



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
CITY OF WOODSTOCK

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MAYOR

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State of the City Address

Members of the City Council, City Manager Moon, city staff, and my fellow Woodstockers, Thank you for your service, your dedication and your hearts for our city.

I am honored beyond words that you have chosen me to serve, and to stand here before you as the 31st Mayor of the City of Woodstock.

In 1826, the renowned Scottish novelist Sir Walter Scott completed his 15th novel, *Woodstock*.

At this same time, in the early nineteenth century, pioneers and their families were settling the land we stand on today, starting new lives, and building a new place in a still-very new world.

Scott's book had become a popular sensation, and the story had found its way to the settlers in these north Georgia woods. They named their new community for it. They named it Woodstock.

Seventy-one years later, the Georgia legislature incorporated that forest community, and our City of Woodstock was born.

In my hand, I hold a copy of Sir Walter Scott's *Woodstock*, published and printed the same year our city was incorporated in 1897.

It's not a particularly valuable print. The overlap of our city's namesake and this particular year of printing could only be interesting to about 35,000 of us, and let's face it: only one of us is eccentric enough to have tracked it down...

But in this print... in this place... we hold so much more than a dusted, 125-year-old book. We have so much more than an aged, 125-year-old town. We have a story.

You see, the story of Scott's *Woodstock* is set during the English civil war. Cromwell has taken the country, and he is hunting the executed King Charles' son, and division is in the air. At a time when, party, and division, and hate and suspicion hung over their nation, a place called Woodstock takes center stage. The place wasn't spared the effects of the divide. The book brings battle and intrigue, betrayal and haunting. But it peaks with grace.

Without spoiling a classic for you, the story culminates in the safe escape of those fleeing, the show of mercy from those you wouldn't expect, and the ultimate coming together of those who were always meant to be. It's a tale of destiny.

And now we look around. In our city, like our namesake novel, we feel that familiar call of a story meant to happen.

We stand today in a nation divided. We all feel it. Call it party. Call it current events. Call it cause, effect or symptom. In the end, division is the theme of our day.

Our national condition is a place where neighbors are increasingly suspicious of neighbors. Where we see others as “other”. Our trust for our institutions, for our communities, and for each other is at an all-time low.

And then there’s Woodstock.

I’ve heard it called Mayberry.

Or “something special”. “There’s something in the air”.

Or a “City Unexpected.”

In reality, we’re a community. We don’t believe in strangers.

We’re a people who enjoy a sense of place. A sense of belonging that is fleeting in the modern day. We have something truly special in this place, and it’s an honor to lead it.

These past two decades have seen our city transformed from a sleepy, leftover 19th century railroad stop into a thriving tourism destination ranking among the largest cities in the state of Georgia. We have a vibrant arts scene. We have best-in-class attractions. We have a growing commercial and business community. We remain the largest city and the economic center of Cherokee County, the seventh largest county in the state.

Here in Woodstock, we are on the forefront of something truly great.

In just the past year, Homes.com has named us the third best suburb to move to in the United States. Money Magazine named us one of the best 50 places to live in America. Safewise.com recognized our city as one of the fifty safest cities in Georgia.

At a time when storefronts in other states remain shuttered, and cities and businesses throughout the country search for answers and recovery, the unemployment rate in our city rests at an historic low of 2.8%.

Our city’s revenues outpace projections and expenses. Our reserves are growing. We have maintained a tremendously responsible, low debt ratio and we maintain some of the very lowest property taxes in our state.

Ladies and gentlemen, I join you as your Mayor this morning to report to you on the state of our city.

The state of our city is strong, and growing stronger.

We have, without a doubt, built a place that people want to be.

Our calling is to build a place that is meant to last.

That will be the mission of my administration, and the goal of our work together. We will build a place in Woodstock that breaks the American pattern. We will build a place that our children will be proud to inherit.

The first 21 years of this century have seen tremendous growth, opportunity and prosperity for our city. In nearly every way, the quality of life for a citizen in Woodstock has improved.

Our home values have climbed, our businesses have grown, and our city is an example for all of America for downtown revitalization.

Thanks to our fiscally responsible council members, our city has lowered our millage rate each year for 6 years in a row to ensure you didn't see back-door tax increases as a result of your rising home values. As a taxpayer, thank you, Council Members.

Thanks to a fiscally sound foundation, and the vision set by these leaders and our residents years ago, we have a thriving downtown that is the envy of our sister cities throughout the region. And of course, we owe a huge debt of gratitude to the man who stood at the helm for the last sixteen years. Mayor Donnie Henriques served our city for four terms, the longest of any leader in the nearly 125 years of our history. From my family, and on behalf of the families of our great city, thank you for your leadership, sir.

