



2018 State of the County Address

Delivered by Chairman Todd Levent

May 9, 2018

Good afternoon and thank you for being here today. There are some exciting things happening in Forsyth County and I am thrilled to share them with you today.

I would like to take a moment to thank the Chamber of Commerce and the sponsors that the chamber has already honored today for organizing this wonderful event each year.

It is a pleasure to address you today alongside our School Board Chair, Ann Crow.

Since our county is only as good as its employees, I would like to introduce you to some of the men and women that make Forsyth County so awesome.

County Manager Eric Johnson, Deputy County Manager Tim Merritt and Assistant County Manager Garrin Coleman

Roughly 1,600 full time and 300 part-time employees take on honor of serving this county to provide outstanding services, amenities and programs.

Some of the county department directors and staff are in attendance today. Please stand as I say your name:

- Major Tom Patton
- Chief Deputy Grady Sanford
- Fire Chief and Emergency Management Agency Director Danny Bowman
- Fire Administration Division Chief Brenda Green
- Fire Technical Services Division Chief Jason Shivers
- Senior Services Director Ruthie Brew
- Planning and Community Development Director Tom Brown
- 911 Center Director Pat Giordano
- Chief Financial Officer David Gruen
- Information System and Technology Director Brandon Kenney
- Water and Sewer Director Tim Perkins

To all of the county's government employees – thank you for your dedicated service to our community.

Serving Forsyth County as commissioner and chairman is the greatest honor I've ever had. I would also like to thank my fellow commissioners for all of the hard work and hours they put in to this call to service.

So what is it that makes Forsyth County such a great community to live, work and play in? Because the secret is out.

Our community was recently named the fastest growing county in the state and 25th in the country. This is up from last year when we were ranked 11th in the country. And while the rapid residential growth does present new challenges, these statistics will give us a better opportunity to get our infrastructure, such as schools, roads, parks, sewer and water plant expansions and water independence caught up.

The question of whether residential growth is taking place or not has been replaced with how that growth is maintained to preserve what makes Forsyth County one of America's best communities to live in.

One answer lies in an update to the county's comprehensive plan.

Following a multi-month update process branded as Foster Forsyth, a comprehensive plan was adopted in 2017.

The purpose of the plan is to guide the intensity, location and timing of development and to ensure compatibility with existing uses.

The comprehensive plan serves as a policy guideline document for the county's future growth and development, which plays an important role in rezoning and development decisions. The plan also establishes community goals and priorities for the county's future.

Those goals are to:

- Invest in quality of life
- Improve mobility
- Enhance community character
- Expand infrastructure
- Facilitate job opportunities
- Maintain and expand greenspace

Finally, the plan seeks balance among land use, housing, economic development and transportation needs while understanding that Forsyth County must also protect its great schools, parks spaces and the natural environment that has made, and will maintain it as, a desirable place to live for generations.

With the implementation of the comprehensive plan, and the changes to the UDC that followed, the estimated population has been lowered by more than 25 percent over the previous plan that had projections to the year 2037 while still allowing for a vibrant economic future.

Speaking of growth, the county's projected year-over-year population growth is steadily slowing according to the latest research.

In 2011, the growth in population from the year prior was 4.32 percent. The projected population growth for 2019 is 2.92 percent and is projected to decrease each year with a projected 1.88 percent growth in 2037 based on the changes made to the comprehensive plan in 2017.

While population growth is slowing, new and expanding businesses brought over 1,300 new jobs and \$167 million in capital investment to the county in 2017.

And that growth is on track for another strong year in 2018 as 477 new jobs and \$62.7 million have been announced so far.

In November, the 2018 operating budget was adopted by the board, funded with no increase in the county's property tax millage rate. A millage rate of 8.036 continues to be one of the lowest rates among metro Atlanta counties.

Along with millage rates being among metro Atlanta's lowest, Forsyth County also is one of just three Georgia counties to maintain a Triple A bond rating.

You cannot accomplish this bond rating without having the most fiscally sound asset to debt ratio possible, just as a citizen would need to have in order to accomplish an 850 credit score.

Forsyth County's focus on making transportation improvements is more of a priority today than perhaps ever before.

To assist in the county's ever growing need for transportation updates, a new position of assistant county manager was created to serve as the executive manager for all transportation related activities and responsibilities within the county.

Garrin Coleman will also serve as a central point-of-contact between Forsyth County and the Georgia Department of Transportation along with other agencies regarding regional transportation development efforts.

We are excited to build upon an already strong relationship with the Georgia Department of Transportation and to usher the county through needed transportation projects.

Right now, we are nearing the end of the process of updating our comprehensive transportation plan, which is the guiding document outlining the long-range vision for transportation in the county.

Some of the key projects that have been identified in the update include widening Post Road, widening McGinnis Ferry Road from Sargent Road to McFarland Parkway, widening State Route 306 from 400 to 369, and widening State Route 9 from Fulton County to the city of Cumming.

I encourage you all to visit the Transportation Plan update website at www.forsythtransportationplan.com.

