CITY OF JOPLIN
COUNCIL AGENDA ITEM

ITEM:
Council Bill No. 2026-601 – Contract by and between the City of Joplin and Upanup Studios Inc. to provide comprehensive website design, development and technology implementation services for the City of Joplin; authorizing the City Manager to execute said Contract by and on behalf of the City of Joplin; and establishing a time for this ordinance to become effective.

MEETING DATE
Jan. 5, 2026

ORIGINATING DEPARTMENT
Marketing & Communications Department

ATTACHMENTS
Council Bill No. 2026-601; Exhibit A - Contract; Exhibit B – Upanup Proposal; Exhibit C – 2025-RFP-24; Exhibit D – proposal scores.

REVIEWED BY
Director of Marketing & Communications Drew Douglas; Director of Finance Leslie Haase; City Attorney Peter Edwards; and Assistant City Manager Tony Robyn.

SUMMARY
This Council Bill approves a contract between the City of Joplin and Upanup Studios Inc. to design, develop, and implement a new website to replace the current JoplinMo.org, a new website to be known as MOmentumBikePark.com, and establish Drupal as our single Content Management System for both websites and establishing the platform for online publication of city content to future websites and potential future apps or other digital experiences. Upanup will also provide fortified and managed website hosting services through Amazon Web Services (AWS) as part of this agreement.

BACKGROUND
The City's website is the single most important piece of information infrastructure the City has for providing transparency to its citizens. It is the backbone of our marketing and communications strategy, a warehouse of public information, a central hub for citizens and customers to find information they are looking for, and way to accomplish business with the City without having to come to City Hall physically. At least, that's what a good municipal government website should be, and ours is currently failing at this mission in a variety of ways. This council bill will help us make a giant leap forward in improving our website and will open up future possibilities for further advancement. We want to be on a platform which enables the City to become a leader in local government transparency, proactive communication, and easy-to-use business processes so we can serve the public better and more efficiently. Approval of this contract will start the process of adopting such a platform and lead us through the launch of a new city website in 2026.

Research Phase:
Improving the City's website and online experiences has been a top priority for the Marketing & Communications Department since its inception in April of 2024. Council and the City Management emphasized the importance of improving our website and so the staff of this new department immediately began research and planning for a website redesign project. Our first step was to learn

about the current website Content Management System (CMS), to identify its strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement, and to survey staff who have been responsible for adding or updating content on the website. While many departments have some similar needs and common desired capabilities for the website, we learned there are also opportunities for software integrations and solutions which could be built right into a CMS in order to provide better online service experiences to our residents, businesses, and customers. We also want to improve the experience for staff managing the content and business processes in the back end of the website. Similarly, we surveyed the public, conducted user interviews, and consulted with a group of local marketers and others with relevant website experience to gather their input and understand a vision for the direction of the City's online presence.

Which CMS platform?

During the research phase, we learned that to achieve the goals laid out by the public and various city departments for improving the website experience, the City needed more than a mere redesign of the front-end of the current CivicPlus website. Many of the issues we learned about during the research phase led us to the conclusion the City would be best served by migrating content from multiple city-owned websites to a single CMS with the capability of helping us achieve desired outcomes in ways which our current CMS is not capable of. Having the content of multiple websites managed from a single CMS would make it easier for our new Webmaster position (and other staff tasked with contributing content to multiple websites) to update and maintain the content their departments are responsible for. For example, FlyJoplin.com currently stands alone on a separate CMS. The museum website also stands alone on a separate system currently. This creates barriers and complicates the process of keeping our websites updated and displaying consistent information with current city branding. During this process, the City also built and opened MOmentum Bike Park, and we identified a desire to have a dedicated website for the park – but do not want to have yet another backend system requiring duplicate effort. In the future, the City may identify additional websites we'd like to set up, but we should not have a separate system for each website – we need a unified solution for managing all websites (except for VisitJoplinMo.org and JoplinGolf.com possibly – though we are aiming to build the website in such a way it could support absorbing both those outlier web properties in the future if those department heads so desire.)

Our research led us to identify that the best way to unify content into a single Content Management System, and create the potential for the City to develop mobile apps and other Internet-of-Things digital experiences in the future – would be to migrate to a headless "MACH" architecture. Configuring our website on such a "Headless" CMS also means we can design new websites and deploy them in the future without needing to migrate content between systems. Our goal is to migrate once in the transition from CivicPlus to Drupal, and then be able to design new experiences in the future without having to migrate our library of content again.

