

State of the Community 2025

Thank you for joining me today. The successes of Athens would not be realized if not for your constant efforts. The creative and giving residents of our community have always been the most critical element of our strength. I also wish to thank my many colleagues in the Unified Government: Commissioners, Management and Staff current and past, down to every employee checking kids into afterschool programs, keeping our water supply safe, or responding to an emergency. The vitality of this community is built on solid teamwork.

It is a given that in Athens we enjoy a high quality of life.

Awards and accolades are nonstop. One of the best places to retire. Two time national champion football team in the last five years. A city that punches above its weight as a creative hub. Fantastic outdoor experiences. Here in the Unified Government, a Leisure Services Department that is constantly awarded the best in class in Georgia.

Just last year I encountered a group of friends having the time of their lives on North Campus, having travelled here from Pennsylvania for the first time, and hearing about what a great experience a football weekend in Athens could be. A few months later, I met a fan of the band the Drive By Truckers at the 40 Watt Club who came from England for a week to revel in that band's homecoming shows. Continually, I walk out the door of City Hall to see wide eyed visitors from around the globe gazing at the Music Walk of Fame markers downtown.

Just as fulfilling, a month ago, I sat with second graders at Fowler Elementary who were as motivated and thoughtful as young people of any age. I have every confidence that among them was a future mayor.

If you want to find a beautiful portrait of Athens, just stroll down the Greenway between College Avenue and Sandy Creek Nature Center on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Walking there among retirees, students, young families pushing strollers, and people from every background is to be part of a deeply loving community.

With your commitment and passion, the great places we have to celebrate just keep arriving. We can now enjoy professional Rock Lobsters hockey and world class music at the Akins Arena at the Classic Center.

This year we began work on a gorgeous new design for the College Square Plaza, where the University meets the City, and where a lush tree canopy and outdoor seating that will welcome residents and visitors alike.

In 2025 and beyond, to ensure that the place we love continues to be strong and vital, we will lean into the cornerstones of a successful community and successful lives: healthy neighborhoods, safe public spaces that connect us to each other, good jobs, and access to the education that brings upward mobility.

Housing is certainly among the community needs that we hear the most about right now, and that is understandable, as a secure life must include a place to call home.

We are in the midst of critical work on this question, which will require efforts from each and every one of us, including a willingness to meet this moment. I say that because we are at a juncture when need to plan for years ahead, not the past. Our future land use plan will set the stage for zoning code changes to open opportunity for now and for coming generations. That plan now under development, and poised for approval this summer needs to be forward looking, and consider the needs of today's six and seven year olds as much as today's 60 and 70-year-olds. We know that healthcare, academic, and biotech jobs, along with the service sector work that follows, will continue to grow. We need to make sure that people can travel four or 5 miles to work not 40 or 50 miles. I expect this will mean some gentle changes across the map, with more concentrated density along corridors like Atlanta Highway, and at key intersections, such as exits around the Highway 10 Loop.

In addition to creating available opportunity for residents and businesses across the county, we also have targeted housing efforts for residents who earn far below median income. Right now in Athens are more than 4500 families who earn below \$35,000 per year and pay more than half of their income in housing costs. To have a truly thriving community, we are creating an environment in which these residents can have

homes from which can get to work and raise their children successfully.

While housing availability and affordability challenges will require us to strive for years to come, every single effort is important, and so many of these efforts come through partnerships. With the Athens Housing Authority, and through your approval of our current SPLOST program, we are rebuilding the North Downtown area formerly known as Bethel Homes, with the first phase just complete. This will take one of the most under-resourced neighborhoods in town, and transform it into the most desirable. And by increasing the density there, we will maintain at least as many affordable units and prevent displacement. This mixed-income model has served us well at Columbia Brookside where a tripling of the number of residents from the former public housing neighborhood also yielded a 60% reduction in calls for police. There is nothing more traumatizing to young people than to live amongst violence and crime, and these redevelopments will mean that today's young people will live with fewer scars on their minds and bodies.

The Housing Authority has also been a stalwart partner in seeking out new housing opportunities for nurses, lab techs, baristas and retirees, and between their efforts assisting with Low Income Housing Tax Credits and the zoning approvals from the County Commission, hundreds of units are springing up near Athens Technical College, to be followed by more on Lexington Highway near the airport and on Atlanta Highway just west of Epps Bridge.

Habitat for Humanity, the Athens Land Trust, and the East Athens Development Corporation are also key partners in building more affordable homes for residents, and also provide critical counseling and financial education. In 2025 we will extend the good work they are able to do by introducing a working Land Bank Authority, which is able to assist families who have dormant properties by managing title challenges and eliminating back taxes so that those properties can again become homes for families. We will also use an inventory of public properties held by Athens-Clarke County that are viable for residential use to further partner with affordable housing providers.

The Athens Homeless Coalition and their many partners continues to coordinate supportive services for unsheltered residents, and their work is to be commended. Having spent decades of my life in public education working among families who have fallen on hard times, it is clear that well-coordinated case management and focused efforts toward housing will make the difference. Related efforts include the 60 bed treatment facility operated by Advantage Behavioral Health Services funded with a combination of SPLOST funds and state dollars that will rise out of the ground this year, and provide a key connection in getting people to healthier lives. Like with providing sufficient housing stock generally, homelessness is a challenge that we must tackle for the long-term, as its roots are varied and require a multitude of solutions to meaningfully address.

Another cornerstone of a healthy community is one where safety is prioritized.

Roadway safety continues to be a critical area of this effort, for not just comfort and convenience, but for the ability to see our neighbors safely to their destinations. Sadly, many recent years have ended with more than twenty roadway deaths across Athens. Our Vision Zero Office in the Transportation and Public Works Department will be working diligently to reduce that number. Already, we have been able to identify the intersections with the greatest risk, and with the more than \$16 million in funds allocated, will begin redesigning roadways and intersections that are demonstrably dangerous, such as the corner of Oglethorpe and Hawthorne Avenues.

