

JOHNS CREEK 2009 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Mayor Mike Bodker

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INTRODUCTION - SURVEY

On several occasions, I've said that if you asked Johns Creek citizens the famous question President Ronald Reagan once posed to the country – “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” – the answer would be a resounding yes.

Well, in 2008 we essentially asked that very question. And the answer WAS a resounding yes.

Last year, I stood before you and pronounced the State of the City to be strong.

That determination was purely anecdotal, but hard to deny. After all, we had successfully stood up a new city.

This year we have unbiased, scientific data to demonstrate that the state of the city is strong indeed.

This past September, a well-known Washington DC polling firm surveyed three hundred registered Johns Creek voters. The results surpassed even our most optimistic expectations.

What they show is we have delivered on our promise to create a government that is responsive, transparent and fiscally responsible

Three-quarters of respondents said they are satisfied with the direction the city is going.

Our survey consultant said it was among the highest satisfaction ratings he's seen in more than 20 years. It puts us among the top ten cities out of almost four hundred surveyed in the past few years.

Some of the reasons our citizens are so satisfied include:

- The fact we have a safe community with a low crime rate
- The fact we have great schools in Johns Creek
- The fact we've controlled growth
- And the overall quality of life here

I'm also pleased that about seven out of 10 approve of the job Council and I are doing in dealing with the issues and problems facing Johns Creek.

Almost the same percentage feels we are doing a better job of providing services than Fulton County did.

Amazingly, three-quarters of respondents approve of our new Police Department's work fighting crime and improving public safety. More than half say they are doing a better job than what Fulton provided.

Those results rank the Johns Creek police SECOND in the country, according to the research firm.

And when it comes to Public Works, close to two-thirds gave those folks a thumbs up.

So can you guess what respondents believe is the most pressing problem facing the city?

It's a subject I've been harping on since before incorporation. That's right – it's traffic. And I'll come back to this in more detail a bit later.

Two questions I found particularly interesting center around the public-private partnership we have with CH2M HILL OMI.

This approach to providing municipal services is designed to be seamless. Based on the results, it seems we've been successful.

While this unique approach has received a great deal of publicity, 66 percent of those surveyed were not aware of it.

But whether they know about it or not, they certainly like the idea; 60 percent approve of the concept.

That tells me our citizens don't care who is providing them with their services or how, as long as the quality is high.

These results also say a great deal about the people who work for you.

City Manager John Kachmar says this is the best staff he's worked with in his 30 years in government. These results certainly support that opinion.

I must say how proud I am of our staff and our City Council for their willingness to submit to the scrutiny a survey like this invites.

However, while we obviously have every reason to be pleased with these results, we realize that we have set the bar high.

We cannot rest on our accomplishments.

There's always room for improvement, and the challenges before us will only continue to grow.

2008 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

So, why did we rank so highly? Well, it's due in part to some of the many things that happened in 2008.

How many of you have seen the new police cars patrolling your neighborhood or fire engine racing quickly to a call?

Probably nothing announced our presence as a city more visibly than these vehicles, all with "Johns Creek" emblazoned on the side.

In late April, our police department hit the streets. The 56 officers are now actively pursuing criminal activity and focusing on traffic enforcement. Their presence has clearly made our streets safer.

Equally important, the department has quickly reached out to the community.

In the Shield business watch program, our officers partner with business owners to help prevent crime through education and awareness.

PACT – which stands for Police And Community Together – is a neighborhood watch program. Residents and officers work together to identify neighborhood issues, prevent future crimes and short-circuit rumors.

The department also struck an historic joint agreement with the Fulton County School Police.

This proactive partnership will help keep kids safe on campus and in the community.

In October, the 78 firefighters of the Johns Creek Fire Department joined their police counterparts in helping protect lives and property in the City.

The department operates out of three fire stations acquired from Fulton County.

Station 1 – on Medlock Bridge Parkway – This station also serves as department headquarters

Station 2 – near Shakeraq Park and;

Station 3 – near Newtown Park

The new department has lot of nice, shiny new equipment. We have:

- 3 engine trucks;

- 2 “quints”, which are a combination pumper and aerial bucket truck; and
- 2 Quick-Response Vehicles or QRVs

I’m particularly happy about the QRVs.

You might not know that most calls to a fire department aren’t about fires. Usually, they’re emergency medical calls.

By sending the QRVs as first-responders, we are able to keep the other equipment in reserve for an actual fire call.

And these vehicles are literally lifesavers.

With a licensed paramedic on each one, they can stabilize and transport patients.

They carry electronic technology that can send vital signs directly to physicians at the hospital while en route.

Johns Creek has NEVER had these capabilities available before.

Together, the fire and police departments have vastly increased the public safety capabilities in Johns Creek to unprecedented levels.