Drupal is an open-source platform used by many local governments across North America. Open Source means it is not proprietary to a single business. It was developed by a community of web developers and the code base is free to use for anyone who wants to use it as the CMS platform for their websites. Our current CMS for Joplinmo.org is CivicPlus' proprietary Website Central product. Generally speaking, one downside of proprietary CMS platforms is that the owner of the CMS determines what improvements to make to their system and when. The owner of the CMS may not want to solve the problems we have with their system as fast as we want them to. With Open Source solutions on the other hand, the developer hired by the City has more flexibility to develop the solutions we need as we need them.

CivicPlus had provided the City use of their proprietary CMS, normally sold on a subscription model,

at no cost during our recovery from the 2011 tornado. The City has since opted in to multiple additional services related to the website, each of which we have been paying for on an annual basis through a subscription model. We will be able to cancel some of these subscription costs once the new website goes live (and we may want to keep other systems not dependent on their CMS such as See.Click.Fix., Social Media Archiving, and MuniCode). CivicPlus helped migrate the City's old website content to their CMS in 2012. By the time our department was established and charged with the responsibility of maintaining the website content – the CivicPlus Web Central CMS was no longer considered new technology and we identified a variety of pain points and frustrations with limitations of the CMS which we knew alternative modern CMS platforms were capable of.

We drafted a very thorough RFP explaining each of our priorities for capabilities we sought from the new website, its CMS, and for hosting, support, and consulting from the vendor to be awarded the contract. We categorized each of our priorities in one of three buckets, and called them our Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 priorities, where:

- Tier 1 is considered foundational and non-negotiable. Things our new CMS must be capable of, ways our new websites must be designed, and levels of service we expect to get from the provider. Much of these items are replacements for current website capabilities or corrections for the pain points and frustrations with the current CMS which we believed other CMS platforms may be able to resolve.
- Tier 2 was considered to be items we really need to have if possible and if budget allows, but we were maybe unsure at the time of drafting the RFP how realistic some of those were, and so we de-prioritized them a step.
- Tier 3 was considered items which signify a step up and improvement in capability over our current website, would also be a nice-to-have for our citizens and staff, but we would be able to live without if they could not be afforded within project budget.

We considered 4 different CMS solutions, 2 of which were other proprietary systems which would have come along with subscription costs and locked us into an environment with limited ability to have custom website designs. The other 2 CMS solutions we considered are Open-Source platforms, meaning there is no subscription cost for using these platforms. One was WordPress, which is widely used but presents security concerns when using plug-ins which are not vetted or updated in a timely manner. The other Open-Source platform we considered is Drupal. The majority of proposals the City received in response to our RFP were to migrate our content to the Drupal platform configured as de-coupled headless. During the course of reviewing the 17 proposals, conducting our own research, interviewing the 6 finalist vendors, and viewing product demonstrations for each CMS platform, we became convinced that Drupal is indeed the best fit for the City's current and future needs.

Benefits of the Drupal platform include:

1. **Security:** Better security than Wordpress, based on our understanding that plug-ins contributed to the platform by the community of Drupal developers are vetted and tested prior to becoming available for use by the City.
2. **Granular control over access and permissions.**
3. **Accessibility:** Tools built into Drupal (such as forcing the entry of alt tags on images at upload) and atomic design principles mean it's easier to meet WCAG 2.1 AA standards and even the latest 2.2 AA standards while also ensuring our content is optimized to be searched and used by AI tools. Upanup also proposed optional additional 3rd party accessibility tools available for implementation in the backend of our website. We have selected an optional accessibility scan tool to ensure our compliance at least annually. Another optional tool is available if council believes it would be worth the additional expense.

