



Growth Management Director

EXECUTIVE
RECRUITMENT
PROVIDED BY





The Crown Jewel of the Ridge

THE COMMUNITY

The “crown jewel” of Florida’s central ridge, the City of Lake Wales is a community deeply rooted in history, beauty, and a strong sense of identity. Stretched across 14 square miles of Polk County, the city was founded in 1911 by the Lake Wales Land Company, which purchased 5,000 acres around Lake Wailes to establish the original town. The area’s sandy soil made it ideal for citrus farming, and by 1917, Lake Wales was officially incorporated. The railroad’s arrival in 1887 helped the citrus industry thrive, allowing growers to export fruit across the country — and over time, the city’s picturesque lakes and rolling terrain have made it a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors eager to experience Florida’s natural beauty.

During the 1920s, renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. developed a master plan for Lake Wales, drawing on the Garden City Movement to create a “city in a garden” that would blend urban design with natural beauty. While not all of Olmsted’s vision was fully realized, his influence remains visible in the city’s tree-lined streets, public green spaces, and pedestrian-friendly layout. Today, Lake Wales is embracing its history by revitalizing elements of Olmsted’s original plan, ensuring that as the city grows, it does so with intention and respect for its natural surroundings.

With its mix of history, recreation, and cultural attractions, Lake Wales offers residents a high quality of life. The city’s vibrant downtown district is experiencing a revitalization, attracting new businesses and dining options to enhance its small-town charm — and the community hosts a variety of festivals and celebrations, including the Rockin’ on the Ridge event celebrating Independence Day, Lake Wales Mardi Gras, Pioneer Days, the annual Christmas Parade, Make it Magical, the Olmsted Day Celebration, and the Orange Blossom Revue. The Lake Wales Arts Council also plays a significant role in the city’s cultural life, organizing events throughout the year, including the popular Lake Wales Arts Festival.

Outdoor enthusiasts find endless opportunities to explore the area’s natural beauty. The city is home to scenic trails, lakes, and parks, perfect for hiking, biking, fishing, and kayaking. Lake Kissimmee State Park, Sumica Wilderness Preserve, Tiger Creek Preserve, and the Lake Wailes Trail offer some of the best outdoor experiences in the region — and for those looking for adventure, Jump Florida Skydiving and Westgate River Ranch Resort & Rodeo provide unique experiences. One of the area’s defining features is the Lake Wales Ridge, a unique geological formation of ancient dunes and one of Florida’s oldest natural scrub ecosystems. Inspired by the region’s beauty, philanthropist Edward Bok commissioned the Olmsted Design firm to create the Bok Tower Gardens, which opened in 1929 as a sanctuary of art, music, and nature. Today, the gardens remain one of Florida’s most cherished cultural landmarks, offering visitors an escape into a lush, tranquil oasis.

Families also enjoy easy access to the Lake Wales History Museum, the Lake Wales Arts Center, the all-volunteer Lake Wales Little Theatre, and Florida’s Natural (orange) Grove Store. They can also adventure to Legoland Florida and the Peppa Pig Theme Park in nearby Winter Haven, while sports fans can catch Detroit Tigers Spring Training in Lakeland, just 30 miles away.

Lake Wales is seeing steady economic growth, balancing business development with its commitment to preserving its unique character. The city’s location along major transportation routes, including State Road 60 and U.S. Hwy. 27, makes it an attractive destination for business investment, particularly in industries such as agriculture, tourism,

retail, and light manufacturing. Shopping options range from national retailers at Eagle Ridge Mall to longstanding local businesses like Yeoman's Feed Seed & Garden Supply, which has been serving the community for more than 110 years. Dining choices include everything from local favorites like Manny's Chophouse, Melanie's Seafood Company, and Lincontro to new additions such as Crazy Fish Key West Kitchen, set to open this spring. Due to downtown revitalization, several new restaurants and businesses are opening.

In addition to interstate access making cities like Tampa and Orlando easily accessible, public transportation options for residents include the Citrus Connection, which operates the Lake Wales Circulator and the Lake Wales Squeeze, a golf cart shuttle service for downtown. Amtrak service is also available in Winter Haven, just 15 miles away, and commercial flights are easily accessible through a mix of international airports nearby.