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.

A major example of this leveraging of funds was the partnership with G-DOT for the third lane on 400, interchanges at 369 and 400 as well as at McGinnis Ferry Road and 400.

Construction on both will begin in 2020. Courtesy of G-DOT, \$73 million is being invested in Bethelview Road's four lane project.

We 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.

Projects funded by SPLOST VII and completed in 2017 include the widening of Union Hill Road/Mullinax Road, Phase 3 of the widening of Old Atlanta Road, the widening of Castleberry Road, the addition of sidewalks along Majors Road and Caney Road/Old Alpharetta Road, and intersection improvements at SR 9 and Bannister Road, Holbrook Road at Burnt Bridge Road, and Wallace Tatum Road at both Wright Bridge and Burnt Bridge Roads.

Most importantly to our citizens, it is vital that those SPLOST dollars are available for maintaining and resurfacing of county roads in their neighborhoods and the surrounding community.

The Board of Commissioners is currently discussing plans to schedule an eighth SPLOST referendum to be voted on in November and public input has been sought throughout the year already regarding the continuation of the penny sales tax.

Previous SPLOST programs have funded road improvement projects, parks, fire stations and apparatus, libraries and the county's new courthouse, jail and parking facilities.

In January, the county kicked off a series of 10 community public input meetings held at locations throughout the county to garner feedback on how the proposed SPLOST funds should be allocated.

A list of projects under consideration for SPLOST funding was collected from residents through the input meetings held earlier this year and an online survey. Data collected from the meetings and online survey provided the following breakdown of how SPLOST VIII funds should be allocated.

- 33 percent Transportation
- 13.6 percent Parks and Recreation
- 10.6 percent Sheriff's Office
- 9.1 percent Fire
- 7.1 percent Senior Services
- 6.6 percent Water and Sewer
- 5.4 percent Libraries
- 5.2 percent Recycling and Solid Waste
- 3.7 percent Animal Services

As you can see, the category with the second highest percentage is Parks and Recreation. Factor in the recent announcement that Forsyth was named Georgia's healthiest county for the sixth consecutive year and it's quite clear that our community values recreation.

And as the demand grows for more outdoor activities like walking, cycling, kayaking and boating; so do the number of amenities for county 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, northwest Forsyth became the home to the county's newest park. Eagle's Beak Park was funded by the Parks, Recreation and Green Space Bond approved by Forsyth County voters in 2008 and by the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) VI program.

The 226-acre park features a canoe and kayak launch on the Etowah River, nature trails, restroom facility and parking.

Sawnee Mountain Preserve added a new adventure for visitors late last spring. A climbing tower was made possible by a \$60,000 donation from the Sawnee Mountain Foundation and offers climbing and rappelling on heights of up to 38 feet at the preserve's visitor's center.

Phases one through four of the Big Creek Greenway located in Forsyth County span from McFarland Parkway to Kelly Mill Road for approximately 9.6 miles. And when the future Phase five is complete, the greenway will span approximately 15 miles in Forsyth County.

Just a handful of weeks ago, the county announced plans to purchase two adjacent land parcels totaling more than 70 acres in the southwest part of the county that could be the site of a future park next to the new Denmark High School. Early plans include four possible fields and an amphitheater.

Last fall, a new safety feature was added to several parks throughout the county. The Thor Guard Weather Warning System is now in place at all of the department's athletic facilities and at Sawnee Mountain Preserve to predict lightning before it strikes.

Our parks system now covers over 2700 hundred acres. That's 25 parks and counting with many more great recreational options on the way.

We must not forget that we only have this amazing parks system because of the impact fees, 2008 park bond and SPLOST dollars. Thank you for supporting that at the polls.

As our county continues to grow, an emphasis on public safety becomes a priority.

Sheriff Ron Freeman and Fire Chief Danny Bowman are in attendance with us today and we are honored to have them and the men and women who serve under them protecting our lives and property every day.

To all of the members in both of those departments working to protect our community, thank you.

Every day these men and women come to work knowing their lives are on the line to protect the lives and property of citizens. There are not enough words to thank them for their sacrifices as well as their families'.

One extremely important area the sheriff has placed an emphasis on is securing the safety of our schools. With that in mind, the sheriff is on a mission to hire 15 new School Resource Officers, bringing the total to 43.

That would allow for every school campus to have an SRO with two in every high school. The hiring of SRO's is going to be a big push for the department in the coming weeks.

In another step to keep our schools safe, the Sheriff's Office, along with Forsyth County Schools, rolled out a new school bus stop arm enforcement program. The program features a camera system to capture

vehicles illegally passing stopped school buses that have their stop sign extended to load and unload students. Violators who are caught on camera will receive a citation.

A new multi-agency Drug Task Force was also formed that includes the Johns Creek Police Department, Alpharetta Department of Public Safety, and Forsyth County Sheriff's Office. The task force is comprised of 18 agents who are committed to combatting drug sales in our areas. As of April, the drug task force had already made their presence known to area drug dealers and arrested three large scale dealers who were primary suppliers to local high school students.