4. **Headless Configuration:** The ability to configure Drupal as headless so it can truly serve as a single repository of content for all city websites in the future and serve up content via APIs for other apps and digital experiences.
5. **Custom Front-End Designs:** Ability to deploy custom-built front-end website experiences, each of which can display content housed in the CMS in unique ways.
6. **Lower Costs:** Drupal has no CMS subscription costs, in contrast with proprietary CMS platforms such as CivicPlus' Evolve platform, which is built to work as headless, or GovStack (which is a monolithic, not headless, proprietary platform) or StoryBlok (another proprietary headless CMS which we believe would have been the best user experience for staff, but includes subscription costs and limited options for front end developers we could have worked with to design the front-end experience.) The lack of CMS subscription costs means significant savings for total cost of ownership over the life of the website. Most of the costs of this website are front-loaded as one-time design and build, and we enjoy the benefit of how it works in future years by paying ongoing costs for hosting, maintenance, service, and a contingency for having the Upanup team available to develop or configure additional capabilities into the website in future years. Drupal recently made a major update to the platform, meaning we will not incur major upgrade costs every 2-3 years, as was the case for websites built on older versions of Drupal.
7. **User Experience for Staff:** We believe Drupal's CMS user experience for city staff was the second-best available, of those proposed to us, and the best when considering costs. We are convinced it is capable of and excels in many of the capabilities which our current CivicPlus CMS does not offer. In fact, the CivicPlus proposal for the Evolve platform (essentially a headless version of the platform we are currently using) acknowledged they were not capable of providing several of the capabilities outlined in our RFP which the Drupal platform is built for.

So why Upanup?

Of the 17 proposals, 8 firms proposed Drupal as the CMS platform they would build our website on. We scored the 17 and then decided to interview the 6 highest scoring proposals regardless of which platform they proposed – because at that time, we suspected but were not yet sure if Drupal would be the best solution. Of the 6 finalists, 3 were proposals which had recommended Drupal, but one of them (Planeteria Media) revealed during their interview that they actually prefer to work in Wordpress and so we considered their proposal essentially switched from Drupal to Wordpress. We interviewed another Wordpress proposal (from Juicebox Creative, which had the best-looking front-end designs we saw through this entire process), and two proprietary CMS solutions (GovStack CMS and StoryBlock headless CMS who submitted a proposal in collaboration with a St. Louis-based boutique web design firm) just in case they might convince us of the benefits of transitioning to a different proprietary CMS. The other finalist Drupal proposal was from Promet Source, out of Chicago. They also had a competitive bid, but after scoring the 6 finalist proposals and averaging the scores, we determined Upanup had the lowest and best bid.

We felt Upanup's proposal was the best and most thorough response to our RFP, and they took care to answer our questions in the format we had requested – addressing each of our concerns point by point. We feel confident in their plan to integrate 3rd party systems where needed, and to actually develop custom solutions for us within the CMS and within the scope of the project, whereas some other proposals would have burst the budget in order to include custom solutions within Drupal or WordPress. We also feel that one of the most complex problems presented in the transition away from CivicPlus to another platform will be migration of our library of council agendas, minutes and all the documents linked from past agendas. If not executed properly, the transition will render our past council agendas unusable - resulting in a less transparent, worse user experience. This is one

element of the website transition process which must be executed with precision and care – and the ability to use automation will save hundreds of hours of staff time. We were convinced during the interview that Upanup has thought through this before, they have helped other local governments navigate such tricky transition processes in the past, and articulated a plan which means they will be doing the work to help us through this, rather than some other proposals which seemed to leave it up to City staff to resolve or else cut the losses and move forward doing better in the future. We believe we're in good hands and that the level of customer service and experience helping guide cities through complex website transitions will minimize the pain for staff in this process. They also have a track record of winning website design awards and they put heavy emphasis on website accessibility and training our staff on how to maintain an accessible website.

Transition to .GOV
Another key aspect of this project will be the transition to a .gov domain. Our intent is to launch the new website as a .gov when it goes live in the late summer of 2026. Upanup has experience helping governments through this transition.

So what's happening with our current CivicPlus website?
With the transition away from CivicPlus for our website, we will continue all our current subscriptions for one more year. We have a renewal coming up this month, which helps us keep our current public-facing website available through the end of December 2026. This allows us time to build the new Drupal website and launch it late summer/early fall of 2026 and migrate all content from the current website to the new website, before shutting down our current website before the next renewal comes due in early 2027. However, we may choose to continue our subscription to other CivicPlus software-as-a-service solutions (which are not dependent upon the CMS) such as See.Click.Fix, Social Media Archiving, and MuniCode. Those systems can stand alone apart from the website, and we can link to them from the new website as needed. In the future, we may desire to replace some or all of those with custom-built solutions integrated into Drupal and the design of our website.

Potential Future Costs:
Finally, while our intent has been to solve as many possible software system needs within the scope of this website project, it should be noted that in order to achieve some of the things we want to offer as part of our complete online experience, the City may need to purchase additional 3rd party softwares. Upanup's proposal includes integrations with those systems if and when we acquire and implement them. They have also proposed to build some custom solutions into our CMS, minimizing how many 3rd party softwares we may need to subscribe to. The capabilities they can't meet within the CMS are the same ones no other proposal included solutions for.

