



West Central Florida Police Benevolent Association



The West Central Florida Police Benevolent Association officially noticed City Manager James Slaton as well as the City of Lake Wales on May 5, 2025, via a Public Employees Relations Commission(PERC) Form 14, that notices the city that the PBA seeks to initiate collective bargaining with the city. The West Central PBA and the City of Lake Wales currently have a running 3-year collective bargaining contract that is valid through September 30, 2026.

Article 30 of the current contract allows the City of Lake Wales and the West Central PBA to re-open up to two(2) articles in addition to opening and negotiating Wages, Article 16. We noticed the City in May and stressed that Wages was going to be an important Article, hence the reason for the early May notice. Per Article 30, Wages were not open for negotiations in 2024-2025, which both parties had originally agreed to when the contract was ratified in 2023.

I recently read and reviewed the article authored by James Coulter and posted by Maria Iannucci in the Daily Ridge on September 6, 2025, titled "City of Lake Wales Approves \$123 Million Dollar Budget, Focus on Projects to further implement Lake Wales Connected Plan".

Resurfaced city streets, restored alleyways, and refurbished city parks were just some of the wonderful line items that were listed in the \$123 million Dollar Budget, noting that operating expenditures are now 14.6% more than last year's total operating expenditures. The article touted that many of the projects proposed in the budget were selected to help the city further implement "Lake Wales Connected," which according to the city is a long-range plan to revitalize the City's historic core, which comprises the downtown historic and Northwest Neighborhood.



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\$750,000 to resurface the streets.

\$150,000 to improve streetlight conditions.

\$150,000 to restripe designated streets.

\$100,000 for sidewalk repair and construction.

\$500,000 to restore alleyways.

Quick math on these improvements has an estimated price tag of about 1.6 million.

Other details noted in the budget were to improve Kiwanis Park, including a multi-modal trail, a new playground, new pavilions, and other amenities. All great improvements!

I searched the article and the budget vigorously, and I failed to find any mention of **Public Safety**. I failed to find a line item dedicated to properly and fairly compensating the sworn men and women of the Lake Wales Police Department. The sworn police officers who stand in the gap between good and evil every day in Lake Wales and put it on the line for each other and for the citizens 24/7 protecting the city from crime. Those who protect folks from those who currently reside in the city or are simply passing through the city with hate and violence in their heart. The officers who patrol the streets that the city is spending big money on to resurface, and the officers that patrol the alleyways at 3:00AM that the city is looking to restore, and the officers who patrol the neighborhoods, playgrounds and pavilions each day so that law abiding citizens can feel safe while walking the trails and playing with their children.

Lake Wales, whether the citizens are ready for growth and expansion or not, is getting bigger and will be more populated, and with the increase in new homes, and new businesses coming into the city, well, comes an increase in crime, and bad humans doing terrible things to good people. In order to keep the wonderful City of Lake Wales safe, you need to **Recruit and Retain qualified Police Officers**.



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In order to do this, you must pay your officers a fair and comparable wage, and remain competitive with not only the current market, but with neighboring police Agencies who are increasing pay and benefits to keep up with the challenges of recruitment, and keeping those who they have already hired and trained.

City Manager James Slaton has proven repeatedly over the years that he does not value police officers, especially Lake Wales Police Officers who risk their lives for the community in which they serve. A rookie police officer in Lake Wales Florida starts at a salary of **\$49,468.38**. Less than \$50,000/year to be a sworn police officer, where you take an oath to sacrifice and protect your fellow police officer, and for people you have never met. Selfless service to make sure that folks can go about their day in peace, and if and when citizens call 911, they know they have someone who is willing to drop everything to respond, 24/7 without hesitation, and someone who could ultimately give up their life in the line of duty if called upon to do so. Don't you want the best coming to help you when needed? Don't you want the best trained, best qualified, and officers with clear eyes and full hearts responding regardless of the dangers that await them?

A starting salary of \$49,468 has LWPD at the bottom as it relates to pay in the County, just above Haines City PD and Bartow PD. Our request this year was to get starting pay to a whopping \$55,899.00, which would still only get the officers to jump up one spot in lowest in the County. This request proved to be too much for the City Manager this year. We can only assume that the restriping of the designated streets and resurfacing of the streets took precedent over taking care of our sworn folks.

This budget failed to document that Mr. Slaton has no problem receiving a nice raise, increasing his salary from **\$172,000 to \$186,000** on 10/1. I do not like to compare salaries of City Managers, and/or professionals who have worked to get to a position where the pay is appropriate to the position, and I stress this to my sworn members all the time, however, for him to receive such a generous wage increase, and to then neglect to fairly compensate those who stand on the wall is completely unacceptable.



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The West Central PBA declared Impasse with the City on September 4th, 2026, after a Spring and Summer of frustration. We were unable to convince the City Manager that being a police officer deserves a fair and reasonable wage, and that we are well, different. We come to work and wear a Kevlar Vest to protect our vital organs, and carry a firearm, and are tasked with making a split-second life altering decision at any given time.

The City Manager had no problem saying NO for the last four months, however, has no problem cashing his six-figure paycheck, while my young police officers struggle to make ends meet. The City Manager could not even agree to allow his sworn police officers family memberships to the Lake Wales Family Recreation Center. A simple and easy gesture that would have allowed sworn officers to frequent the Rec Center, keep them physically fit, and having police officers at a city facility every day. This was a simple sweetener, and an out of the box suggestion by the PBA that we proposed when we tried to agree on some sort of fiscal increase, but our request was flat out denied.

The PBA represents the brave men and women of the Lake Wales Police Department and will continue to fight for them each and every day. We are hopeful those in the city who love this department, and respect those who have taken the oath to protect it, will support the PBA and the members of the Lake Wales PD, as we seek a fair and reasonable pay increase.

Sincerely,

Nick Marolda

President,

West Central Florida PBA