I know that Donnie would agree with me though, as I've heard him say it more than once before: the success we've seen so often gets attributed to elected officials and big personalities. What we far too often fail to recognize is the work of the dedicated public and civil servants that work for the City of Woodstock.

We have more than 200 full-time, part-time and seasonal employees in our city. Under the leadership of the - and I mean this with every bit of credibility I can muster - the best city manager in America, Jeff Moon, our team dedicate their all everyday to building a city that serves all of our residents.

As you can guess, it hasn't been an easy road working in local government these last few years.

If you're a member of our city staff in the room today, please stand up for me. Let's take a moment and show them how much we appreciate what they've done for us - especially these last two years during a pandemic.

While we're talking about our city team, I want to take a moment to recognize one of our Assistant City Managers Coty Thigpen. When Coty started with the city, she set out on a mission to modernize and prioritize our city's human resources backbone with initiatives like merit-based pay incentives, improved onboarding and retention programs and enhanced leadership training and career development for our employees. At the time, these investments seemed like the right thing to do for our team. Just a short time later, as 2021 and the Great Resignation has taken the global workforce by storm, these investments are paying big dividends. Coty and our incredible HR team got ahead of the global talent investment trend, and it has paid off for both our employees and the taxpayer in a big way. Despite unprecedented challenges in retention and recruitment for both the private and public sectors, Woodstock has seen less than half the national average in turnover. These gains were made while dramatically improving the quality of work and life for the public servants who step up for us each and every day. It takes real leadership to evaluate a team, find what motivates each individual and intentionally invest in them, and it takes a real leader to get ahead of global problems before they hit.

This year, we received the 2020 census data. I know it will come as a surprise to all of you, but Woodstock has grown. Dramatically. Again.

In 1990, our city's population was less than 4,500.

In 2000, our city's population doubled to 10,050.

In 2010, we more than doubled again to 23,896.
And as of last year, 35,065 citizens call this great city home.

There's no way around it. We've built a place that people want to be.

With growth comes major challenges. From transportation and development to strain on services and preservation of identity, I want to discuss how our city is thinking ahead and addressing concerns and molding them into opportunities.

But I think it is vitally important to remind each of you, nearly every other community in America would do anything to have these problems.

The challenges that come with growth are better than those with decline.

The challenges that come with a lively, bustling downtown are better than those of a town whose young people can't wait to graduate and leave.

The challenges that come with life, are better than those with a city gasping its final breath.

We are in a fantastic position.

Our greatest priority for a growing city must be maintaining a safe city. Our city's public safety members, our Police and Fire, are some of the finest in the world.

One might assume that with nearly 50% growth in residents over the past decade, our city would see at least a moderate uptick in crime. Thanks to the incredible men and women of the Woodstock Police Department, just the opposite has occurred. Reported crime in 2021 was down 44% compared to ten years ago, and we marked our lowest crime level in more than a decade this past year.

A former Georgia House colleague of mine from the metro Atlanta area attempted to explain away their city's increase in criminal activity in the past few years. He claimed, "it's happening everywhere in the Atlanta region."

Well, because of Woodstock PD's focus on community policing, active partnerships with our faith community and nonprofits, and constant dedication to protecting our citizens, that rise in crime hasn't and won't make it to Woodstock.

We'll continue to ensure it doesn't by focusing additional policing resources on our downtown and the densest areas of our city and being sure that a constant presence helps maintain the trust, the credibility and fast response we have come to count on from Woodstock's Finest.

As many of you know, Chief Calvin Moss is retiring in just a few months. Sir, you have done an incredible job for the city of Woodstock and the families that call this place home. From my family to yours, thank you! Please join me in thanking Chief Moss and his whole team for their service.

Our Fire Department has certainly seen the effects of our growth. Alarm calls for the Department have grown by nearly 62% since 2012, and Woodstock's Bravest responded to a record 6,642 calls this past year. In order to ensure our Firefighters and their team are prepared to combat both the current and coming challenges our city will present them, we have created a new role for a full-time Training Officer. Ensuring our fire department is trained, practiced and always-at-the-ready is critical toward both

protecting their lives and the lives and property of our families, and our city is taking unprecedented steps toward ensuring we will always meet and exceed that goal.

Chief Dave Soumas and his team do an incredible job for our city, and we all owe them a great debt of gratitude.