HEART READY CITY

With its strong sense of community and commitment to family, Johns Creek can be said to be a City with a heart.

Last July, we became the American Heart Association’s first “Heart Ready City” in Georgia.

Every 26 seconds an American has a heart attack.

Every 60 seconds, someone dies from one.

Using an Automated External Defibrillator – a small, portable device that sends an electric shock to the heart and restores a patient’s heart rhythm to normal levels – greatly increases the chance of survival.

The City received this award because we committed to do things like:

- Putting AEDs in all our police cars, City offices, and parks
- Train our employees on how to use the AEDs and perform CPR

- Develop a similar training program for the community, and
- Encourage businesses to also purchase AEDs for their locations

This award also is another example of how Johns Creek seeks creative partnerships to better the community.

Emory Johns Creek Hospital donated 14-thousand-dollars, leading a group that included Georgia Power, Rural Metro EMS, Ciba Vision, and Olde Taylor Farms to raise a total of 38-thousand-dollars to purchase the AEDs for the police cars.

Emory also will collaborate with our Fire Department and the Heart Association on the community-wide AED/CPR training program.

Allow me to take a moment here to give a “shout-out” to Emory Johns Creek.

Beyond the superb medical care the hospital provides, Emory Johns Creek has become one of our community’s leading corporate citizens.

In addition to their contributions to the Heart Ready program, they also provided 20-thousand-dollars for medical equipment on our Quick Response Vehicles.

Emory Johns Creek celebrates its second anniversary in a few days and I’d like to extend early best wishes to them.

In this short time, you have woven yourselves into the fabric of our community. We greatly appreciate all you do.

RECREATION AND PARKS

One way to keep your heart healthy is through exercise.

Our Recreation and Parks Division made sure Johns Creek residents had plenty of chances to play in 2008.

In addition to the youth athletic programs operated by our non-profit associations at Newtown and Ocee parks, this year we added:

- An adult co-ed softball league
- A spring egg hunt for the kids
- A youth and adult tennis program

We also

- Hosted a youth baseball regional tournament that brought more than 400 people to town.
- Held a qualifier for the national Pitch, Hit & Run competition
- Sponsored the City's first Swim team.

This gave Johns Creek swimmers their first opportunity to advance to the state championship meet.

They certainly took advantage of the opportunity, bringing home 42 medals.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

One particularly significant milestone in 2008 was completion of our own Comprehensive Plan.

When Johns Creek incorporated, we operated under Fulton County's plan.

In autumn 2007, we embarked on an 18-month process to create our own Comp Plan to guide the City's growth and development, transportation and green space.

A successful comp plan reflects the citizens' collective vision for their community.

Council and I want to thank the 11 members of the Citizen Advisory Committee as well as members of the transportation and green plan subcommittees. Their contribution of time and talent working with our staff and consultants brought this plan to fruition.

I also want to thank the hundreds of residents who took their time to attend meetings or share thoughts via e-mail. Your input truly shaped this plan.

It's important to remember that the Comprehensive Plan is a living document. It will change as the community grows and evolves.

But it does serve as a blueprint as we make decisions on future growth and redevelopment.

BUDGET

I believe one reason survey respondents ranked their elected officials so highly comes back to our fiscal responsibility.

I'm very pleased that – at a time many cities are running a deficit – we were able to approve our third straight balanced budget this year.

The 2009 budget totals 47-point-4 million dollars. This includes almost 2-point-5 million dollars for Capital Improvement Projects, and slightly more than a half-million going into the city contingency fund.

The charts here show a breakdown of revenue sources, along with how we spend your tax dollars.

I will also note that we continued to maintain the City's millage rate – your property tax rate – at the same level we were paying under Fulton County.

Our rate of 4.614 mills is the lowest among cities of our size in Metro Atlanta.

Remember, too, that when your tax bill arrives in the mail, the portion of city taxes is actually the smallest. You can see here how the percentages break down, with more than half going to Fulton County Schools.

FOUNDERS DAY

2008 ended with a rousing Founders Day celebration.

Our inaugural event was so well received that we decided to expand the festivities into a weeklong affair.

We began with our decoration-lighting ceremony at City Hall on our birthday, Monday, December 1.

The rest of the week included:

- Kids making their own holiday ornaments at the Johns Creek Arts Center
- Council and I reading our favorite holiday stories to elementary students
- A Toys for Tots drive
- Inviting residents to sign greeting cards that were sent to our troops overseas
- And a holiday workshop sponsored by Emory Johns Creek Hospital.

The festivities culminated Saturday with our Founders Day parade.

With Channel 11 anchor and Johns Creek resident Karyn Greer providing the commentary, we welcomed close to 100 entries.

And it was easy to see that the crowd of spectators lining State Bridge Road had increased significantly from last year.

