scheduling for the city with the county calendar.

The city made substantial progress on transportation and roadway improvements. Projects included were the FDOT modification grant approval supporting landscaping improvements extending approximately 1.5 miles north along highway 331, county partnership to pave roads extending up to two miles as part of the 2026 project planning. Installation and activation of the traffic signal at Highway 20 and County Road 83A West, which went operational on May 27, 2026. Sidewalk improvements progressing from Business 331 to Highway 20 along Kylea Drive and improvements to the pedestrian bridge on Four Mile Road including lighting and wood treatment. Bear Creek replacement project completed through partnership with Walton County and an FDOT grant of \$850,000. The total project cost of \$1,369,661.25 with the remaining balance after grant of \$519,661.25 and the city contribution of \$259,830.62.

The William May Pavilion located at Barrier Free Park was dedicated on August 20th honoring Deputy William May for his service and sacrifice to the Walton County community.

Under our utilities- Water, Wastewater and Solid Waste- the Utilities Department advanced major capital projects while planning for future growth. The key accomplishments included adoption of updated water and wastewater rates by council and approval of utilities rate increases beginning October 1, 2026, with scheduled annual increases through September 2030. Execution of the solid waste franchise agreement with Waste Management and construction approval of the county road 3280 portable well project.

Dewberry Engineering services were engaged for utility-related engineering support.

Wastewater Treatment Plant design reached 90% completion, permits were received, and bidding preparation began. Interim financing approved by council for utility projects and purchases of new equipment for both the water and sewer departments and continued discussion and evaluation of DEP funding and financing options related to Bulldog Road and wastewater improvements and ARPA funding remained available for eligible wastewater and sewer related projects.

A significant milestone occurred with expansion of Mosquito Control as a dedicated city department with continued investment in professional education and networking throughout Florida the council approved for department participation in annual Florida Mosquito Control training and certification programs. Purchase and approval of an electric scooter to support operations and continued facility improvements through renovated office space.

Public safety remains a top priority for the City of Freeport throughout the year. As our community continues to grow, we remain committed to supporting emergency preparedness, maintaining reliable infrastructure, and ensuring services continue to meet the need of our citizens. Through planning, investment, and strong partnerships, we will continue working to provide a safe, secure, and high quality of life for all who call Freeport home. The Rotary Club

of Freeport made a presentation supporting rescue tube placement at Marse Landing and Four Mile Creek and with the approval of the council these were implemented enhancing the safety of our citizens. As we move forward through 2026, Freeport remains committed to responsible growth, infrastructure investment, recreation expansion, public safety, and maintaining the quality of life our residents expect and deserve.

The city proudly recognized outstanding service and local achievement including the Employee of the Year- Gene Martin and the Supervisor of the Year- Larry Tuggle. Recognition of Miss Freeport LaRae Smith (2025) who later earned the title of National Peanut Queen for 2026 and received a Key to the City and recognition of Kayleigh Byrd as her successor representing Freeport.

The accomplishment of 2025 and progress through June 2026 reflect the dedication of the City Council, City Staff, community partners, and the citizens of Freeport. Together, we continue building a stronger Freeport.

Freeport continues to experience exceptional growth and remains one of the fastest-growing communities in the State of Florida. With a current population of approximately 15,000 residents within the city limits and an additional estimated 12,000 residents served within our utility service area for water and sewer services, the city continues to expand while maintaining a focus on delivering high-quality public services and preserving the character of our community.

This growth reflects the confidence that residents, businesses, and families continue to place in the City of Freeport and reinforces the importance of strategic, planning, infrastructure investment and responsible fiscal management.

As our community grows, so does our commitment to serving our residents with excellence. Across every department, our employees continue to demonstrate professionalism, dedication, and pride in public service. Their daily efforts support the quality of life our citizens expect and deserve.

One of the greatest measures of success is the positive feedback we continue to receive from our residents. Citizens regularly express appreciation for the service and for the responsiveness, care and commitment shown by our dedicated city staff.

As we move forward, Freeport remains focused on building for the future while preserving the values that make our community special. Through continued investment, strong leadership, and dedicated employees, we are well positioned for continued success in the years ahead. Together, we will continue moving Freeport forward.

Thank you for your support and allowing me to serve as your mayor. May God bless each one of you and the City of Freeport.

Russ Barley
Mayor