

State of the Community 2022

It is great to be with you today in such a vibrant, giving, and creative place, where we have constant reasons to be reminded of how fortunate we are to call Athens home. Of course, the times all of us have endured in the last 24 months require us to reflect on what we have learned and continue to draw strength from one another. If you are hearing this message, you surely have been knocked about by the great physical, emotional and economic tsunami that this era has brought to our doorstep. So many among us have lost friends, family members, parents, grandparents, mentors, or colleagues, and it is only human to acknowledge the way it has left us winded at times.

As we look forward to a year of immense possibility for the Athens-Clarke County Community, we can also take stock of the wealth of resources in front of us, as well as the great work this community has done taking care of one another over these last two years. While challenges remain that we need to acknowledge and address, we have maintained the lowest mortality rate from COVID-19 of any urbanized county in Georgia, we have simultaneously experienced unprecedented new investment and economic success, and we have made great strides forward in supporting all Athenians. For our engine to be firing on all cylinders, I need to thank each and every member of our community, from all those who paid careful attention to safe protocols, to everyone who ordered a meal from a local restaurant or caterer, to the dedicated Athens-Clarke County Unified Government workforce supported by Manager Blaine Williams, along with our constitutional officers, judiciary, and my colleagues on the County Commission, and most of all, the tireless medical staff at our amazing hospitals and community clinics.

As we look to the time ahead, there are interlocking circles that will continue to draw us together in common cause, including economic prosperity for all Athenians, attention to the physical infrastructure that ties us together, and mutual care for our community needs.

We continue to experience historically low unemployment, having dropped to pre-pandemic levels of 2.5% by December 2021. **Business expansion** has been a great source of pride in recent years, with more than \$315M of building permits issued in 2021 (in terms of project value), an historical record. Here in your local government, we have streamlined redevelopment processes for stormwater

management, and refined our requirements related to grading single family neighborhoods as two significant process improvements. In addition, retail spending in Athens is at an all-time high, and is the highest in Northeast Georgia in both in total annual revenue and when measured per-capita. Simply put, **businesses are expanding, and people are spending money here in Athens.**

Significant new jobs in Athens include hundreds of new positions at RWDC (who make a replacement for plastic from used vegetable oil, an innovation birthed at UGA), Boehringer Ingelheim (who are doing critical work in animal vaccine development), the Classic Center (whose world class arena will be opening late next year), and Wayfair (who have occupied the former General Time facility). Other businesses that have expanded or permitted additional operations in last two years include Publix, Creature Comforts, Heyward Allen Toyota, REI and scores of new businesses.

Just as the University of Georgia promotes the great work their research and development faculty and staff do in bringing products developed on campus to market, and we continue to partner with many operations that they have launched, in Athens-Clarke County we are also working to make it just as easy for entrepreneurs starting at their kitchen table by bringing our resources to bear to ensure that all have access to planning and permitting knowledge and technical support. Our Economic Development office has worked with the Enterprise Innovation Institute to complete an Innovation Ecosystem Needs Assessment focused on the needs of entrepreneurs of color, women entrepreneurs and creative entrepreneurs. These findings will be the work plan for a Small Business & Entrepreneurship position that will be hired this Spring with funds that the Commission has allocated.

Given heightened local incentives for redevelopment, which includes the creation of 6 Tax Allocation Districts, and creation of an Inclusionary Zoning Policy (about which I will mention more in a minute), we are going to see even more investment in Athens in the months and years ahead. This will include a nearly half-billion-dollar revitalization of the Georgia Square Mall site, and new business activity in Beechwood, Newton Bridge Road, Barnett Shoals Road, the Athens Tech area, and other locations throughout the community.

