

Building a Foundation for the Future

Johns Creek State of the City Address 2008

Mayor Mike Bodker

Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honor and privilege to be with you here today.

In a year filled with many “firsts” in the City’s young history, this represents yet another for me – my first State of the City address.

Sadly, the State of our City was greatly diminished yesterday by the loss of one of our leading citizens, Margaret Kruger.

Many of you here knew Margaret and what she has done for this community since coming here in 1980. I will refer later to the city’s identity, but Margaret – as much as anybody – can be credited for giving Johns Creek an identity and a voice. From helping to establish the Johns Creek Community Association, to persevering Autrey Mill and creating the Nature Center and Preserve, to her years of public service including involvement with countless political campaigns, Margaret is truly one of this City’s historical founders.

I could spend my entire time today talking about this remarkable woman. Let me just say it is a great loss to the city and to me personally. Our thoughts, prayers – and gratitude – go out to her family, including her children Anita, Jeff and Dan. Would you please join me in a moment of silence in Margaret’s honor and memory?

Thank you.

I hope to be giving this speech to many groups over the next several weeks, but I can think of no better place to debut it than the Johns Creek Area Council of the Greater North Fulton Chamber of Commerce. As community and business leaders, you make up the fabric of Johns Creek.

I want to thank Chamber Chairman Paul Maggard and the Chamber Board of Directors, and Area Council Chair Tony Green for affording me this opportunity. I also want to thank Chamber CEO Brandon Beach and his staff for all they do for the City. Thanks as well to today’s sponsors, Eagle Business Strategies and Wendy Butler Legal Services

As Mayor, I get to preside over a great team here in Johns Creek and I want to give them their due.

I want to first thank my City Council colleagues. Thank you for working so hard with rigor and devotion, week in and week out. Every day, we have the opportunity to positively impact the lives of the people who live, work and visit this great City.

I would like to recognize those Council members here today and ask them stand. Post 1, Randall Johnson; Post 2, Dan McCabe, Post 3, Karen Richardson; Post 4, Ivan Figueroa; Post 5, Liz Hausmann, and Post 6, Bev Miller, our Mayor Pro Tem.

Because of the way our City Charter was established, the election cycle required Council Members Miller, Figueroa, and McCabe to run for re-election after just one year in office. I think the fact that Bev ran unopposed while Ivan and Dan both won re-election handily is validation of what we were able to accomplish in our first year.

Thank you as well to our directors and staff. When I took office, I thought I knew a lot about what it would take to run this community. But it has been quite a learning experience to actually see first-hand everything that is involved.

We have over 80 outstanding, capable and talented City personnel – they are truly some of the best professionals in their respective fields. These are the men and women who turn Council policy into reality for our citizens. They continually give their ALL to make our City great and I am honored to serve on the same team with them.

It has been humbling to see the importance that people place on the office of Mayor and on all public figures. I visit our elementary schools frequently and I am amazed at how excited they seem to meet and talk with their Mayor.

I also have to say that they can be one of the toughest audiences I face. I don't think anyone can be more brutally honest than a first-grader. They are a constant reminder of our responsibility to do the best job we can for our City.

The first year of Cityhood has been an amazing experience. It is simply remarkable to see how far we have come in such a short time.

Now, State of the City speeches are usually about reflecting on the past year's significant achievements, and I'll spend some time doing that today.

But while it's good to savor what we have achieved, resting on our laurels is not an option I will ever accept as mayor. Nor should you.

The Council and I prefer to focus on the future, because the accomplishments of the past are merely the foundation upon which we are building that future.

You will hear me repeat the phrase "quality of life" a number of times today. Because at the end of the day, that is really what local government is all about. We must protect and improve our quality of life – for those of us who live, work, and play here today and for those who will follow us tomorrow.