Education plays a key role in the community, with various public, charter, and private schools providing diverse opportunities for students. Lake Wales Charter Schools, a unique piece of the Polk County Public Schools system, includes Hillcrest Elementary, Edward W. Bok Academy, and Lake Wales High School, among others. Several private and parochial schools, such as The Namesake Christian Academy, Canaan Academy, and Park Avenue Private School, also offer additional educational options. Meanwhile, higher education institutions, including Polk State College, Warner University, Webber International University, Southeastern University, Florida Southern College, and Florida Polytechnic University, contribute to the region's workforce development and economic growth.

The median household income in Lake Wales is about \$56,887, while the average home is priced around \$278,855.



Make the world a bit better or more beautiful because you have lived in it.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

Lake Wales is experiencing notable growth trends in both population and economic development. As of 2024, the city's population is estimated at 16,811, reflecting a 3.19% increase since the 2020 census that's well aligned with the city's average annual population increase of approximately 2.22% between 2000 and 2023.

The City is also preparing for a significant population boom. New subdivisions and housing developments are being approved to accommodate this anticipated growth, including a recent mixed-use project expected to bring around 6000 new homes to the area. Meanwhile, City leaders have adopted a visionary development plan — Lake Wales Envisioned — inspired by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and philanthropist Edward Bok, emphasizing sustainable and thoughtful urban planning.

This growth is also spurring economic development initiatives, with the Lake Wales Connected Plan focusing on revitalizing the community's historic downtown and adjacent neighborhoods to enhance urban design and community engagement.

These combined efforts in urban planning and economic development are positioning Lake Wales for sustained growth, aiming to improve the quality of life for residents and attract new businesses to the area. Projects of note include:

- ▶ **Lake Wales Commons:** Approved in July 2024, this expansive project on the city's western edge encompasses approximately 558 acres. Plans include constructing up to 3,200 residential units, over 1 million square feet of light industrial and warehouse space, and 750,000 square feet of commercial space.
- ▶ **ViaTerra:** a 1,800+ acre master-planned, mixed-use community.
- ▶ **Traditional Neighborhood Design:** Lake Wales adopted the first such ordinance in Polk County to facilitate high-quality development.
- ▶ **Central Polk Parkway:** This proposed toll road aims to improve regional connectivity by linking the Polk Parkway with State Road 60 between Bartow and Lake Wales. The project is expected to facilitate transportation and support local economic development.
- ▶ **Advanced Drainage Systems:** a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility on a 100-acre site.
- ▶ **AdventHealth Lake Wales Expansion:** Since acquiring the hospital in 2019, AdventHealth has undertaken significant renovations and expansions to enhance healthcare services in the area, including a new wound healing center and other facility upgrades.

TOP EMPLOYERS

Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc.

Kegel

Oakley Transport

Florida's Natural Growers

Lake Wales Care Center, Inc.

AdventHealth

Lake Wales International Paper

Coke Florida

Mann+Hummel



LAKE WALES MISSION

The City of Lake Wales is established for the benefit of its citizens and shall provide for their health, welfare, and safety. Special attention shall be devoted to improving the city's appearance, maintaining public facilities and infrastructure, and ensuring citizen safety and quality of life via a fair and equitable system of citizen involvement and input.

Moreover, the city shall provide a positive administration of laws and ordinances governing individual activities and requests. It is the intention of the city not to be an obstacle, but to facilitate solutions to problems and respond to needs while always serving the best interest of the public.

GOVERNANCE & ORGANIZATION

Lake Wales operates with a commission-manager form of government. The mayor is elected at large while four commission members are elected by district, all to three-year terms without term limits. In addition to approving annual budgets, handling the City's legislative decisions, and setting priorities for the community, the City Commission appoints the City Manager, City Clerk, and City Attorney.

City Manager James Slaton has been a leader within the Lake Wales organization since 2005, working his way up from a Computer Network Administrator to the City's top spot in October 2020. The ICMA-credentialed manager oversees the organization's \$107.8 million annual budget and 265 employees.

Major projects underway or recently completed include the reconstruction of Park Avenue in historic downtown, the Market Plaza in historic downtown, the Grove Manor affordable housing redevelopment project, water tower exterior renovations, a Parks & Recreation Master Plan, the continuation of the Lake Wales Connected urban design Plan, and several residential, commercial, and industrial development projects, including 16 Planned Developments.