I am a firm believer that you can see a person's priorities by looking at their checkbook. For our current budget year, the City of Woodstock has invested nearly 50% of our total budget in public safety. Keeping our citizens safe is our paramount duty and priority, and as long as I am Mayor, we'll continue to support these incredible public servants.

Without contest, "traffic" and "parking" were the most frequent words I heard on the campaign trail. As we have all seen, creating a destination and a place that people want to be, comes with people. Our city, and specifically our Public Works Department and Council are actively at work to alleviate traffic congestion, provide more and smarter parking options, and create a more connected, grid-based, walkable city.

I am extremely proud of our Assistant City Manager Rob Hogan for his work developing a draft of our city's first ever annual comprehensive transportation plan. This comprehensive plan will be updated on an annual basis and outlines all of our major transportation initiatives, our current conditions, and goals for the future. It provides policymakers and those executing on the plan the tools they need to see where our city has come from and where it is going. It sets us apart from sister cities stringing their initiatives together and becomes a tremendous differentiator for us to the state and federal governments as well as private entities looking to invest in our transportation network. I look forward to seeing this plan officially presented to Council soon, and I encourage our Council to adopt it.

Among the many major projects outlined in the plan, you'll find the Hub Transformation Project. This city-led state and local partnership was the first of its kind and broke ground just a few short months ago. You have likely noticed the dirt being moved at the split at Mill and Towne Lake Parkway to make room for the roundabout serving as the crux of the project. This project directly improves the traffic flow of seven streets in the heart of our downtown, encourages traffic away from main arteries, and dramatically improves pedestrian walkability. This is all accomplished with minimal change to the footprint but brings about huge gains for our citizens and those passing through our city. This project is expected to be completed by the first quarter of next year.

When we consider transportation and traffic, it is important to keep in mind that we have a city and a destination. We should not build a downtown corridor with the primary focus of moving commuters who do not live in our city through our city to destinations that are not inside of our city. This pass-through traffic belongs on state arteries like 575 and Highway 92 outside of our downtown core. Transportation encompasses more than just roadways and cars. Woodstock has intentionally focused on walkability, biking and even golf carts as alternative ways to enjoy our city. The Council and I are focused on continuing to build out our grid street network and providing more and better ways for citizens to walk between their destinations.

This focus on a walkable, intentional downtown has worked. Last year, we saw over 3 million visitors to our downtown shopping district, ranking the center of our city yet again as the number one destination in Cherokee County. Our restaurants, bars, stores and small businesses chalked up a record year, and our outstanding economic development team under the leadership of Brian Stockton has continued to transform our city into a regional tourism destination.

Last year's State of the City profiled Made Mercantile, a project of Brian's team and the Downtown Development Authority located in the heart of Main Street. This makerspace has grown to 13 member companies during the last year and yielded \$200,000 in retail sales for these new start-ups. The space serves as a low-overhead route to market for creatives looking to start a business and encourages them to build here in Woodstock all while enhancing our downtown retail experience. I can tell you personally, having launched my own business out of our city's coworking space at the Circuit back in 2017, that keeping overhead costs low in the early stages is critical to getting a venture off the ground. Building a healthy environment in which these businesses can thrive through the dangerous early stages and make it to profitability pays big dividends for our entire community.

We are investing in cutting edge technology to help streamline zoning and permitting information for business owners considering Woodstock to make sure that red tape is never a hurdle that keeps someone for getting off the ground in our city.

Initiatives like these, along with the North Atlanta Venture Mentoring Service run by COED for startups here in Woodstock, and our city's waiver of business license fees for your first year in business, show Woodstock is serious about supporting our entrepreneurs and giving them every chance at success.

As many of you know, I live on Hubbard Road downtown and I own a software development company employing nearly 30 just 2600 feet away, also downtown. My walk to work most days means one fewer car on the road, and if we want to discover generational success for our city we must continue to build more commutes like that.

Attracting employers to our downtown requires additional office inventory. As we continue to see our downtown grow, it must be a priority for our city and for developers who are exploring investment opportunities here in Woodstock to provide more office space.

This brings me to a project I know you're all curious about. As you have probably seen, Morgan's Ace Hardware has moved to their new location, and in a short time you'll see the site at Main Street and Arnold Mill will start to be prepared for something new. You're all wondering what will ultimately be housed in the center of our city. So am I. We are actively working with our planning partners, and the city has committed to a transparent process for affected neighbors, stakeholders and all city residents. We are focused on ensuring we get the development in the core of our downtown right. A parking deck will certainly be central to the build. It is my hope that office space, a hotel, and a small conference center will also be major components, in addition to restaurants and retail.