We all know Johns Creek is a unique place. Some of the things that make it special include

- One of the strongest tax digests in State.
- I spoke about the committed leadership your elected representatives bring to the job.
- And I don't have to tell you that we have thriving business community.
- We're also blessed with great schools. They are a major reason people not only choose but often sacrifice to live here. In fact, Johns Creek was honored in our first year to be named one of the Top 25 Places to Live to go to School in 2007 by RelocateAmerica.
- And finally, citizens whose dedication to community service is unrivaled. Our residents are active in cultural, recreational, civic, economic, athletic and other organizations of every type. And they have been equally quick to step up for service on various City boards, commissions and committees. This is truly one of the City's greatest strengths.

I also want to share a few “snapshots” of our community. This information was just made public as part of the community assessment phase of the City's first comprehensive plan development.

First of all, we have more people than previously thought. The 2000 Census put the count at just over 60,000 residents. We had estimated that currently we had about 65,000. However, the comp plan consultants' data analysis led them to estimate we have more than 70,000 people living in the City right now. And they project that number will continue to grow to more than 93,000 by the year 2030. And you thought traffic was bad now!

That 56 percent growth rate will, for the first time in many years, actually trail Metro Atlanta. The region overall is expected to grow by 70 percent over the same period. That's not really surprising since the explosive growth we experienced to this point has pretty much exhausted the land available for new development.

How old is that population? Well, as you can see from the graph here, a significant number of our residents are clustered between the ages of 35 and 54 – the prime earning years and the prime years for raising a family. So it is no surprise that we also currently have a large number of children in our community – 35 percent are age 19 or younger.

Those numbers make it clear we need more recreational and other activities geared toward our younger residents. At the same time, we must also prepare to offer more services and activities for seniors as our population matures.

With that in mind, **one of my initiatives this year as mayor is to begin a senior outreach.** Now is the time to start slowly building a program in consultation with the very active and rich senior population we have today, so we are properly prepared for the increased numbers tomorrow.

Turning to industry and employment. Again, no surprise that the vast majority of businesses in Johns Creek are in the services industry. You also see a list of the City's Top 10 employers, based on business license data.

Our residents do well economically – the median income has shot up over the past seven years and vastly exceeds that of Metro Atlanta as a whole. **Our citizens are smart, too.** The numbers of people holding bachelor's and master's degrees is double that of the region.

As you might imagine, residents who are that well-educated, who earn those kinds of salaries, are able to afford **quality housing.** The median home price in Johns Creek has jumped 41 percent in the past seven years, from around \$251,000 to just under \$343,000. Few markets anywhere have done as well. Currently, 77 percent of the housing stock is valued at more than \$250,000 and 27 percent are worth more than \$500,000.

At the same time, however, the alarms have sounded about the down-turn in the housing market and accompanying mortgage crunch. Georgia is particularly hard hit and in the last economic downturn we saw significant foreclosures in northeast Fulton.

Another initiative of mine is to keep the very real potential of the national foreclosure crisis from literally hitting home.

Last week in Washington, I learned that the financial industry is better prepared this go-around, and there are tremendous educational and support resources out there. The City can help make sure our citizens are aware of the various programs available and have good access to resources. We also can help build local capacity for counseling and restructuring.

There is no shame in working to save your home.

So, what were the highlights for the City of Johns Creek, year one?

Well, undoubtedly the most significant accomplishment was that we became a City in the first place.

President Ronald Reagan once remarked that, "Our government has no power except that granted it by the people."

In July 2006, Johns Creek residents voted to grant that power to a new government. It was an unshakable belief in our power to create a better future for ourselves and our children that led to creation of what is now Georgia's 10th largest City.

It required the work of many people, including many of you in this room, to bring together the communities of Newtown, Shakerag, Ocee, Autry Mill, and Warsaw into a unified City. A City that welcomes the new while keeping the best of the past, embracing our small-town roots as the foundation for shaping the future.

I believe we have delivered on our promise to create a transparent, responsive and fiscally responsible government.

Everything we do is open for scrutiny. We strive to empower citizens with access to information about their government.

If you call City hall, you get a live person 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If there is an emergency situation, someone is on the job right away. We handled some 30,000 calls in our first year.