RECENT ACCOLADES

Florida Planning and Zoning Association's Outstanding Study/Plan for Lake Wales Envisioned (2024)

APA Florida's Award of Excellence for Lake Wales Envisioned (2024)

Florida Redevelopment Association's Best Planning Study for Lake Wales Connected (2020)

National Association of Development Organization's Impact Award for Economic Development Strategic Plan (2024)

Heart of Florida Chapter of APA Plan it! Award for Economic Development Strategic Plan (2024)

Heart of Florida Chapter of APA Plan it! Award for Mobility Plan (2022)

Telly Awards for Police Department educational video series (2024)

Distinctive Preservation Award to Lake Wales Main Street (2023)

GFOA Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting
Tree City USA designation

Recipient of \$22.9 million federal RAISE grant

BY THE NUMBERS

The Development Services team anticipates the following performance indicators in 2025.

20

Development Site Plan Reviews

600

New Florida Water Star
Certified Residential Homes

700

Lien Searches/Code
Compliance

1,500

Permits Issued

6,000

Building Inspections

ABOUT THE DEPARTMENT

With a team of 10 approved positions and an annual budget of nearly \$1.48 million, Growth Management department oversees Planning and Zoning, Permits and Inspections, Code Enforcement, and Business Tax Receipts.

The Planning Department oversees the short- and long-term planning and enforcement of the City's land use and development rules, focused on providing guidance to the public on land use matters and facilitating high-quality community development by fairly and impartially administering ordinances and established regulations. The department aims to promote growth in alignment with the City of Lake Wales Comprehensive Plan, Land Development Regulations, and the Lake Wales Envisioned Plan.

The Permits & Inspections Department reviews construction plans to ensure compliance with all relevant codes. This includes issuing all necessary permits, conducting inspections at various stages of the construction process, and guaranteeing that projects adhere to approved plans and comply with code regulations.

The Code Enforcement Department is responsible for ensuring fair, prompt, efficient, and cost-effective enforcement of city codes and ordinances in cases of violations to preserve public health, safety, and welfare as they relate to the ongoing use and upkeep of structures and properties.



ABOUT THE POSITION

Reporting directly to the City Manager, Lake Wales' Growth Management Director oversees the City's planning, zoning, building safety, permitting, plan review, and code compliance functions, ensuring that growth and development align with the community's long-term vision and regulatory requirements.

This position leads a dedicated team, including the Building Official/Inspector, Senior Planner, and Code Compliance Supervisor, and plays a key role in shaping the City's future by developing and implementing policies that support responsible growth and redevelopment. Key responsibilities include:

- ▶ **Leadership & Oversight:** Supervising and directing the department's daily operations, managing staff assignments, workflows, and training to achieve strategic goals.
- ▶ **Planning & Development Strategy:** Leading short- and long-term planning efforts, gathering and analyzing data to support growth initiatives, ordinance updates, and zoning regulations, and advising directors on issues related to code interpretations.
- ▶ **Process Improvement & Efficiency:** Developing and implementing streamlined systems to enhance the development approval process, working collaboratively with applicants, staff, and external stakeholders.
- ▶ **Community & Stakeholder Engagement:** Building strong working relationships with the business and development communities, representing the City at public meetings and to various agencies and organizations, and serving as a liaison to various boards and commissions, including the Planning & Zoning Board, Board of Appeals, and Historic District Regulatory Board.
- ▶ **Financial & Resource Management:** Managing the department's budget, ensuring responsible allocation of resources while maintaining compliance with local, state, and federal regulations.

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

Polk County is experiencing unprecedented development, requiring Lake Wales to take a proactive and visionary approach to planning, zoning, and permitting. Those pressures will create exciting opportunities and significant challenges for the next Growth Management Director to ensure that new development is smart, sustainable, and aligned with the Lake Wales Envisioned Plan. The selected candidate will need to focus on:

- ▶ **Rebuilding and Strengthening the Planning Department** — The department is in a period of transition and must be rebuilt with strong leadership, clear expectations, and a renewed focus on service. Filling staff vacancies and providing mentorship, training, and professional development will be essential to fostering a high-performing team.
- ▶ **Enhancing Process Efficiency** — With increased development comes the need to streamline permitting, zoning, and code enforcement processes. The new director will implement best practices that make it easier for businesses, developers, and residents to navigate regulations while maintaining high standards.
- ▶ **Balancing Growth and Community Needs** — As Lake Wales evolves, this position must help ensure that growth does not outpace infrastructure or compromise the city's character. This will require a balanced approach considering economic development, housing availability, transportation, and environmental sustainability. On the horizon, the selected candidate will also work closely with the Economic Development Council to attract and retain manufacturing and other large scale employment opportunities.
- ▶ **Policy and Code Evaluation** — More than just enforcing regulations, the new hire will assess whether existing policies are appropriate and effective. They will bring a solutions-focused mindset, recommending updates to zoning laws and development rules to support smart growth while maintaining the city's unique identity. This may also include an assessment of the organization's impact fees.



