



OFFICE OF THE CITY COUNCIL

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SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Minutes

January 15, 2026
4:00 p.m.

Location: Lynwood Roberts Room

In attendance: Chair Freeman, Vice Chair Amaro, Council Members Pittman,

Also: Council Member Johnson, John Everett, Kids Hope Alliance (Director of Workforce Development & College Career Readiness); Shannon MacGillis, Office of General Counsel; Brandon Russell, Council Research

Meeting Convened: 4:01 p.m.

Meeting Call to Order:

Chair Freeman called the meeting to order.

Introductions and Welcome:

Chair Freeman welcomed the group and called for introductions.

Purpose of Meeting

Chair Freeman said the meeting would focus on Committee Priority 2, recreational access and safe community spaces. He said the goal was to hear about models that expand access and then identify policy priorities that should guide the City's upcoming Youth Empowerment RFP process.

Mr. Everett provided a brief overview of the RFP framework. He said that one of the themes that has emerged during the Committee's meeting is the two types of work being done: those related to youth experiences in community spaces and those related to education, skills, and career pathways. He added that separating the two allows each to be discussed and the scope to be evaluated.

Mr. Everett said one potential track could focus on community spaces, such as parks and centers, and how they function as safe and accessible places for youth. Another track could focus on people-based support, especially for young people who age out of traditional use programs yet still need structured pathways into education and work. He added that this explicit distinction helps distinguish the Youth Empowerment Committee from Kids Hope Alliance's youth programming and clarifies the focus on continuity beyond the age of 18.

Mr. Everett said that the most helpful input from the Committee at this stage would be about priority sequencing, population or geographic focus, and high-level outcomes of interest. He said the overview was intended to support the Committee's conversation and give context for why a two-track structure was being explored as a way to translate their priorities into something workable.

Provider Presentations

Ronnie King and Dr. Betty Burney presented their STEM Hub program. Mr. King said they had a partnership with the 100 Stars STEM Center that they wanted to share with the Committee and to provide different options for using public spaces.

Mr. King shared details on the Coding in Color Pipeline, a program for middle and high school students, with some students up to age 21, that strives to provide students with skills in AI development, game development, and data analytics. He added that they also focus on entrepreneurship, noting that some in the program have even started their own businesses, collectively earning over \$1 million. He said he would go through how they use their spaces to generate new ideas.

Mr. King said that they could think of this as a distributed campus defined by shared environments where the City's many youth and career partners can plug in, co-host, and collaborate, without needing a new facility for every program. He stated that shared accountability was also a defining feature, where clear standards and real responsibilities give youth a place to practice professionalism and entrepreneurship.

Mr. King then described the space used for the 100 Stars STEM Center on Moncrief Road, which is City-owned property shared between 100 Black Men of Jacksonville and I'm a Star Foundation and has been open for almost four years. He highlighted the space's flexibility to accommodate various activities and programming as needed. He encouraged thinking about how spaces could be designed or improved to be used by multiple providers.

Mr. King explained some other key features needed in the distributed campus model. He said he believes they can have spaces that allow for mobile work so that youth can float across sites with their projects. He said they also want spaces to accommodate families and partners, as well as students.

Mr. King then provided examples of other locations that are connected to the 100 Stars STEM Center: MyVillage Project DuPont Office, Jacksonville Downtown Public Library, 100 Black Men Chapter Offices, and Scratchwerk Tech Office Buildings. He said that students are allowed to work and collaborate at any of the centers.

Mr. King explained what inclusion and accessibility should look like in spaces. He named community trust as an essential factor so families feel comfortable entering the space, meeting mentors, and staying engaged over time. He also mentioned near-peer learning, in which students teach and mentor peers in the same space. Finally, he stressed the need for flexible layouts that are open and reconfigurable so that they can be quickly shifted for different purposes. Mr. King also shared some outcomes to measure in spaces, including who uses the space, how it's used, youth-led moments, and community connection.

CM Pittman noted the emphasis on trust during the presentation and said she always considers student transportation to locations like those mentioned, as that is frequently a challenge. CM Johnson advocated for including an arts component in programming to bolster creative thinking and expand offerings. Dr. Burney stated that they added an arts component three months into the program, which is a significant part of their summer program.

Tiffany Guthrie from Junior Achievement then provided an overview of experiential learning centers and discussed how hands-on environments can support young people's career exploration and skill development. She explained that Junior Achievement works with schools, non-profits, and the business community to help young people understand how the world of work, money, and opportunity function together. She said this is done through classroom-based curriculum and applied learning experiences. She added that where learning happens is just as important as what is taught. That insight led to a reimagining of how a community space can support youth readiness in Jacksonville.