And Sheriff Freeman proudly announced earlier this year that the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office has earned accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies.

CALEA's standards for awarding accreditation are acknowledged as benchmarks by law enforcement executives and major law enforcement associations. This accreditation signifies the sheriff's commitment to maintain the highest standards and greater accountability, while meeting goals of excellence within both the agency and our community.

Regarding the public's first responders, the Forsyth County Fire Department responded to a total of 14,993 incidents in 2017.

The total number of dispatched emergency fire apparatus was just over 18,000 for the year. It is evident that the demand for the county's emergency fire services has grown steadily over the years.

Despite the increasing number of calls, the Fire Department's average response time for on-scene arrival for a call was five minutes and 18 seconds. This is down from six minutes and 35 seconds in 2016. That is well below the national average that ranges around the 14 minute mark.

It was 20 years ago in March of this year when the county hired its first career firefighters. 16 of the original 30 hired in 1998 remain with the department in leadership roles.

Many have taken on various leadership ranks within the organization and have played a role in the department's growth and success. A true testament to the kind of men and women serving the county every day.

And last, but certainly not least, it's time for the greatest news this county has had in 40 years. It is the first time ever the county has had strong potential for water independence. This is essential to maintain life and economic viability.

With limited reserve water supply, this will give the county, the city of Cumming and its citizens the comfort of having a second intake in case the city's fails.

This type of redundancy is found and recommended in the Homeland Security manual. Without this intake, Forsyth County will pay \$103 million to the city of Cumming over the next 24 years for raw water based on our contract and CPI.

As much as, or more than, \$250 million could be paid over the next 50 years with the same terms, CPI and population growth. All of that just to draw our water with our allocation permit through their pipe hundreds of feet which will be treated in our treatment plant.

Because of these facts, a resolution was passed by the board of commissioners with a 5-0 vote to ask for our own easement into Lake Lanier.

Last November, I joined Commissioners Brown and Mills on a trip to Washington DC to hand deliver the resolution to Congressman Woodall, Congressman Collins, U.S. Senator Perdue and Special Assistant to the President/Deputy Director of Intergovernmental Affairs William H. Kirkland.

All of these elected officials now support Forsyth County's easement into Lake Lanier for a 408 permit and. In fact, here is what Congressman Woodall had to say on March 15, 2018 to Army Corps of Engineers Lieutenant General Todd T. Semonite.

Exciting news right? Well that isn't all. We now have a letter from the EPD supporting our easement. Here is what the EPD Director wrote on April 27th.

Dear Colonel DeLapp,

I am writing to request that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers commence negotiations with Forsyth County on an easement for a new water supply intake at Lake Lanier. As you are aware, the State of Georgia and the Corps are currently negotiating the terms of a contract for water supply storage at Lake Lanier. The State is also working with water supply utilities, including Forsyth County, to enter into subcontracts for the use of that storage. EPD anticipates entering into subcontracts either concurrent with or shortly after the State enters into the contract with the Corps.

At that point, EPD fully expects that Forsyth County will hold a subcontract in Lake Lanier. As a result, by the anticipated terms of the Corps contract and the subcontract, Forsyth County will be entitled to obtain an easement into Lake Lanier.

In addition, EPD is in the process of finalizing a modification of the existing State-issued water withdrawal permit that will allow Forsyth County to continue to withdraw water from Lake Lanier to accommodate present and reasonably anticipated growth. EPD anticipates putting that permit modification out for public comment in the near term, and the permit could be issued as soon as this summer. In light of the pending water supply contracts and Forsyth County's anticipated modification to its State water withdrawal permit, EPD requests that the Corps begin the process of negotiating the terms of an easement with Forsyth County at this time.

Negotiating the terms now will allow the Corps to issue the easement to Forsyth County as soon as the contracts in Lake Lanier are final. If the Corps and Forsyth County finalize easement negotiations in the near term, EPD would not object to the Corps issuing the easement to Forsyth County prior to the execution of the contracts.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

- Georgia Environmental Protection Division Director Richard E. Dunn

I would like to thank all of our state delegation, Senator Gooch, Senator Williams, House Representative Kevin Tanner, Mark Morris, Todd Jones, Sherri Gilligan and all of our citizens for the efforts they have made to help us get to this point.

Please continue to write Congressman Woodall and Collins supporting Forsyth County's easement into Lake Lanier.

We are at 4th and Goal and need everybody's help to get the ball across the goal line.

I would just like to say again how grateful I am for the opportunity to serve as your chairman of the Board of Commissioners, and how much I appreciate having the chance to speak with you today to provide an update on the state of our county.

Before we leave here I would like to acknowledge one of our commissioners who has chosen not to run for re-election.

District One Commissioner Pete Amos, would you please stand.

Would you please join me in recognizing Commissioner Amos.

On behalf of the Board of Commissioners and the Forsyth County government staff, thank you for allowing us the opportunity to serve you.