



2016 State of the County Address Delivered by Chairman R.J. (Pete) Amos May 19, 2016

Good afternoon. Thank you all for being here today and for allowing me a few minutes to share with you a few of the exciting things that have been 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 Chairman, Darla Light.

It is my pleasure to serve Forsyth County with my fellow commissioners, District 2 commissioner Brian Tam, District 3 Commissioner Todd Levent, District 4 Commissioner Cindy Jones Mills, and District 5 Commissioner Jim Boff.

I would also like to recognize County Manager Doug Derrer, Deputy County Manager Tim Merritt and all other county officials and employees here today.

Forsyth County would not be able to provide the outstanding programs, services and amenities we do without our roughly fifteen hundred full-time, part-time and seasonal employees, and I'd like to thank them for all they do.

2015 was a great year for Forsyth County and has positioned us for 2016 to be amazing.

This year we started one of our largest public input projects to date, with Foster Forsyth, our Comprehensive Plan update process.

As your elected representatives, we want to hear from you. We all know that the metro Atlanta area will experience population growth in the next 20 years. As a community we need to determine where our new community members will fit into our county. How will we fund infrastructure and quality of life improvements and what will our needs be for the future?

More than four thousand citizens have completed our survey online. The survey is open through Sunday so there is still time so log on to FosterForsyth.com and give us your opinions.

Some of the top assets of Forsyth County according to our community survey responses so far are:

- Quality schools**
- Cost of living**
- Character of our community**

While I could go on for days about our educational system I think Darla did an excellent job bragging on the students, staff and parents who make up Forsyth County schools.

One of the reasons that our citizens consider cost of living one of our greatest assets is because of their return on investment. Forsyth County offers a great quality of life for the cost to live here.

We can attribute that in part to recreation, public safety, healthcare and natural resources.

When comparing Forsyth County to the 2016 National Recreation and Parks Association Field Report, we offer more park space per resident than other communities our size and we have lower annual operating expenses.

Last year more than 50,000 people participated in fitness, sports, recreation and wellness activities through our parks and rec programs. And many, many more visit our parks each year to enjoy their walking and biking trails, playgrounds and natural beauty.

Our parks and recreational areas now cover more than 2,100 acres.

2016 is bringing great additions to our parks system.

- **We opened phase 3 of Sawnee Mountain Preserve, which provided our community with over 6 miles of hiking trails, a new playground and 2 picnic areas to enjoy with your family all within the serene landscape of Sawnee Mountain. I believe that our citizens are proud of our preservation efforts on Sawnee Mountain. We are always looking for ways to preserve the beauty of our natural landscape and our natural resources.**
- **We are nearing completion this summer of phase 1 of Matt Community Park at Settingdown Creek in the northwest part of the county.**
 - **Matt Community Park spans 185 acres and phase 1 will feature 4 rectangle fields and a playground.**
- **Recently we broke ground for the new Lanierland Park in northeast Forsyth.**
 - **Lanierland encompasses 109 acres, with 4 rectangle fields, a playground and picnic facilities.**
 - **We look forward to the opening of Lanierland in late 2016.**

As you can see we have a very active parks system!

In 2008, voters graciously approved a \$100 million Parks, Recreation and Green Space Bond. The improvements to the parks system over the last 7 years continue to impact all of us but the funding from the bond is nearly exhausted. This means that in order to maintain our level of service we will need to address funding for new parks and park facilities in another manner.

Jim Pryor, director of Parks and Recreation, came on board in 2014. He is now in the process of updating our Parks and Rec Comprehensive Master Plan to ensure that Forsyth County continues to provide the quality and quantity of parks and green space that our community expects.

In addition to our parks, we take great pride in providing top-notch public safety services.

Our Sheriff's Office is working hard to keep our community safe.

We have seen crime drop by over 20 percent since 2013.

Active warrants for wanted people in the county went from a running average of 4,000 a month since 2012 down to about 1,400 a month as of this year. Taking criminals off the streets of our county prevents future crimes.

Our school resource deputies have increased from 4 in 2012 to 16 today. There will be at least 3 additional deputies added by 2017. Keeping our children safe is important to all of us.

In January a change to our code that was approved by the board of commissioners went into effect. Since that implementation, the Sheriff's Office has closed 7 massage parlors.