We'll be holding this new Johns Creek tradition each year on the first Saturday in December. So it's not too early to mark your calendars for this year's edition.

REGIONAL/STATE LEADER

Perhaps most significant for Johns Creek in 2008 was our emergence as a regional and state leader.

For example, the City is playing a leading administrative role in development of the North Fulton Regional Transportation Plan.

And one of my goals this year was to become more involved in ways that help increase Johns Creek's presence on the larger stage.

As Chair of the Metro Atlanta Mayors Association, I have the opportunity to work with my fellow mayors to exert the collective influence of 67 municipalities on a range of issues that affect everyone in this room.

This, along with

- my new role as Chair of the Georgia Municipal Association's Revenue and Finance Committee;
- a seat on the Atlanta Regional Commission's Transportation and Air Quality Committee;
- and membership on the Senate Study Committee on Sales Tax Privatization

all mean Johns Creek has a voice in shaping policy and reaping benefits for all our citizens.

I am grateful for the opportunity to represent your interests.

STRATEGIC PLAN

This past August, Council members and I, joined by senior administrators, gathered for a planning retreat. There we accomplished several objectives.

First, we outlined our mission as a city – what we do.

Second, we developed our vision for the future – what we want to become.

We also defined what we believe are your government’s core values.

We used these to craft our first strategic plan, which outlines our goals for the next five years.

We want to:

- Improve our transportation system
- Provide excellent services in an efficient, cost-effective manner
- Expand business opportunities and local economy
- Build our community pride, and
- Develop leisure, recreation and arts opportunities

Why is this plan important?

Well, they say if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.

Our city has many needs and desires, buffered by limited resources.

This strategic plan serves as a roadmap for our decisions whenever we face issue or question. It keeps us focused on what we have agreed is most important for Johns Creek.

2009 - ECONOMY

Entering 2009, we are facing the greatest economic downturn our country has seen in several generations.

- Housing sales and property values are down, foreclosures are up
- Developers aren’t developing.
- Our major financial institutions required a massive government bailout to stay afloat.
- Small businesses around town are closing down at an alarming rate.
- Unemployment is up. Consumer spending is down – and our sales taxes with it.

This is the economic reality we are living in. And this reality will dictate how much we will be able to accomplish.

Just like you, we face a couple of tight budget years ahead.

But two other factors could make these tough times even tougher in Johns Creek.

I mentioned our already low millage rate a moment ago.

In most cities and counties, leaders can set a millage rate that can meet their citizens' needs.

Things are different in Johns Creek. Our charter limits our millage rate to a maximum 4.731 mills. We can't go any higher without your approval.

We have a bit of flexibility, but it's not much. Still, we have known this from the outset.

Now, though, we may find ourselves in the grip of an economic vise that could well squeeze the life out of our young city.

That's because it is likely that the Georgia General Assembly will pass some type of cap on property tax assessments in this legislative session.

The leading candidate is House Resolution 1, which calls for a limit of 3 percent or less.

Now I am certainly an advocate of keeping taxes as low as possible.

But the combination of a millage cap AND an assessment cap could be disastrous for Johns Creek.

Our sister cities of Sandy Springs and Milton – as well as other governments around the state and all of our school boards – would face the same double whammy.

We will work with our local Legislative delegation to ensure we can continue to provide the services you've told us you want.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

While these dark economic clouds threaten on the horizon, I am confident that – with careful planning and strong fiscal oversight – we will weather this economic storm.

We must proceed with prudence, but I remain cautiously optimistic that we can still make significant advancements in 2009.

This slide shows you some of our top priorities.

As you can see, we want to

- Continue to focus on our financial stability

- Fulfill our promise to you on the Greenway
- Continue to expand our sidewalk network
- Draft a plan to expand our parkland and better utilize the facilities we have
- Revise key ordinances that contribute greatly to our quality of life
- And begin work on plans and programs to help our environment.

9-1-1

Last summer, we had a tragic incident in our City. A 39-year-old resident died after her call for help was delayed 25 minutes because a Fulton County 9-1-1 operator sent emergency crews to the wrong address.

I'm pleased to say that we recently joined with Sandy Springs to sign a \$33 million contract to develop our own joint 9-1-1 center.

The center, to be located in Sandy Springs, will come on line late this summer.

This center will provide both cities with technical capabilities that are light years ahead of where we are now.

For instance, it will have far greater ability to locate cell phones calls – a huge problem for 911 systems.

It is also another example of how Johns Creek is a leader in outsourcing to achieve cost-effective solutions.

The cities are partnering with IXP, a New Jersey based company that will install and operate the system. IXP clients include the New York City police and fire departments, as well as the police departments in Seattle and Boston.

Implementing this system will maximize the effectiveness of our outstanding police and fire departments. We believe the result will be more lives saved.

BOND REFERENDUM

The next issue I want to discuss goes back – as discussions in Johns Creek so often do – to transportation.