Council, staff and I all take seriously our responsibility of providing the best possible City services with the least amount of tax dollars possible.

You may be aware that our charter caps Johns Creek's property tax rate at 4.731 mills. And as we prepared our first budget, it would have been quite easy to impose the maximum. But we felt it was important to maintain the same tax level as residents previously paid to Fulton County for the Special Services District. So we opted to leave the rate at 4.614 mills.

The difference is small, but the message was huge.

We took the first steps toward establishing our own police and fire departments.

Peace in the streets is part of anyone's definition of quality of life and you have told us in no uncertain terms that public safety is a top priority. At the same time we did not want to rush the process.

The men and women of the Fulton police and fire departments are as dedicated a group of professionals that you can find and we owe them great thanks for their service. But we want to take that service to an even higher level.

We took the first steps toward addressing road and traffic issues. Our challenge today, tomorrow, and for the foreseeable future is addressing the inadequate, poorly maintained infrastructure we inherited.

We did make some strides in year one, such as improving traffic light timing at intersections, resurfacing Jones Bridge Road and finishing work on State Bridge Road. And there is more on the drawing board, which we'll discuss momentarily.

We began establishing our own identity and enhancing the sense of pride and unity in our community.

While we don't have our own post office yet – and it may be some time in coming – we did get the Postal Service to officially recognize Johns Creek, Georgia for mail delivery. This, however, is just the start, which **leads me to my next initiative, “Choose to Use Johns Creek.”**

I want every resident to use Johns Creek whenever you address an envelope, fill out a form – every time you use your street address. I want you to request everyone who sends you a bill to use that address to reach you - not Duluth, not Alpharetta – **JOHNS CREEK.**

As a City, we can only do so much to establish this identity. The rest has to come by popular demand.

We also held events designed to engage our citizens. Perhaps the best example was our first Founders Day. Held December 1st in celebration of the anniversary of incorporation, the day began with a great parade. We then moved to Newtown for Santa's visit with families. It all culminated with our holiday lighting event in the evening featuring outstanding music and choral performances by our local schools. Throughout the day, we had several thousand residents turn out and show their hometown pride. We want to provide more of those opportunities going forward.

I won't go into great detail on the next two slides, but the numbers give you a little perspective on the amount of work – much of it unnoticed – that took place in year one.

So there you have our foundation for the future. Where do we go from here?

Let me start by saying that, while we have and will continue to make great strides as a City, if I had to choose one word that characterizes our outlook going forward it would have to be **PATIENCE.**

And believe me that is not an easy thing for any of us on the Council. But the needs are many, the resources limited. And, as with the approach to public safety, we don't want to rush into things without full consideration and thoughtful planning.

One major goal in 2008 is to complete roll out of our own police and fire departments.

Together, these departments will provide a new level of responsiveness and protection for our community

We've hired our Chief, Ed Densmore, who served in the same capacity in Alpharetta

Your department will feature 56 sworn officers and an initial operating budget of almost \$7 million.

They will operate out of our Public Safety Center where they will join our Municipal Court operations.

Hopefully, your first encounter with our department won't be in the form of blue lights in your rearview mirror. We won't have a "police state." But with our own force, they will have a more visible presence and they will address violations we know are taking place.

On the fire side, our new Chief Joey Daniels just started Monday. He joins us from Fulton County where he was formerly our Battalion Chief.

The department will have 65 firefighters and a 2008 operating budget of almost \$8.5 million.

And we will start with three existing fire stations that we will purchase from Fulton.

One thing we will do differently in the fire department involves vehicles.

About 85 percent of calls to the fire department don't involve fires – they are medical emergencies. So we are going to equip each station with an Advanced Life Support vehicle to serve as a first responder. They will roll on most calls rather than tying up fire vehicles on non-fire situations. These vehicles are also smaller and more maneuverable in traffic, saving critical time.