And with almost 48,000 followers, the Sheriff's Office Facebook page is very active. Our citizens' involvement and the help of social media have aided in solving more than 30 crimes in the last few years.

All of these services at a reduction to the budget of about \$2 million in 2015.

Our Sheriff's Office works very hard every day to keep our community a safe place to live, work and play.

Construction is currently underway for two new fire stations. Station 6 will be located on Brookwood Road in south Forsyth County and a new replacement facility for Fire Station 8 is being built off of Keith Bridge Road in northeast Forsyth.

The investments the county makes in public safety continue to pay dividends.

Last year the county once again earned an improved rating from the Insurance Services Office.

This improved rating is a reflection of 3 key areas of public safety: fire protection, E-911 service and water services.

These efforts benefit us all individually. I encourage each of you to check with your insurance company to see if the county's improved ISO rating makes you eligible for a reduction in your insurance premiums.

We thank Lynn Jackson and her team for their continued successes in healthcare. A thriving healthcare system supports our growing community. Northside Forsyth and Children's Healthcare are both contributing to our community through service and leadership.

Lake Lanier, Sawnee Mountain, the Chattahoochee and Etowah rivers, our rolling hills and our green pastures all provide the character of Forsyth County that our citizens and visitors cherish.

In order to preserve this character we have worked with our citizens and builders to achieve an average density of residential zonings last year of 1.95 units per acre.

Many counties in the state are experiencing very little, if any, growth. Officials from these communities would welcome the high quality development we are experiencing because it means that we live in a desirable county.

I don't have to tell you how important transportation is to our community. It impacts economic development and our quality of life.

In 2014, our voters approved a \$200 million Transportation Bond, proving the importance of transportation to our citizens.

By doing so, they placed a great deal of trust in the county and we are working diligently to deliver the results our residents expect and deserve.

By approving this bond, our voters also sent a clear message to the state Department of Transportation that Forsyth County residents are committed to improving our roads.

It's no question that the state looks favorably upon communities like ours who are taking the initiative to proactively address transportation. I would like to thank my fellow commissioners and the Georgia Department of Transportation for building a great partnership and special thanks to Rudy Bowen and Emily Dunn on the state DOT board for all the help they have provided Forsyth County.

We anticipate that by showing that we were willing and ready to step up to the plate and support this transportation bond, the state will commit additional funding for road projects in Forsyth County, possibly to the tune of \$250 million.

These monies will support the widening of Post Road from Highway 9 to Kelly Mill Road. At our transportation summit last fall, GDOT revealed that because of our commitment to local transportation through the bond, they will agree to also fund the widening of Post Road from Kelly Mill to State Route 20.

To date the county has issued the first \$100 million of the bond, which enabled us to begin moving forward with the following projects.

- Intersection improvements
 - SR 369 at Mount Tabor Road
 - SR 369 at Old Federal Road
 - SR 369 at Pooles Mill Road
 - SR 369 at Bus Field Entrance
 - SR 369 at Little Mill Road
 - SR 306 at Little Mill Road
 - SR 400 at Jot-em-down Road
 - SR 400 at Martin Road
 - SR 9 at Campground Road
 - SR 9 at Smith Lane
 - SR 9 at Martin Road
 - SR 53 at Dogwood Path
 - Ronald Reagan Boulevard at SR 141
 - Old Alpharetta Road at SR 141
 - Union Hill Road at Shepherd's Pond
- Sidewalk projects
 - Trammel Road
 - James Burgess Road

- Sanders Road
- Nuckolls Road
- Echols Road
- Audrey's Way
- Samples Road
- Freedom Parkway
- Old Atlanta Road/Melody Mizer Lane
- Major road projects
 - Ronald Reagan Boulevard Expansion
 - Brookwood Road
 - Pilgrim Mill Road
 - Union Hill Road
 - Old Atlanta Road
 - One of the most highly anticipated projects to be funded by the bond is the widening of State Route 400, which will include an additional lane both north and south bound from McFarland to 369.
 - The construction of the northbound lane began in November. As you all know traveling 400 right now is a challenge but when it is completed mid-2018 the struggle will be well worth it.
 - We just got news from DOT that they'll open the new northbound lane from McFarland to State Route 141 by September of this year.
 - The bond will also help fund the addition of two interchanges at McGinnis Ferry Road and Highway 369 and 400.