I've been talking about it everywhere I go for several years now. I've never understood why it should take an hour for me to take my kids five miles to school.

And it's only gotten worse. Each year it seems to take less time to fly across the ocean and longer to drive across Johns Creek.

Our survey showed that about a third of respondents volunteered traffic as the number one problem – and that concern increases the longer residents have lived here.

While traffic is easily the most pressing problem in Johns Creek, our citizens are not sure what we should do about it.

In 2008, we did some resurfacing on some major roads and improved several intersections.

In 2009, about a third of our Capital Improvement budget will go toward resurfacing other transportation improvements.

These will provide some minor relief to some specific areas.

However, the fact is, we are just applying patches to patches.

It would take an estimated 15-million-dollars over the next five years to bring our roads up to standard.

That's not to make improvements. That's just to get even.

There is simply no way we can hope to make any significant headway using what's available in our annual budget.

If we really want our efforts to make a difference, if we want to see real progress, we must leverage our dollars through a bond referendum.

During our strategic planning process, Council agreed that we should begin laying the groundwork for such a vote.

In all likelihood, we will have public discussion later in the year about how much we want to ask for, and what we'll do with the money.

I know what you're thinking.

You're thinking – but Mike, weren't you just saying how bad things are right now?

And that it doesn't look to improve much anytime soon?

How can you possibly expect us to approve raising our taxes to cover a bond issue?

Well, the fact is that elected leaders have to make the tough decisions.

It's the same for business leaders or in your own household – there comes a time where hard choices must be made. This is one of those times.

As elected officials and city staff, we can tell you what we need and why we need it.

For such a measure is actually to pass, however, concerned citizens like you must rally around the cause, just as we did with the City's creation.

I call upon you here today, as leaders of this community, to help build support among your family, friends and associates.

If you believe that addressing our traffic needs is a key to reviving the local economy and improving our overall quality of life, you need to step up.

CHOOSE TO USE JOHNS CREEK

During my last State of the City address, I discussed a “Choose to Use Johns Creek” initiative. The main idea was to encourage our residents and business owners to proclaim Johns Creek proudly as your hometown.

We still want all those in the city ZIP codes 30005, 30022 and 30097 to use Johns Creek, Georgia as their mailing address.

We still want you to ask your credit card companies, the magazines you subscribe to, and all those who mail things to you to change your address to Johns Creek.

We want you to go to the Georgia Department of Driver Services and ask them to change the address on your license to Johns Creek.

We want business owners to use Johns Creek on signs, menus – all your business materials.

Throughout 2008, we continued to work with the U.S. Postal Service.

The U-S-P-S recognizes the three ZIP codes I just mentioned as being Johns Creek. But there are a few hundred homes in two other ZIP codes that are still not able to use the city as their home address. We'd like to change that.

We've also spoken to postal officials about unifying these ZIP codes into one number. And we've strongly expressed our desire to have a post office in the city.

Unfortunately, while those officials express understanding, they have not displayed much willingness to work with us.

We will continue to work with them, though, just as we are doing with phone companies, mapping services, delivery services and others to recognize Johns Creek.

This year, we look to expand the “Choose to Use” program in another direction.

We know the economy is tough. As you drive around Johns Creek, you don’t have to look far to find empty storefronts. And sadly, the number is growing.

I’ve personally had the experience of going to a favorite local restaurant one week, then returning the next to find it closed. That story is being repeated over and over.

The real shame is that people were driving right past those businesses to similar locations OUTSIDE Johns Creek to get exactly what the closed business provided.

So we also want you to “Choose to Use Johns Creek” businesses for all your dining, shopping and service needs. We want to encourage all those who pass through our city to stop off and “Choose to Use Johns Creek.”

If we can help businesses succeed, it produces several positive results.

- It helps create a more vibrant atmosphere across our community.
- Businesses beget businesses – the more businesses succeed the more that will follow in those footsteps.
- Expanding our commercial bases evens out the tax burden.

Johns Creek is about 85 percent residential and 15 percent commercial. That means you as homeowners bear a heavier proportion of taxes than in most communities.

So tell your friends, tell your neighbors – Choose to Use Johns Creek, in every possible way.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the State of the City is sound – and that’s not me saying that, it’s our citizens.

We face challenges in the year ahead, no question. But I believe we have the leadership – both elected and on our staff – that will enable us to weather the economic storm.

We will need to proceed prudently and with caution, but make no mistake; we will continue to move forward.

I think a motivational author captured my own feelings when he wrote, “Stop thinking in terms of limitations and start thinking in terms of possibilities.”

Despite the limitations of our current economic conditions, 2009 presents ample possibilities to lay the groundwork to invest fully in our future.

Thank you for your attention today and for all you do to make Johns Creek such a vibrant community.