Any community that has a growing employment base also must take housing needs seriously, as local realtors have identified that housing inventory is at a modern-era low. In one significant residential development, the first phase of our North Downtown project is now underway at the site of the former Bethel Midtown Village, which will bring more than a thousand new bedrooms to the core of our community, many of them priced in reach of nurses, teachers, and service industry professionals. This public-private partnership, made possible through our SPLOST program, will be joined by much-needed new housing stock across a variety of price-points, including with support of more than \$11M of ARPA funds, and facilitated by the previously mentioned Inclusionary Zoning policy, which was approved by our Planning Commission last month, and is poised for final approval in a few weeks. This will invite the creation of homes in locations that are crumbling, or serve only as vast seas of asphalt parking. This will help accommodate many of the more than 40,000 people who must drive into Athens to work every day for lack of housing availability. And as this redevelopment happens, it will include homes that are permanently affordable for the workforce that is so critical to our collective success.

To continue these economic development and housing strides, we must maintain key investments in the physical infrastructure that ties us together. In addition to the road maintenance embedded in our annual capital program, we will be investing more heavily in road safety in the coming years, continuing the safety audits that we have done locally, and in conjunction with GDOT, and expanding the safety improvements we have funded for Milledge Avenue, West Broad Street. In this effort, we will be examining Tallasse Road and other key corridors.

We intend to enhance our transit service this year with passage of the 2022 TSPLOST to create higher frequency service on key corridors, layering this on top of the business expansions and new housing stock that I have discussed to highlight our place as a modern city in which owning a vehicle is not the only means of mobility. We also will work with the A.T.L., metro Atlanta's regional transit planning body, as they have recommended a scheduled bus route connecting MARTA to our Multimodal Center. If implemented, this would mean that a student or commuter would no longer need to white-knuckle it behind the wheel to attend a work meeting in Atlanta or go see mom for the weekend.

Adding to the nearly mile-and-a-half of new sidewalk recently installed at locations that include Barnett Shoals Road, Baxter Street, Magnolia Street, and West Broad Street, pedestrian and trail upgrades we will see this year include the completion of the North Oconee River Greenway segment directly connecting Oconee Street and College Station Road, along with extension of the Firefly Trail to downtown Winterville, replacement of the Tallassee Road Bridge, and thank heavens, completion of the Downtown Infrastructure Improvements on Clayton Street. If you have not strolled down the smooth, wide sidewalk between Lumpkin St. and Jackson St., do yourself a favor, and head down there right after this with a friend to grab a hot cup of coffee and do some shopping!

At our airport we have completed pavement rehabilitation of the main taxiway, to include new lighting and enhanced taxiway turns radius, and re-construction of the secondary runway will happen this year. While the pandemic temporarily paused some travel activity, airport management has opened the door for communication with several airlines and will continue to work to get future passenger service back in Athens.

To take care of aging storm drains, during 2021, Transportation & Public Works staff replaced 10 failing culverts utilizing in-house forces and funded by the stormwater utility fee, many of these constructed of corrugated pipe decades ago. And knowing that it has been more than fifteen years since we reviewed the structure of our stormwater management program, I initiated a Stormwater Advisory Committee last year in which residents have been taking a deep dive into issues surrounding the level of service associated with the stormwater fee.

Our commitment to sustainability continues in earnest. The Sustainability Office undertook extensive community engagement over the last year for our clean energy campaign, gathering information from the public, community organizations, and businesses during dozens of sessions to create a path to renewable energy for a plan that will be complete this summer. Related activities include a \$200,000 Georgia Environmental Finance Authority Grant to install a solar and battery storage system at the Family Protection Center that will keep the facility functioning in the event the electrical grid failure, and our order of fully electric buses for our Transit fleet are on their way, due for arrival first quarter of 2023

All of this is part of ACC's efforts to transition to clean and renewable energy sources and save taxpayers money in the process. Since its creation in 2017, the programs and activities sponsored and/or coordinated by the Sustainability Office have generated more than \$2.5M in grants and donations and brought more than \$600,000 in operational savings.

Because maintenance of our natural environment is an important piece of sustainability, our **Restore our River Project** removed invasive plants from approximately 12 acres adjacent to the newly built Greenway Path between College Avenue and North Avenue, and 20 acres at Dudley Park, with preservation of an additional 30 acres of High Priority Habitats adjacent to the North Oconee River upcoming. Work thus far included valuable partnerships with the UGA Sustainability Office for native plants and funding by the non-profit OneTree in partnership with Caterpillar.