Ideally, each emergency vehicle, police and fire, will have an AED – a portable defibrillator – on board. We also want to have a device in each of the City's parks. So if you're looking for a contribution opportunity, this would be a great one.

We want to make these devices widely available throughout Johns Creek – not just in public facilities but private businesses and other locations. So I urge you to consider installing these devices in your place of business. This is part of an overall **initiative to be recognized by the American Heart Association as Georgia's first "Heart Ready City."**

In addition to the equipment, the initiative involves offering CPR classes. It is my hope that every man, woman and child will be trained in this life-saving technique. We also

want to offer nutritional education. I want everyone to enjoy living in our community for as long as possible!

I have two other public safety initiatives I hope our community will support. The first is to add K-9 units, fully trained and outfitted, for our Police Department. These units would be another critical tool in the department's arsenal.

The second initiative is a program to "embrace" our firefighters. I mentioned that we will be acquiring three fire stations from Fulton County. But when they leave, they basically will strip the buildings down to the bare walls.

Now, I'm not sure if you realize that a firefighter's shift is 24 hours. During that time, the stationhouse is their home. And when they are not answering calls, training or performing other duties, they need to be able to prepare meals, rest and relax so they are ready to answer the next emergency. We will need the community to help us provide these dedicated men and women the best accommodations possible.

We will continue to plan and execute transportation improvements.

As I said a moment ago, we took some small steps this year. But the problems we face have been 30 years in the making; we won't fix them overnight.

This year, much of the work that will be accomplished will be in design and planning for future projects. On the right you see numerous intersections that are slated for improvement in 2008. In addition, some of the other major things coming include:

- McGinnis Ferry Widening Project
- Old Alabama Study
- 141 Corridor Improvements
- State Bridge Wrap Up
- Resurfacing Challenges

Regarding this last item – our Public Works Department assessed and analyzed every inch of public roadway in the City limits. It probably won't surprise you to learn that many of our roads are substandard. It would take an estimated \$15 million over the next five years just to get us even.

That is why Council and I are considering a proposal to ask our residents for a bond referendum. We know it is a lot to ask in just our second year. But it does make sense from a financial standpoint.

By issuing bonds we greatly speed up the process, bringing relief sooner rather than later. We also keep from falling even further behind. And by doing it now, we save money on the rising cost of materials. Most road materials are petroleum-based. You know what oil prices have been doing recently? Enough said.

Bonds also allow us to spread the payments out over a much longer period. That frees up money for other priorities such as sidewalks or acquiring additional park land. We hope you would find the case compelling enough to approve the referendum.

Earlier I cited some data that emerged from the community assessment. We are on course to complete the comprehensive plan in November.

This is a landmark project that will shape the City's future for years to come. Over the next several months, you will have numerous opportunities to tell us what you want your community to look like. I urge you to study what is unfolding and make your voice heard.

My hope is that the end result will be a plan that provides for managed growth that values neighborhood livability, environmental sustainability, economic development and quality of life.

We need to finalize the comprehensive plan before moving forward aggressively with land initiatives. **One such initiative near the top of my long-term priority list is creation of a town center.**

At a speech earlier this month, I used the word "downtown" and an audience member asked, "Where IS downtown?" The answer is we don't have one ... YET!

In bringing together the historic communities within Johns Creek to create a City, we were left without a defined town center. In places like Marietta, Duluth, Suwanee and Decatur, they have such a center that provides a community focal point for business, entertainment, cultural and residential initiatives. If Johns Creek is to truly establish itself, I believe a town center is critical.

To achieve that goal, however, would require significant redevelopment. And redevelopment would require incentives and the capability of increased density. The comp plan – with your input – will help guide these decisions.

There is another very fundamental question in this process that you have to help us answer. One piece of data that I didn't show earlier is the fact that Johns Creek is 85 percent residential – we are a bedroom community. Most cities strive for a 60/40 balance of residential to commercial property. It helps equalize the tax digest and relieves some of the burden on homeowners.

