



## 2017 State of the County Address Delivered by Chairman Todd Levent May 18, 2017

Good afternoon. Thank you all for being here today and for allowing me to share some of the exciting things that are happening in Forsyth County.

A special thanks to the Chamber of Commerce and the Council for Quality Growth for organizing this great event.

I am honored to speak to you today alongside our School Board Chairwoman, Kristin Morrissey.

It is my pleasure to serve Forsyth County with my fellow commissioners: Pete Amos, Rick Swope, Cindy Jones Mills and Laura Semanson.

Forsyth County would not be able to provide the outstanding programs, services and amenities we do without our roughly 1,600 employees, and I would like to thank them for all they do for our county.

We are mindful that you all – everyone in this room and everyone in our county – have made an investment in Forsyth County.

This is where you have chosen to live, or where you have chosen to do business. As your county government we are committed to doing everything we can to protect that investment – to ensuring your quality of life and the quality of life of your employees and the viability of your business.

We want to facilitate your success – whether that means improving our roads so you get home to see your children sooner, or whether that means making infrastructure improvements that make relocating your company's headquarters to Forsyth County not only a possibility but an easy decision.

It is clear to residents, particularly long-time residents, that Forsyth County has grown rapidly in the last two decades.

One area where this growth can be seen is in our schools, and we thank the Forsyth County Board of Education for all they have done to manage school overcrowding.

Rapid growth has also resulted in hasty home construction and an overburdened infrastructure including water, roads and public safety. To combat this, we have chosen to update our Comprehensive Plan early in order to better manage residential and commercial development. It is critical that we balance residential growth with commercial. This ultimately assists a balanced digest that is essential to maintaining our low millage rate year after year.

*Foster Forsyth*, our 20-year Comprehensive Plan update process, incorporated public workshops, a community survey, a steering committee, a visioning committee and public hearings. Last month, nearly one year after the first public workshop was held, the Board of Commissioners voted to transmit the Comprehensive Plan for regional and state review. This new plan lowers the estimated population by more than 25 percent over the previous plan that had projections to the year 2040. We hope to adopt the plan this summer.

Together with this Comprehensive Plan update, the Board of Commissioners has focused on several key areas we believe have led to the challenges of rapid growth. These include moratoriums on Res6, Res4, Res3, CR2 and MPD, or high-density residential zonings, while we lower the density in each category to align with the new Comprehensive Plan.

In order to create an open and public dialogue with the Planning Commission, we have started monthly zoning workshops. These are open to the public and allow the Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission to view upcoming zonings as a collective group and generate a dialogue with those requesting the zonings.

Impact Fees are a large source of county income paid by developers. Last year the Board of Commissioners approved a Resolution adopting a modified Forsyth County Impact Fee Ordinance, which became effective in June and was revised in February for the Parks and Recreation fees. Forsyth County charges Impact Fees on residential buildings for roads, parks, libraries and public safety. Non-residential buildings are charged for public safety.

Concerning the county's water and sewer infrastructure, I am pleased to report that the Army Corps of Engineers recently issued its record of decision on the updated Water Control Manual for Lake Lanier. The new manual clears the way for Forsyth County to seek approval of a new water supply intake in the lake. This has been a long time coming – the Corps has said for many years that it had to get this manual out of the way, and the legal challenges relating to it, before it could authorize a new intake. While there are still legal challenges to be resolved, we are finally making real progress. The new manual is a major step forward – one that has literally been decades in the making – and we are moving toward the goal of securing a reliable, sustainable water supply to meet our needs well into the future.

In 2014, in what seemed the height of traffic congestion in the county, voters approved a \$200 million Transportation Bond. \$81 million is proposed for projects in partnership with the Georgia Department of Transportation, leveraging state and federal funding, with the remaining \$119 million proposed for county projects. This bond has provided the county with funds to improve our roads, sidewalks and intersections.