For example, the City may need or wish to pursue 3rd party softwares for the following:

- Expansion of our current Constant Contact subscription currently used for distribution of email marketing (monthly email newsletters) to include text messaging. This will replace the CivicPlus text messaging system for sending alerts to subscribers.
- **IPAWS authorized emergency alert notification system -** such as Smart911, Everbridge, or similar. IPAWS stands for Integrated Public Alert & Warning System. It is FEMA's standardized system for establishing local alerts which can be sent by reverse 911 phone call to every phone number in our area, send text messages, emails, and push notifications to anyone who has downloaded the app. I was curious whether any website vendors might be able to satisfy our desire for such a system as part of the website project, but no proposal submitted included a complete solution for this – except CivicPlus, whose Mass Notification solution was quoted at $22,000 annually, but would only make sense in my opinion if we

were staying with CivicPlus for the website CMS. My intent will be to work with the Emergency Manager in 2026 to conduct some product demonstrations with Smart911 and similar IPAWS-authorized solutions to determine an estimated cost so we could budget for this in 2027 or a later year.

- **Agenda Management Software** – Upanup is going to develop a custom solution for us within the CMS, using its capabilities to replace the CMS-based capabilities we have been using within CivicPlus Website Central CMS. If we are not satisfied with this custom solution, we may want to explore a complete Agenda Management SaaS to be selected by the City Clerk. I'm fairly confident at this time that Upanup's custom solution will satisfy our needs and help us avoid the subscription costs for a SaaS which could be $20k-$30k annually.
- **Open Records System** – Upanup is going to develop a custom solution for us within the CMS, using its capabilities to create an Open Records request form, status viewer, system for collecting payments for records requested, and a library for the public to search past open records requests so they can easily pull copies of those records for themselves without payment. If we are not satisfied with this custom solution, we may want to explore a complete Open Records SaaS such as JustFOIA or GovQA to be selected by the City Clerk. I'm fairly confident at this time that Upanup's custom solution will satisfy our needs and help us avoid the subscription costs for a SaaS which could also be in the ballpark of $20-$30k annually.
- **Procurement System** – Upanup is going to develop a custom solution for us within the CMS, using its capabilities to post bids as a content type with subscriber alerts, and may be able to work with our Finance Department to create a way for us to be able to accept bids and proposals through our website, so they do not have to be mailed in. I am fairly confident at this time that the CMS will be capable of meeting the Finance Department's requirements for keeping bid submissions sealed until the designated time of opening. However, if we are not satisfied with the custom solution built into the CMS, we may want to explore a complete procurement software system at some point in the future to be selected by the Finance Director. I do not know the ballpark subscription cost for a procurement system, but suspect it may also be in the ballpark of $15-$30k annually.
- **Strategic Planning & Performance Reporting System** – Upanup is going to develop a custom solution using content types for us to create a way to make our strategic plans and progress on plan implementation more transparent. We want to be able to show the public what our long-term plans and goals are, and make it easy to see how far along we are in implementing action steps. If we are not satisfied with the custom solution, we may want to explore a complete strategic planning & performance dashboarding system such as Envisio. I do not know the ballpark subscription cost for Envisio or similar, but suspect it may be in the ballpark of $20k annually.
- **Solid Waste & Recycling System** – Upanup is going to help us design pages and display content to be created in collaboration with our REO grant partners for the new recycling page of the website. One consultant had recommended we implement Waste Wizard, a SaaS tool offered by a 3rd party, and which costs in the ballpark of $7,000 annually. However, from what I have seen of this product, it seems to be designed more for cities which operate their own solid waste and recycling trucks, with control over scheduling and routes. Then, we would use such a system to help the public be able to see their schedule and route, along with information about what they can and can't recycle. Since we currently use Republic Services, and they offer a schedule and route viewer through their website, I am fairly confident at this time that we will be able to achieve the same outcome as the Waste Wizard without incurring another subscription to this 3rd party software. However, if we are not satisfied with the new recycle content after launch of the new website, we may want to explore procuring such a system and integrating it into the website. Upanup has included integration with such a

solution within the scope of this project in case we need it.