Safety and mobility improvements in the next year will also include completion of the Loop 10 at Lexington interchange, rebuilding the Loop 10 at Atlanta Hwy interchange to create safer passage for all users. With the Georgia Department of Transportation's assistance, we will also begin reconstruction of Chase Street between the elementary school and Newton Bridge Road, conversion of the intersection of Hancock Avenue and West Broad Street to a safer roundabout, along with construction of a multi-use path that will begin at that point and extend to the intersection of Atlanta Highway and Epps Bridge Parkway. Work is also underway toward completion of the segment of the Firefly Trail between downtown Athens and Winterville, and I can't wait to meet Mayor Ferrelle from Winterville along that path. Safety improvements are also being prepared on Prince

Avenue, Newton Bridge Road, Vincent Drive, North Avenue, and Lexington Highway.

The work of our public safety agencies is also paramount, so I wish to highlight some of their great work.

We will enhance Fire Department responsiveness by continuing rollout of a multi-year plan for additional medical personnel, responding to the reality that sixty percent of calls to our nine fire stations are for medical needs. A new fire station in the southeastern part of the county will allow us to maintain an ISO (Insurance Services Office) rating of one, which will provide optimal response times and keep insurance rates at the lowest levels possible.

We will also see the introduction this year of a Mobile Medical Center, in a partnership with Piedmont Athens Regional Medical Center, to bring critical care to residents where they live.

Turning to the Athens Clarke County Police Department, they have pulled together optimal funding, highly skilled leadership, and quality training, to bring - - for the first time in my more eighteen years of local government service - - a department with all certified officer positions within the department filled. Furthermore, our recent classes of hires reflect the range of backgrounds of Athenians, to bring the department what all agencies seek: a force that looks like the community.

All of this great work by the Police Department and others has borne dividends: crime in Athens was down 3% last year, on top of the 4% reduction in 2023, and we are going to continue to push this even lower. Because while the five murders in Athens last year may represent an historical low, and is certainly preferable to the dozens of murders in our peer cities across Georgia, the only acceptable number for any of us is zero.

As we look to the future, we need to work across public safety and criminal justice agencies to reduce both crime and reduce our jail population, as a wealth of research has demonstrated that excess nights spent in jail have both a fiscal and a social cost. It should be no surprise to anyone that rarely do people get healthier when simply incarcerated. Fortunately, the accountability courts that have been a model for the rest of the state continues to demonstrate what a difference diligence and use of well-honed rehabilitation efforts can make in the lives of a community. I've worked here long enough to see teenagers dabble in substance abuse and criminality, fall into addiction and hopelessness, but then find helping hands that allow them to work their way out of the chaos to become great and contributing neighbors. Some experiences crystalize the power of these efforts, and hanging with a former student and her child at a playground while my own child played basketball was a solid reminder that – while undeniably difficult – the efforts we make to support others make a real difference.

Lastly, I want to turn to how Successful Paths to Education and Careers are among the means by which we achieve the ideal Athens.

We know that when we support our young residents, that they will thrive individually, and that we will create a better community for everyone. This is why one of the our efforts with federal funds over the last few years has been an emphasis on youth programming. Together with the Clarke County School District, we initiated, then expanded a sports collaborative for fourth through eighth grade students. This provides the opportunity for every elementary and middle school in the District to host basketball, volleyball, cross country, cheerleading and more. Hundreds of young residents now spend their afterschool hours experiencing teamwork, and high schools now will have better prepared student athletes as they become ninth graders. To attend the elementary school championship basketball games the last two years with families from every neighborhood in Athens is to feel a high as great as any that you would have at Stegman Coliseum or Sanford Stadium, and go home with the knowledge that through support of this program, we are helping Athens thrive for decades to come because of the lessons these young neighbors are learning.

Similarly, the expanded programming that the Boys and Girls Clubs of Athens have pursued with local assistance has ensured that residents of Rocksprings, Parkview, Nellie B and other Housing Authority neighborhoods now have afterschool programming for the first time in years. In addition, the Clubs' YouthForce program at the mall extends the power of the Clubs' to older teens and young adults to help them find a firmer footing in life.

We are also particularly proud to be a partner with the school district in the Biotech pathway that opened this year at the Athens Community Career Academy. For my entire time in Athens, this community has discussed the need to ensure that high-wage and high-growth professions are open to young residents who grow up here. This pathway's opening means that the diligent efforts of our Economic Development Department, the University of Georgia, Athens Technical College, and our state and private sector partners now feature a ladder to success that reaches down to young minds who may never have conceived of such employment options in earlier generations.

We also continue to lean into the growth opportunities represented by the medical community, bioscience, advanced manufacturing, creative arts, and entrepreneurship. The Meissner bio-science facility will soon be open to support the entire life science industry by building equipment essential to their operations, and there is another phase of the Boehringer Ingelheim vaccine innovation and production facility now under construction. We continue to be excited about the expanding Medical College at the University of Georgia, and everything it will bring to a region and a state with clear needs for additional medical professionals.

Supporting all of these industries is the emerging Athens Achieves collaborative with the Athens Area Chamber of Commerce, which will help shepherd residents to employment and maintain relationships with newly hired employees to ensure the continued success of both individuals and businesses.

The efforts I've discussed are just the tip of the iceberg, and are joined by scores of other initiatives that will continue to strengthen our foundational cornerstones for a strong, safe, and welcoming Athens. Working together, we form a foundation that will not crack or yield, and that will support all of our residents, whether raising a family, enjoying retirement, attending school, or writing the next song that will be heard half a world away.