

AI Summary: Lake City Ignores Public Hearing Law in Multi-Million Dollar WWTP Purchase

On April 20, 2026, the Lake City Council unanimously passed Resolution 2026-043, approving the purchase of the North Florida Mega Industrial Park wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) from Columbia County. The deal originated in August 2025, when City Manager Don Rosenthal pitched a \$7 million acquisition to the Council using an undated, unsigned, vaguely titled handout which was the beginning of the "The Great Don Rosenthal Hoodoo."

Columbia County held a properly noticed public hearing on April 16, 2026, before its 4-1 vote to sell its WWTP. Four minutes after the County vote, Lake City added the purchase of the WWTP to its April 20 agenda. Despite Florida Statute 180.301 explicitly requiring a public hearing before a municipality can purchase a wastewater utility, the City failed to publish notice in the local newspaper and never designated the item as a "public hearing" on its agenda—even though the City's own Exhibit K claimed the hearing had been noticed.

The Columbia County Observer alerted the City Clerk, City Manager, Deputy Clerk, and City Attorney Clay Martin by email, phone, and text before the meeting. Attorney Martin responded that the City had complied with statutory requirements.

At the meeting, Attorney Martin read the 10-point statutory criteria aloud, while Mayor Walker noted no one had signed up for public comment and moved directly to Council discussion. Council members offered superficial congratulatory remarks rather than substantive analysis of the statutory factors.

Under Florida law and case precedent, a statutory "public hearing" requires specific advance public notice distinct from a generic agenda item on a regular meeting. The failure to provide it violates the statute, renders the action potentially voidable, and erodes public trust.

Core Statutory Requirement (quoted by City Attorney Clay Martin during the meeting): *"...a municipality cannot purchase a wastewater utility until the governing body of the municipality has held a public hearing on the purchase..."*

From the April 15 § 180.301 City analysis memorandum (explicitly incorporated into Councilmember Carter's successful motion): *"Lake City may not purchase the referenced wastewater treatment plant until the City Council has 1) held a public hearing on said purchase..."*