We continue to take public safety extremely seriously, and recognize that conversations about public safety must be had with the necessary complexity and breadth of understanding. We are grateful that the dramatic spikes in crime that have afflicted similarly sized communities throughout the state have not been present here, and that overall crime decreased. While many comparable communities in Georgia experienced several dozen murders each in 2021, Athens-Clarke saw only four. However, each of these murders was a life ended much too soon, and to prevent further deaths we have more work to do, just as the rise that has occurred in specific categories of crime such as aggravated assault and motor vehicle theft needs to be swiftly addressed.

When it comes to safety from crime, we must recognize that interdiction of drug, weapon and human trafficking is an element of our support for human dignity and for the sanctity of our homes and neighborhoods, and so retention of skilled Police Officers is critical. Thus, we have taken a large stride in terms of compensation of our Officers in the last year, raising starting salaries to \$47k/year, on top of which we offer a \$3k signing bonus. I will be recommending a further salary hike this year, bringing starting pay to almost 50k/year. In addition, I am asking for re-initiation of our Police Department Corporal program, so that young people who have grown up in Athens can be trained in law enforcement and lend their deep knowledge of this community to careers in caring for their friends and neighbors.

We also recognize that technology and force multipliers can more rapidly solve crimes and stem the tide of additional crimes. Already this year, we have approved purchase of a ballistics analysis device, which will prevent delays in sending bullets found to the GBI, and I will be recommending additional investments in cameras and safety-by-design analysis. If we can create spaces that are less crime-prone, we benefit the community at large and the professional efforts of our investigators alike.

Knowing that incidents of police violence across the nation have scarred the consciousness of so many Americans, and to ensure that we do not replicate any of these traumatic episodes, we also have initiated a **Public Safety Civilian Oversight Board** this year, so that law enforcement and community members have a formal opportunity to exchange observations and recommendations. In this, we join many hundreds of communities throughout the nation, small and large, in creating a bridge to greater understanding, building upon existing efforts from within the Department and within the community.

We know that a national phenomenon that has sadly afflicted our region is that we are living amidst a behavioral health crisis that presents itself in chemical dependency and homelessness alike. Just as the nation saw over 100,000 overdose deaths last year for the first time ever, officers in our Police Department have responded many dozens of times in the last year with overdose prevention treatments.

To expand our response toolbox, we took a huge step this year with creation of Alternative Crisis Response Team to address clearly nonviolent episodes of behavioral health need. That team is in addition to the seven approved Co-Responder Teams, pairing police officers with clinicians from Advantage Behavioral Health Services. That program has become a statewide model, and we field calls weekly from other communities regarding its success.

In the coming year we will be pursuing an expansion of inpatient bed space for behavioral health needs through our SPLOST program, as well as utilizing an additional \$4M through the American Rescue Plan Act for related needs.

We also will work with our partners in the Homeless Coalition to pursue a comprehensive homeless services strategic plan, and fund the initial element of that plan. I anticipate it will include both comprehensive case management needs, so those individuals who have been challenged by circumstance can get back to productive lives, as well as commitment to the rapid rehousing and permanent supportive housing options that are in such short supply in this very tight housing market.

I am heartened that after years in which Athens was the only homeless service provider between Atlanta and Greenville, that Gwinnett County has opened bed space for unsheltered persons this year, and other neighboring counties have shown similar interest, as they recognize the stress felt by family members in their own jurisdictions.

We are also grateful for the work of our state and federal partners, with both Georgia House Speaker David Ralston and US Senator Raphael Warnock introducing new funding and operational remedies addressing this behavioral health crisis in their respective bodies in recent months.

We know that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so we will be further expanding our youth development efforts this year to ensure that we make generational investments in opportunity for our children and grandchildren, and they will be less likely to need the crisis response resources that I have just described.