In addition to the widening of 400 we are in the design stage of a beautification plan. It will include all the interchanges along 400 in our county and bring forth a robust public/private partnership. I'd like to thank Commissioner Mills for her leadership of this initiative.

We once again have our voters to thank for passing the transportation bond to provide funding for these much-needed projects.

We are also working on many projects funded by SPLOST dollars.

- Intersection improvements
 - John Burruss Road at Karr Road
 - Bannister Road at Elmo Road
 - Wallace Tatum Road at Wright Bridge Road
 - Wallace Tatum Road at Burnt Bridge Road
 - Holbrook Road at Burnt Bridge Road
 - SR 369 at SR 9
 - Settingdown Road at Martin Road
 - SR 20 at Woodland Hill Drive
- Sidewalk projects
 - Old Atlanta Road to Nichols Drive
 - Nichols Road to James Burgess Road
 - Post Road to Big Creek Greenway
 - Brookwood Road to Big Creek Elementary
 - SR 141 to Ronald Reagan Boulevard
- Major road projects
 - Bethelview Road
 - Castleberry Road
 - Old Atlanta Road

- Sharon Road
- Union Hill Road
- Mullinax Road

These projects were funded by the SPLOST penny sales tax program, which voters have approved 7 times since 1983. SPLOST is a great program that allows the county to fund infrastructure improvements and capital projects through sales tax - not through property tax.

We hope the citizens will continue to support the SPLOST program by approving SPLOST 8 in the next election cycle. As you can see, your support of transportation is paying off and soon people will be moving more quickly throughout our county.

To ensure the future success of our transportation needs the county is in the early stages of working on the Comprehensive Transportation Plan update.

For updates on any of these projects please visit the county website at forsythco.com.

Forsyth County not only leads the state as a community that cares about transportation, we can also be found on almost every top ten list published in the state of Georgia.

Starting with our unemployment rate of 4.2 percent being the lowest among metro counties and second lowest among counties statewide.

We maintain the highest bond ratings possible and continue to see climbing sales tax revenues.

Our low taxes can be attributed to our growing economy. Simply stated, without growth, our taxes would rise dramatically.

Our tax digest has become disproportionately weighted toward residential growth, largely as a result of the county's explosive residential development.

Our homeowners receive a great return on investment and we all know that commercial and industrial property owners use fewer resources than residential owners do. They don't add the same burden on services as residential growth, such as schools and public safety.

In essence, commercial and industrial property owners are subsidizing the gap left by residential property owners.

Balancing our tax digest is why economic development is absolutely critical to our county's future.

We will continue working with the Development Authority and the Chamber of Commerce to seek future commercial and industrial investment for Forsyth County.

The chamber is focused on developing key areas including healthcare, hotel, retail, international corporate headquarters and advanced manufacturing.

Last year new and existing companies created 541 new jobs and made nearly \$40 million in new capital investments in our community.

The Halcyon project is one of the largest mixed use developments being built in metro Atlanta and phase 1 will invest more than \$200 million. We are very excited about the future of commercial investments in Forsyth County.

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.

As many of you know, ARC as well as our consultants have predicted the population will continue to grow in Forsyth County. In order to address this change to our community your elected officials realize that this is the time to develop a long-term vision for Forsyth County.

As I mentioned earlier we have started our Comprehensive Plan update project, Foster Forsyth. We awarded the contract for this initiative to Jacobs consulting.

Your Board of Commissioners felt strongly that we needed a plan based on citizen input that would provide both the current and future boards a more concrete foundation for our county government to follow.

Please remember to visit FosterForsyth.com and get involved!

I would like to encourage each of you to ask 3 people you know who are not here today to go online and complete the survey.

We have the ability to create that long-term vision for what we want Forsyth County to be for our children and grandchildren, and the type of environment we want to foster for them.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today but before we leave here I would like to acknowledge 2 commissioners who have chosen not to run for re-election. Brian Tam, District 2 Commissioner, and Jim Boff, District 5 Commissioner – please stand.

I have thoroughly enjoyed working with these gentlemen for the last 6 years. Forsyth County has truly benefited from their service. We will miss their leadership and daily participation in our government. And I will personally miss the lively discussions around the work session table and camaraderie we have developed. Thank you gentlemen. Please join me in recognizing these fine men.