So the question is, do we want to try to balance that ratio? Doing so will necessitate some difficult conversations about density, building heights, and suitable locations.

If we decide that we don't want to move in that direction, then the conversation will be equally difficult. It will arise when residents ask for things like increased services, road

improvements, and more parks. The question becomes, do we want to increase taxes to pay for these things?

Do you see why it is so important that we involve as many citizens as possible in developing the comp plan? All the data, meeting schedules and other information is available on our Web site.

As we continue to discuss quality of life in Johns Creek, let me address some specifics as they relate to parks, greenspace and the environment overall.

The City features four parks – Newtown, Ocee, Shakerag and the Autrey Mill Nature Preserve & Heritage Center.

Newtown, Ocee and Autrey Mill are all backed by strong community associations. At Newtown and Ocee, we have vibrant youth programs including sports.

The Old School at Newtown Park has great potential as a community and senior center, but will require as much as \$5 million in improvements to fulfill such a role.

At Autrey Mill, we have a number of restorations in progress including the Summerour House, and Warsaw Church, along with the Green Store, Farm Museum and Visitor Center. The work is being done thanks to over a quarter-million dollars in grants. The majority of those funds come from the state thanks to the efforts of our own State Representative and Speaker Pro Tem, Mark Burkhalter.

Shakerag remains the least developed facility because we split ownership with the school system. But it has great potential and we are in ongoing negotiations.

While these are great facilities, we need more. We trail surrounding communities in the amount of parks and greenspace available per capita. We will have to be creative in using what we have and trying to expand those resources. Community assistance will be a huge factor in those efforts.

The greenway project will get under way later in 2008. My fellow Council members and I took a pledge that we will fund this in the 2009 budget, which begins in October. Again, however, community involvement and support are critical if we are to realize the full potential of this resource.

I am confident that support will be there because this community has a deep appreciation for and commitment to preserving and enhancing our natural resources. Keep North Fulton Beautiful has been active in the area for some time, and we recently added a new, locally based group, Johns Creek Beautification – part of the Johns Creek Community Association. Their first project is the beautification of the medians along State Road 141.

Be assured, we will act whenever our quality of life is threatened. You probably have heard or read about our efforts to block the introduction of more than 70 billboards in North Fulton, including over 30 here in Johns Creek.

These potential billboards are the result, yet again, of mistakes and inaction by Fulton County Commissioners. The commissioners, facing the threat of paying multimillion dollar damages after their sign ordinance was found to be unconstitutional, chose instead to sell us out. They agreed to issue backdated permits in our community – something we believe they no longer have the right to do. Johns Creek, along with Sandy Springs, Milton and Alpharetta, are fighting this settlement in court. The state Legislature has weighed in, proposing a bill that would disallow backdated permits.

We will continue to stand our ground on this issue.

When it comes the environment overall, however, there is so much more we can and should be doing. That is why I want to take the opportunity today to announce that I will propose to Council a bold, new, comprehensive initiative that I hope can make Johns Creek an environmental leader in Georgia, the Southeast and throughout the county.

We call it the Johns Creek “Green Stamp” program. The long-term objective is to coalesce and align the various resources available to us, and to integrate an environmental aspect into virtually everything we do as a City.

The example is set at City Hall, from our facilities to our purchasing policies. As part of the comprehensive plan process, I would like to see us encourage – whether by mandate or incentives – the development of environmentally friendly construction standards. We should strive to become a LEED community – a Leader in Energy and Environmental Development.

We can positively impact water quality through our stormwater management policies. We need to work on rebuilding our urban forests.

We hope to build a traffic control center that, along with the installation of “smart” traffic signals can improve the flow of traffic in our City. That, along with encouraging carpools and telecommuting, should improve our air quality.

And of course, we must focus our attention firmly on water conservation. It is not just a matter of dealing with the current, ongoing drought. Conservation must become a way of life.

Now some people get nervous when you start talking about “green” programs. Be assured, this initiative is not aimed at curtailing growth or development. Rather, it is intended to promote smart growth, which I think is something we can all agree on.