This Transportation Bond has already funded multiple projects, including:

GDOT partnership projects

- State Route 371 from State Route 9 to Kelly Mill Road
- State Route 400 widening
- Two future interchanges along State Route 400 at State Route 369 and McGinnis Ferry Road

New road project

- Ronald Reagan Boulevard Extension from Majors Road to McFarland Parkway

Major road widening projects

- Brookwood Road
- McGinnis Ferry Road
- Old Atlanta Road, Phase IV
- Old Atlanta Road, Phase V
- Pilgrim Mill Road

Traffic safety improvement projects

- Market Place Boulevard at Turner Road
- Windy Oaks Drive

Intersection improvement projects

- Five intersections along State Route 369
- State Route 306 at Little Mill Road
- State Route 400
  - at Jot Em Down Road
  - at Martin Road
- State Route 9
  - at Campground Road
  - at Smith Lane/Coal Mountain
  - at Martin Road
- State Route 53 at Dogwood Path
- Old Alpharetta Road at State Route 141
- Ronald Reagan Boulevard at State Route 141

Nine significant sidewalk projects

We must thank our voters for passing the Transportation Bond to provide funding for these much-needed projects.

The SPLOST penny sales tax program, which has been approved by voters seven times since 1983, has also helped to fund many transportation projects, including:

#### Major road widening projects

- Bethelview Road
- Brookwood Road
- Castleberry Road
- McFarland Parkway
- McGinnis Ferry Road
- Old Atlanta Road, Phase II
- Old Atlanta Road, Phase III
- Pilgrim Mill Road
- Sharon Road
- Union Hill Road/Mullinax Road
- Union Hill Road/Bridge

#### Road resurfacing

- Resurface approximately 60 miles of county roads each year

#### Traffic safety improvement projects

- State Route 369 truck passing lanes
- Heardsville Road
- Church Road
- State Route 9 at Bannister Road
- McGinnis Ferry Road at McFarland Road traffic signal upgrades
- James Road Sidewalk
- Shiloh Road at Shiloh Crossing

#### Intersection improvement projects

- John Burruss Road at Karr Road
- Bannister Road at Elmo Road
- Wallace Tatum Road
  - at Wright Bridge Road
  - at Burnt Bridge Road
- Holbrook Road at Burnt Bridge Road
- State Route 369 at State Route 9
- Settingdown Road at Martin Road
- State Route 20 at Woodland Hill Drive

#### Six significant sidewalk projects

We hope the citizens will continue to support the SPLOST program by approving SPLOST VIII in 2018. This program also pays for new fire stations, libraries, parks and other essential capital improvements throughout the county.

To ensure the future success of our transportation needs, the county has started work updating the Forsyth Transportation Plan. I encourage you all to visit the Transportation Plan update website at [www.forsythtransportationplan.com](http://www.forsythtransportationplan.com). There you will find a list of dates of future meetings and a transportation survey. Please provide your feedback and share this information with your neighbors.

With the growth of our county, comes the challenges of public safety, but I am proud to report we have maintained our top-notch public safety services. Sheriff Freeman, his deputies and staff are working hard to keep our community a safe place to live, work and play.

The Sheriff's Office employs 256 certified peace officers, 69 jailers and 73 civilians, bringing their total work force to 398.

In order to maintain efficiency and effectiveness across the county, the South Precinct reopened in early February and once again became a full-service precinct.

To increase its existing fleet, the Sheriff's Office sold six of its existing luxury vehicles from the previous administration and used those funds to purchase 12 new deputy vehicles.

As a parent, school safety is a top priority, and I thank Sheriff Freeman for adding four new School Resource Officers to four of our elementary schools.

On the subject of drugs – which unfortunately has become too common a topic – since the start of 2017, there have been 11 residential search warrants issued for drugs. The Sheriff's Office has seized 23 guns, five vehicles, 96 pounds of marijuana and 30 ounces of methamphetamine. Illegal narcotics has resulted in 59 arrests, in addition to the hundreds of illegal narcotics cases made during deputies' daily tours of duty.

Regarding the public's first responders, the Forsyth County Fire Department recently opened two new state of the art four-stall fire stations, both paid for by SPLOST and Impact Fees. Station 6 is located off of Caney Road in south Forsyth County, and a new replacement facility for Fire Station 8 is located off of Keith Bridge Road in northeast Forsyth County.

Fire Station 6 is a brand new facility in a rapidly growing area of the county. Its opening brings our total station count to 13. Fire Station 8 replaced an aging station that was built by volunteers in 1984. While Station 8 was being built, our firefighters worked out of Dawson County Fire Station 2. A huge thank you goes out to Dawson County Fire Chief Lanier Swafford and the Dawson County Fire Department.

Just this past winter, our 911 Center was awarded the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies – also known as CALEA – Public Safety Communications Accreditation. For those unfamiliar, CALEA Accreditation strengthens an agency's accountability, both within the agency and the community, and can limit a communications center's liability and risk exposure by demonstrating that standards for public safety communications are met. This is also true for our Sheriff's Office. That is why Sheriff Freeman is working diligently to restore CALEA accreditation to his office.