- **Public Engagement System** – Upanup is including within the scope of this contract use of their engagement solution. I am fairly confident in its ability to meet most of our needs for gathering public input through the website, including online surveys and discussion boards where needed for public comment on particular projects. However, if we are not satisfied with its capabilities, we may wish to explore procuring a subscription to a more robust citizen engagement platform which could be integrated into the website, such as Engagement HQ, now owned by Granicus, or Social Pinpoint, which Upanup has integrated with for other cities, and which costs in the ballpark of $30k annually.

As you can see, if we were to procure and subscribe to a Software-as-a-Service in each of these categories rather than relying on the capabilities built into the Drupal CMS as configured for us by Upanup, the City could be looking at spending another $130,000 to $150,000 annually. Therefore, I think exploring the custom-built solutions which Upanup can provide within the Drupal CMS warrant the effort as they can potentially save the City hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. More than one vendor pointed out that if we really wanted the website we specified in the RFP plus all the best-in-class 3rd party softwares for the categories we outlined, we would easily be in the ballpark of $500,000 to deliver all the solutions as we described them in the RFP.

It should also be noted that while this project does not include a true mobile-app within scope, we have included solutions consulting so that Upanup can help us identify and define potential use cases for apps the City may want to offer our citizens, as well as other Internet-of-Things digital experiences. For example, in the future, I'd like to see TV monitors inside the lobby of each city facility displaying a slideshow of news and announcements along with video – think of the digital menu signs you see inside many chain restaurants now, or the announcement boards inside airports. Many other cities already have this sort of indoor signage, and we'd love to be able to manage the content for those slideshows within the CMS, so when we add a news item to the website, with a single click, we could distribute that graphic or video to the playlist playing on such digital signs around the City. For another example, one day, I would like for there to be an Alexa tool for a mom to be able to say, "Hey Alexa, register our kids for fall soccer with the Joplin Parks Department". That's all possible with a website built as our new one will be, when we use the headless CMS to create content interaction through the internet of things. Or imagine a contractor about to dig into the ground who could use augmented reality glasses to see where underground infrastructure is located while he's digging. This requires data systems integrated with our CMS through APIs, and the CMS which can serve that data up using APIs to visually represent the map in the augmented reality glasses rather than a desktop internet browser. This is why I believe headless is such an important aspect of the future of digital experiences to be offered by municipal governments. So, the website does not provide all these potential apps and Internet-of-Things experiences – those will come later with their own design and development costs – but they become possible by having our website built in the way we have asked Upanup to build it. They will also be able to help us determine potential costs and steps to implement these kinds of future online services which will set us apart as a true Smart City.

Total Project Cost & Recurring Annual Costs:
The one-time cost for building this website project is $250,800 as specified, to meet all our Tier 1, 2 and 3 priorities, plus a few optional selections which ensure our website is as capable as possible within budget. I can find $800 of savings elsewhere in my department budget to ensure we stay on budget.

The annual recurring costs beginning year 2 will be $47,150 which includes hosting, maintenance,

support, subscription to an AI tool which helps ensure compliance with accessibility, Upanup's engagement platform, and contingency for developing additional capabilities into our website each year as needed. This is significantly cheaper than the bid with the highest annual recurring costs, which was over $150,000 for year 2 – not including any 3rd party SaaS subscriptions (CivicPlus).

Option to Consider:
We are confident that the website to be built as specified in this agreement will comply with all WCAG 2.2 AA standards, a higher standard than required by the Justice Department. However, there is one additional option available which could increase the perception of compliance, and which was included on the menu of options presented by Upanup. If, selected, it would cause us to need a budget amendment. Therefore, I do not feel comfortable adding this option to the contract unless City Council feels it would be worth the additional investment.

The option is called AccessPoint. It is an additional accessibility tool for those who may not already have accessibility browser extensions installed. It creates a pop-up on every page of the website, which gives the user control over various display settings which can make the website easier for them to view according to their preferences and needs. This tool has an additional cost of $13,750 to add to the site, but does not have any annual subscription cost. If Council wishes to add this to the project, the new year-one cost for the project would go up to $264,550. Again, I don't believe this would be necessary to meet our goal for accessibility compliance, but it would send a clear signal that we are prioritizing accessibility for every website user. An example of the tool can be viewed as installed on the website for the Town of Comox, Canada: comox.ca

FUNDING SOURCE
Use Tax funds set aside for the website redesign project as included in the adopted 2026 budget.

RECOMMENDATION
Staff recommends this Council Bill be approved on First Reading with an effective date of January 21, 2026.