IDEAL CANDIDATE

The City of Lake Wales is seeking an assertive, action-oriented leader to serve as its next Growth Management Director. This individual will be decisive, confident, and solutions-focused, ensuring that the City's growth and development align with its long-term vision while maintaining a balanced, people-first approach to governance.

The ideal candidate is a subject matter expert in planning, zoning, permitting, and code enforcement, with deep knowledge of zoning laws, comprehensive planning, development regulations, and economic development. **Experience working with Economic Development Corporations (EDCs) is essential, ensuring strategic alignment between growth management and business recruitment efforts.** More than just an enforcer of codes, they will assess whether policies are appropriate and effective, ensuring decisions support smart, sustainable growth. A creative thinker, this leader will focus on finding ways to get to "yes" — offering solutions and alternatives rather than just obstacles.

As a key advisor to the City Manager, the Growth Management Director must be a strong, confident leader who speaks the truth, holding themselves and others accountable while guiding staff with clarity, integrity, and fairness. They will set high expectations but also provide the mentorship, training, and professional development needed to support their team's success.

The next Growth Management Director must also be an effective communicator who engages architects, contractors, developers, and residents to foster collaboration and trust. They will have a strong backbone and be capable of making tough decisions while maintaining professionalism, diplomacy, and respect in every interaction. At the same time, they must be approachable, ethical, and community-minded — someone who treats people well and understands that successful growth management is as much about relationships and service as it is about regulations.

This position offers a unique opportunity for a strategic leader who thrives in a fast-growing environment and is eager to make a lasting impact on Lake Wales' future.

EDUCATION & EXPERIENCE

Candidates for this role should have graduated from an accredited college or university with a degree in land-use planning, urban planning, landscape architecture, or a closely related field and have four years' experience in municipal planning. Any equivalent combination of education and experience, with additional education substituting on a year-for-year basis with required experience, may be considered.

The American Institute of Certified Planners Certification, in combination with registration with appropriate professional organizations, is preferred, as is relevant experience within the state of Florida.

The selected candidate must maintain a valid Florida driver's license throughout their tenure.

COMPENSATION & BENEFITS

The City of Lake Wales is offering a salary range of \$75,921 to \$134,160 for this position and a comprehensive benefits package. The organization's benefits include medical, dental, vision, life, and disability insurance, 10 paid holidays, generous vacation and sick leave, and a 50% discount to the Lake Wales Family Recreation Center. This position will also benefit from a cell phone allowance.

Lake Wales offers a General Employees' defined benefit Pension Plan as well as a 401a Defined Contribution plan. An optional 457b is available.

APPLICATION PROCESS

[Please apply online](#)

For more information on this position, contact:

Kevin Knutson, Senior Vice President

KevinKnutson@governmentresource.com

727-754-0407



The City of Lake Wales is an Equal Opportunity Employer that does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, color, gender, age, national origin, political affiliation or disability. Applicants selected as finalists will be subject to a comprehensive background check.

RESOURCES

City of Lake Wales

lakewalesfl.gov

Lake Wales Growth Management

<https://www.lakewalesfl.gov/565/Growth-Management>

Lake Wales Connected Plan

<https://www.lakewalesfl.gov/919/Lake-Wales-Connected-Plan>

Lake Wales Envisioned

<https://lakewalesfl.gov/DocumentCenter/View/6645/LWe-Summary-Booklet>

Traditional Neighborhood Development Incentives

lakewalesfl.gov/DocumentCenter/View/7246/Traditional-Neighborhood-Development-Incentives-and-Impact-Fee-Mitigation-?bidId=

Lakes Wales Chamber of Commerce

<https://lakewaleschamber.com/>

Central Florida Tourism

<https://visitcentralflorida.org>

