



# Minutes

## Tempe Veterans Commission

### March 11, 2026

Minutes of the TEMPE VETERANS COMMISSION held at 6 p.m. on Wednesday, March 11, 2026 in a hybrid format via Microsoft Teams and in-person at Tempe Public Library.

**(MEMBERS) Present:**

Gwendolyn Opel, Vice Chair  
Melanie James, Secretary  
William "Dennis" Gorman  
Romaldo Gonzales  
Dillion McDade  
Juan Garcia

**(MEMBERS) Absent:**

Jim Lange, Chair  
José Moreno  
Aaron McBride  
Dani Bermudez

**City Staff Present:**

Michael Garrison, Veterans Services Coordinator  
Karla Flores, Administrative Assistant II+

**Public Appearances**

There were no public appearances.

**Guest Appearances**

There were no guest appearances

**Agenda Item 1 - Call to Order**

Commission Chair Jim Lange moved to CALL THE MEETING TO ORDER at 6:07 p.m.

**Agenda Item 2 - Attendance**

Commission Chair Jim Lange and Commissioner Moreno notified Mr. Garrison in advance and were excused from the meeting. Commissioners Bermudez and McBride were absent without providing an excuse.

**Agenda Item 3 - Call to the Audience for Public Appearances**

There were no public appearances.

**Agenda Item 4 – Review and Approval of February 11, 2026, Tempe Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes**

**MOTION:** Motion initiated by Commissioner W.D. Gorman to APPROVE February 11, 2026, Minutes.

**SECOND:** Motion Seconded by Commissioner Garcia; Motion passed unanimously.

### **Agenda Item 5 - Chair's Remarks**

Vice Chair Gwendolyn Opel opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and noting her pleasant surprise at the strong attendance. She spoke about the unique experiences and challenges faced by service members and veterans, and shared updates on upcoming events and initiatives aimed at supporting the veteran community. She emphasized the importance of participation and the commissioners' role in helping connect veterans with needed resources. Commissioner Opel also highlighted that Mr. Garrison has several positive initiatives planned to benefit veterans, generating excitement for what's ahead.

### **Agenda Item 6 – Community Health and Human Services Updates**

Mr. Garrison provided updates on several key topics related to veterans services. He highlighted the upcoming CARE Fair on March 28 from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., where he will be hosting a table and encouraged others to join him for any amount of time they can. He also discussed the Veterans Stand Down happening on March 12 and 13 from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the Arizona State Fairgrounds, urging participation due to the wide range of available resources, including free services such as eyeglasses and haircuts. He noted that it is the largest stand down event in the nation. Mr. Garrison emphasized the importance of spreading the word to veterans about these opportunities and shared that his department has been especially busy, with an increase in calls around this time. He also reflected on his recent experience at the VA, noting that even with a small number of people present, wait times for services can still be significant. Lastly, he hinted at upcoming events and future discussions, including community salutes and other topics that will be addressed later.

### **Agenda Item 7 - Discussion regarding an operation welcome home style program**

Mr. Garrison noted that the team is approaching two months since the discussion on the welcome home style program and its potential integration on the Community Salutes side. He emphasized the importance of beginning to develop their plan soon to avoid last-minute work. The group can either wait for Veterans Village to finalize their approach or continue developing their own ideas ahead of next year's Community Salute. Vice Chair Opel encouraged anyone with thoughts or new ideas from last month to share, as this is Chair Lange's initiative and they want to ensure they remain on track.

### **Agenda Item 8 – Discussion on 2026 Tempe Community Salutes**

Mr. Garrison provided an update on the Community Salutes and offered a brief preview. He shared that Patrick Maurer from the City of Tempe, a former professional public speaker, will serve as the event's emcee. Mr. Garrison is also working with the PIO team to produce an opening video, with support from Vice Chair Opel, Commissioner Gonzales, and others. He explained that the tone of the event will be more streamlined this year. Judge Tate Elkie, the Veterans Court judge and former enlisted Marine, has been invited as the guest speaker to share his journey from enlistment to becoming a defense attorney and eventually a judge. Mr. Garrison emphasized that the program would avoid political topics and feature fewer speakers. At the end of the event, there will be a DJ and a photo booth where families can receive printed photos on-site. Due to budget limitations, food will be limited to cake and cookies, as catering costs were approximately \$4,300. Instead, funds typically used for food are being redirected to provide raffle items for future enlistees.

### **Agenda Item 9 – Conversation on future presenters/information sessions from staff liaison.**

Mr. Garrison discussed the importance of enhancing the commissioners' overall knowledge base and outlined his plan to implement a more structured monthly training approach. He explained that each month, as long as the agenda permits, one educational topic would be presented, potentially by a subject matter expert. For financial assistance topics, he noted that SSVF providers may be invited to speak, or he may present the material himself. He emphasized that the goal of this structure is to ensure commissioners become better equipped for outreach and tabling events and ultimately complete their service with greater knowledge than when they began. Mr. Garrison invited commissioners to suggest additional topics and recommend broadly relevant presenters while avoiding overly specialized or niche subject areas. He provided examples of suitable partners, including CBI or U.S. VETS for financial assistance, MVP or Fairway for Warriors for social wellness, and Cynthia from UHS for healthcare topics through the Patriots Support Program. He also encouraged commissioners with relevant expertise to present when appropriate.

### **Agenda Item 10 – Commissioner updates**

- Commissioner Gorman shared that Mr. Garrison attended the February 17 Vietnam Veterans of America monthly meeting, where he delivered an engaging presentation that included a topic the members found particularly compelling efforts to recover remains in Cambodia. Commissioner Gorman noted that the attendees greatly appreciated the presentation and thanked Mr. Garrison for participating. He also reported that he traveled to Sunland Memorial in Sun City to deliver a national-level presentation on behalf of the Vietnam Veterans of America to Mr. Rick Kreiberg in recognition of his service to Vietnam veterans. The ceremony was well attended, with approximately 80 veterans present for the event.
- Commissioner Gonzales shared that this month's Coffee Connection will be held at the Envision Center. He encouraged everyone to attend, noting that there will be approximately 20 to 30 resource providers present, offering a wide variety of support. The event will take place on March 25th from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. He added that coffee and snacks will be available, and possibly breakfast items, depending

on his schedule that morning.

**Agenda Item 11– Future agenda**

- Discussion regarding an operation welcome home style program
- Conversation on future presenters/information sessions from staff liaison.
- Discussion on 2026 Tempe Community Salutes

**Agenda Item 12– Adjournment**

**MOTION: Commissioner Gorman motioned to ADJOURN the Meeting.**

**SECOND: Motion Seconded by Commissioner McDade; Motion passed unanimously.**

Chair J. Lange declared the meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.

The next meeting will be on Wednesday, April 8, 2026. Minutes

Prepared by: Karla Flores

Reviewed by: Michael Garrison

Jim Lange, Chair  
Tempe Veterans Commission

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