Ms. Guthrie explained that Junior Achievement has a history of using its financial education to help young people build real-world skills, confidence, and a sense of purpose, creating what they call "future-ready youth." She said that the work begins in the classroom alongside corporate volunteers. The JA Experiential Learning Center would represent the next step in their approach by linking classroom learning, mentorship, and community-based space to create deeper applied learning experiences that not only strengthen youth outcomes that contribute to a future-ready ecosystem but also support economic mobility over time.

Ms. Guthrie said that one of the biggest challenges to youth empowerment and workforce readiness is access to information and access to practice. Their model exists to provide a career-connected learning program so students can engage in real-world situations through simulation. She said the model has 20 years of proven success across 50+ JA areas. The impact is designed to reach elementary, middle, and high school students in the region. She also said that the program aligns with state standards, making it easy to integrate and implement. She said the program is not stand-alone and is designed to grow over time.

Ms. Guthrie said the center would be located on the Downtown FSCJ campus. She added that they intentionally embedded it in a college environment, a workforce corridor, and a civic and transportation hub. She then reviewed the center's design principles. She stated that students are not just learning about systems but are actively operating within them, which is reflected in the design through storefronts, industries, and scenarios that reflect regional employers, workforce sectors, and community needs. She said there would be classroom prep before students arrive at the center and actively operate within real systems in adult roles.

Ms. Guthrie reviewed the stacked learning model, in which students move through a progression of experiences. Students begin with JA Biztown, an interactive free-market simulation where students become business leaders, consumers, and employees. This is followed by JA Finance Park, an immersive experience where students make financial decisions based on a life situation. It concludes with JA Dream Accelerator, an interactive, responsive career exploration experience that inspires students to develop a path to a meaningful career. She said this model was strengthened through collaboration with Duval County Public Schools, FSCJ, and corporate partners.

Ms. Guthrie then explained why experiential learning works. She stated that it builds real-world skills and connects learning to life while building confidence, career readiness, awareness, and community engagement. She said that the design of learning spaces matters, and when learning environments are intentional, outcomes improve. She also stated that repeated learning is more effective than one-time

exposure. She also explained that when schools, community partners, and workforce systems are aligned, youth outcomes extend beyond workforce readiness into long-term economic mobility.

CM Pittman asked if they had any relationship with CareerSource. Ms. Guthrie said that one of their board members is on the CareerSource board and is in conversations to explore opportunities for collaboration.

Committee Discussion—Priority Setting Exercise

Chair Freeman provided the Committee with four options and asked them to identify their priority: extending center hours to evenings and weekends, increasing programs in neighborhoods with limited access, partnering with non-profits to expand STEM and trades programming, or improving safety, lighting, transportation, and supervision.

CM Pittman said that each neighborhood in the City is different, making it hard to compare the options since each area has its own needs. She said she liked all of them but prioritized expanding programs in neighborhoods with limited access. She also highlighted the need to find ways to keep students in Jacksonville after they finish school. CM White prioritized improving safety, lighting, transportation, and supervision. CM Johnson ranked the options with his top priority being increasing programs in neighborhoods with limited access, followed by partnering with non-profits to expand STEM and trades programming, extending center hours, and then improving safety, lighting, transportation, and supervision. Chair Freeman selected partnering with non-profits to expand STEM and trades programming as his priority.

Chair Freeman asked if churches would be eligible for funding. Mr. Everett said that would need to be a discussion within the terms of the RFP.

Public Comment

Blake Bass spoke about his organization, Life Launchers, which works with youth on life skills. He said he is working with private and public schools and the Parks Department to offer Discovery Centers and workshops that offer life skills. He said that young people see potential in Jacksonville, but that more effort is needed to keep them here.

Tina Pham, President of the Asian Chamber of Commerce, wanted to raise awareness of online crimes against children. She spoke about a close family member who had become a victim and initiatives she wanted to implement.

Nashon Nicks shared information about his organization, Team Nitro MMA, and its SEAL Team Curriculum, which focuses on social, emotional, and academic leadership. He said they focus on working with at-risk youth and noted that some programs only work with the best and the brightest.

John Nooney spoke about 2025-0867.

Della Sellers, founder of Girls of Virtue/Men of Vision, said her organization had piloted empowerment centers over the past six years that streamline the process of connecting youth with resources. She said that applications were a huge challenge that led to the development of a software called Unite Us.

Meeting adjourned: 4:55 p.m.

Minutes: Brandon Russell, Council Research
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