It will take time to build the program. We'll start slowly, with some modest initiatives focusing first on education. Over the long term though, wouldn't this be a tremendous legacy for one of America's newest cities?

Finally, it is always our goal to provide opportunities to bring government closer to the people. We will be rolling out a new Web site shortly that will provide even more information and improve your ability to conduct business with the City remotely from your home, office - wherever.

And if you have not signed up for our electronic communications, please, do it today. We have registration sheets here that you can fill out.

In addition to our monthly electronic newsletter, we occasionally do "e-blasts" about emergency situations or important events. A perfect example was when we had a water main burst on Medlock Bridge Road. We immediately put out the information. Later, a number of people told us they got the word on their Blackberries, and were able to go around the trouble or wait out the traffic elsewhere.

And you can get closer to your government by serving on a board, commission or advisory committee. We have created several already and will add more.

You can also serve the City by volunteering with any of the wonderful civic organizations such as Kiwanis, Rotary and soon, I understand, Civitan. We also have a thriving cultural movement in Johns Creek, from the Autrey Mill Nature Center to Ocee Arts, the North Atlanta Dance Theater and the Johns Creek Symphony. These certainly contribute to the community's quality of life.

Whatever avenue you choose, I urge you to find an area you're passionate about and offer your services.

I would like to spend a brief moment on the regional perspective. North Fulton consists of six cities and while we all are unique, we also share common interests and challenges. I am pleased to have been able to lead the formation of the North Fulton Municipal Association, to help bring a common voice to the region. You will see us working on many initiatives such as transportation, public safety and other critical issues. And those same six cities will make up Milton County when – not if – it is re-established.

So it clear that while our City is young, it is strong. We have accomplished much. And I need to acknowledge that the success we have enjoyed in this first year, and the plans for what's to come, are in part the result of **the unique partnership we have with CH2M HILL OMI.**

I already mentioned the top-notch staff we have assembled. They have a built-in culture of customer-service which is demonstrated every day. And as part of a global company of more than 22,000 employees, CH2M HILL OMI has access to a vast array of resources and expertise that our City can utilize as needed.

They also provide a highly efficient operation. The majority of cities in Georgia have between three and seven employees – excluding public safety – for every 1,000 residents. Johns Creek’s ratio is about one-and-a-half workers for every 1,000 citizens.

Without CH2M Hill OMI, it would not have been possible to stand up Johns Creek almost overnight. In fact, I was in Washington, D.C. last week at the U.S. Conference of Mayors, where Johns Creek received a Public-Private Partnership Award in recognition of what’s we have achieved together. It is a partnership that is maximizing your tax dollars to the fullest extent possible.

So that is the state of your city. You can see we’ve achieved some remarkable accomplishments in our first year – more than even I thought possible. We delivered on the promises we made in the drive for incorporation. And now in 2008 we are building on the foundation of those successes.

Of course I wish we could have all the road improvements we need, all the greenspace we can use, a thriving downtown – all those things each of us want as Johns Creek residents – right now. We will get there. But it will take time. Please be patient with us.

I’ve outlined some ambitious initiatives today – become a “Heart Ready City,” the Green Stamp environmental program, providing K-9 units for the Police Department, outfitting our fire stations, “Choose to Use Johns Creek,” a senior outreach, and working to minimize foreclosures.

It is a lot, I admit. But I’ve always been a guy who goes big. I hope you see the value in them, and support those that mean the most to you. If each of you in the room today picked out just one initiative that you could support personally or through your business, we would be well on way to seeing all of them become reality.

James Baldwin wrote, “There is never a time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment, the time is always now.”

The state of the City will change, but some things never do – the hard work, the challenge, the excitement, the fulfillment of participating meaningfully in the life of the community.

We have laid the foundation for the future. We see what is possible and we have the determination to achieve it.

Johns Creek is a great City because we have great people. Thank you for the part you play in making this such a special place.