While our population grows, so do the amenities offered to our residents. This past year brought great additions to our parks system thanks to the 2008 voter-approved Parks, Recreation and Green Space Bond, SPLOST and Impact Fees.

Last summer, we opened Phase IV of the Big Creek Greenway, extending it approximately 4.8 miles. The Greenway, now with a total trail length of approximately 9.6 miles, is by far one of the county's most popular amenities. We look forward to expanding it further in the near future – ultimately leading to Sawnee Mountain Preserve.

In August, we opened Matt Community Park at Settingdown Creek in the northwest part of the county. Matt Community Park spans 185 acres, and Phase I features four rectangular fields, two picnic pavilions and a playground.

In the fall, we broke ground for Eagle's Beak Park, a 230-acre passive park located in northwest Forsyth County. When complete, it will feature a canoe and kayak river launch, and nature trails.

This past winter, Chattahoochee Pointe, located in southeast Forsyth County, underwent improvements that included the expansion of its nature trail to a 5K distance loop.

Just recently we opened Lanierland Park in northeast Forsyth County. Lanierland encompasses 109 acres, with four rectangular fields, four picnic pavilions and a playground.

Our parks system now covers over 2,700 hundred acres. That's 25 parks – soon to be 26 with Eagle's Beak Park.

In the fall, the Board of Commissioners approved the Parks & Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan. The public was invited to participate at public workshops and through a county-wide survey. The result was a document that will guide the Parks & Recreation Department to ensure we provide the quality and quantity of parks and green space that our community expects.

To aid transparency and offer our citizens better access to their government, the county launched two new website features – both of which can be accessed on the homepage of [forsythco.com](http://forsythco.com).

The first being a Board of Commissioners' blog. This feature provides you, the citizen, with access to receive news directly from your district commissioner. You may also subscribe to your commissioner's blog by entering your email address on their blog page. This ensures you will get their news first.

The second new website feature is an interactive transportation projects map. This map provides details of road, sidewalk and intersection improvement projects. When you visit the interactive map, you can determine which phase a transportation project is in – whether design is underway, the work is out to bid or construction is underway.

Forsyth County not only leads the state as a community that cares about transportation, but also in other significant areas.

Starting with our unemployment rate of 3.8 percent, compared to the state unemployment rate of 5.1 percent and the national unemployment rate of 4.5 percent.

Forsyth County's median household income is \$88,816, compared to the City of Cumming median household income of \$43,491 and the U.S. median household income of \$53,889.

Forsyth County's graduation rate is 92.7 percent, compared to the U.S. graduation rate of 83.2 percent.

These are remarkable statistics that make it very clear why Forsyth County has become such a popular place to live.

With the arrival of new residents – an estimated increase of nearly 26 percent from 2010 to 2016, the county commissioners and the Chamber are making sure that economic development remains a county focus. Together, commissioners and the Chamber are dedicated to developing key areas including healthcare, hotel, retail, international corporate headquarters and advanced manufacturing.

Last year, new and existing companies created more than 820 new jobs and made more than \$145 million in new capital investments in our community.

In February, global retail supplier, Sports Warehouse, announced their plans to create an e-commerce fulfillment and distribution center in Forsyth County. This economic development project is the largest announcement for our community in over a decade, investing more than \$14 million and creating more than 300 jobs.

In partnership with the Chamber and the Development Authority, we have revived the Economic Development Stakeholder Group that represents the leadership of the county commission, Development Authority, Forsyth County schools, Lanier Tech, University of North Georgia and the Chamber.

The Economic Development Stakeholder Group has taken the lead on developing and executing a new, community based economic development plan for Forsyth County. The plan will engage business owners and homeowners in creating a new and aggressive plan that will serve to expand the commercial portion of our economy and create new, high-paying, highly skilled jobs.

The stakeholder group is also reviewing our economic incentive structure and making recommendations that will lead to expansion opportunities to create new Community Improvement Districts, Tax Allocation Districts and fast track important commercial projects.

We would like to thank the Chamber of Commerce and their Economic Development Department for their continued efforts to bring business development to our county.

Forsyth County's tagline is: *Your Community. Your future.* I believe that every decision our board makes considers what impact it may have on the future of our county. Together, we can make that future a bright one for our economy, our families and our community.

Thank you for allowing me to share all of the great things happening in Forsyth County.