We seek to support all of our young people through their developmental years, particularly those who have been most at risk given longstanding patterns of segregation and resource deprivation. From monumental investments in neighborhood revitalization to partnerships with the Clarke County School District, Athens Technical College, and the University of Georgia, we will not stop until every young person has the optimal position from which to begin a healthy productive life.

Our internal youth support agency, our Leisure Services Department, converted outdated computer labs into Teen Technology Labs at Heard Park, Lay Park, and Rocksprings Park. These upgraded spaces have modern computers and technology equipment that include robotics, creative design, podcasting, virtual reality games, and much more. **Speaking of our Leisure Services Department**, for the ninth time in 19 years, the Department received the prestigious Georgia Recreation and Park Association's state "**Agency of the Year**" for populations of 80,000 - 150,000. The award is based on outstanding programs and accomplishments over the past year, as voted on by Parks and Recreation professionals from throughout the state.

Fantastic new resources are forthcoming in the next two years with prioritization of the new Eastside Library and the Eastside Youth Development Complex through our SPLOST program. Knowing the generational impact these facilities will make, we have front-loaded them in the sequence of voter-approved capital expenditures ensuring we break ground on these projects as soon as possible.

We have also recently approved two allocations for youth programming in which we will partner with the amazing array of grassroots nonprofit youth service providers that we are blessed to have in our community. To kickstart efforts, we are providing 500K for nonprofits for Summer 2022 to keep our young people positively engaged in the near-term. This will be joined by an additional \$6.5M of additional funds for youth serving nonprofits in the coming four years. With this longer-term effort, we are building a critical partnership with both the nonprofit community and the Clarke County School District to ensure that there are strong systemic ties among all those that have the best interests of our coming generations of young leaders in mind.

Beyond our engagement with our young residents, we continue to strive to be a fully inclusive government. To support this effort, our Inclusion Office has developed an Equity Impact Assessment Tool to evaluate SPLOST projects and ARPA funded projects. We also worked with the Human Rights Campaign and saw our **Municipal Equality Index** score improve from 29 in 2020 to 68 in 2021, partly in response to the passage of our non-discrimination ordinance. In this we join Decatur, Brookhaven, Atlanta, and other successful cities throughout Georgia. To achieve tangible gains for those who have been under-supported, we have also

funded a **disparity study** as the first step to a program to ensure that disadvantaged businesses get a fair opportunity to secure government contracts.

As your local government, we also strive to be a model employer, with every position in the Unified Government now beginning at no less than \$15/hour. In addition, our Human Resource Department has hired an Equity, Diversity & Inclusion professional to ensure that the ACCGov workforce fully represents the diversity of population within Athens-Clarke County.

We also seek to support those members of our community who may be transitioning back from incarceration or supervision. Our Central Services Department has partnered with the Department of Corrections to begin offering the On-The-Job Training Certification Program to returning citizens working in landscape maintenance and print shop programs. This training and experience allows participants receive Certifications from the Technical College System of Georgia which can be used as a foundation from which to seek fulltime employment in the community.

I will be recommending funding for expanded use of the Transition Center segment of our Corrections unit this year to employ people who are transitioning out of incarceration, creating a new foundation for their work lives while benefiting our community. This will allow us to further our corridor beautification efforts in the coming fiscal year, including partnering with the This will bolster the work of Keep Athens-Clarke County Beautiful, who recently launched the new “Love Where You Live” campaign, to heighten the great staff and volunteer litter remediation and beautification efforts that they pursue.

I mention their efforts last, because as a largely volunteer effort, they exemplify the spirit of the Classic City, a place where each of you provide so much time, energy, and commitment to this community year-in, year-out, whether in “normal” times, crisis response or the “new normal.” So, I want to again recognize the individual efforts that each of you make to this healthy, vibrant community. As you ready your child for school in the morning, as you open your business each day, as you care for your neighbors, and as you provide the grace and generosity that is a foundation of Athens’ life, I cannot thank you enough, and I wish you a great year on the road ahead.