We have built an incredible place to live, work and play in Woodstock. Unfortunately, for most of us, you have to pick two. You can either afford to live and play in Woodstock, or you can afford to work here. In order to ensure high paying jobs that can sustain the families that already call this place home, we need more office space to recruit employers.

When I say "employers", I don't mean Microsoft. My goal is not to attract the next Amazon or Tesla campus to our 13 square mile city. I want to see more employers who have 25-50 employees, employees making six figures, who fall into the woodwork of our city, and invest heavily in it like its home. I know they exist; we've built one. I intend to work with our outstanding economic development department to start targeting companies incorporated in the state of Georgia whose owners live in Woodstock, but whose business address exists in a surrounding county. These owners may have opened in Cobb or Fulton ten years ago because it was where you wanted to be. Now, it's time for them to come home. If you're in this room and you own a business, and it isn't located in our city, I want to buy you coffee. If we don't have the space, you need yet, we will. I'm speaking with developers weekly, and I want to know what

you need so that we can matchmake and build the right inventory for the business owners who would otherwise be here. We're not going to wait for it to happen. We're recruiting.

For the families that work here, in the service industry or even on our own city team, the prices of housing in our city can often be completely inaccessible. This is where conservatives like me may have oversimplified a word. For too long we have treated the word "density" as if it's a bad word. Density isn't the metric we should be worrying about, the ratio between ownership and rentership of our housing is.

If we want a financially stable city filled with residents who care about the long-term success of Woodstock, we want a city of homeowners. We built the American middle class on home ownership. If you look around today, you'll see a generation of millennials 10-15 years into their careers wondering why they are objectively poorer than their parents while objectively making more money than their parents did. Their parents pretend as if they were better savers. Hate to break it to you, GenX, you weren't. What you did do, was buy a house far sooner. Millennials waited, and now the industry is flooding an already inventory-starved market with rental options instead. GenX built their wealth, like the generations before them, not in savings, but in equity. Millennials have poured that same money not into a mortgage payment, but a rental payment, and have little nest egg to show for it. Look at California. Look at England. Both have massive majority-rental populations. Both have a massive divide between the wealthy and the poor. If we want a healthy middle class, if we want a financially stable city, we build a financially stable people by ensuring our city is populated with homeowners.

Entry level housing in a destination-city probably doesn't start with a white picket fence. It may start as a townhouse, or even a condo, but it doesn't come with a rental agreement. By creating more owners, we create a sense of place. A sense of belonging. And an automatic wealth generating community. That condo turns into a nest-egg. That nest-egg becomes a down payment for a single-family home. That family gets to stay in Woodstock and pass their love for our city (and the wealth they've created along the way) down to the next generation.

At a time when sister-cities nearby are announcing their populations are majority renter, I am calling on our city council to make this our number one priority. We will build a healthy long-term future by being more concerned about who owns a residence than how many walls they share.

Speaking of development, we have an entire department called Community Development who help manage the applications, inspections, and processes that go along with all of it here in Woodstock. As you can imagine, their workload has grown exponentially over recent years, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for helping ensure the new builds here in Woodstock fit our community, are safe, and meet the quality standards that were promised. Our inspectors average 67 inspections daily, DAILY, spread across just 3 inspectors. City Council, these guys need help. Come next budget year, I hope we'll focus on delivering for them.

Our city rarely solves problems by just delivering more headcount though. We work smarter. Our award-winning GIS department has introduced cutting-edge 3D modeling for new project concepts allowing stakeholders and policymakers to see a proposed development from literally every angle. They have also implemented a new City Data Hub that is available online providing unprecedented access to data and maps to our public.

Between the implementation of a new city drone program to aid in mapping, building-progress and inspections and data collection to the city's partnership with Georgia Tech to develop a formal, documented Smart Cities plan, Woodstock is intent on building a city on the cutting edge and setting policy driven by data.

We aren't just building a great place to live. Or to work. But also, to play. Our award-winning parks and recreation department has been hard at work. As Woodstockers, and the entire world, broke out of their 2020 quarantine and remembered what the outdoors was like in 2021 our parks and events were ready for them. We saw more than 100,000 bike trips on the Olde Rope Mill Park bike trails, and our city played host to the SORBA (Southern Off Road Biking Association) conference in October.

Our Woodstock Summer Concert Series broke attendance records multiple times, peaking with The Ultimate Queen Celebration Starring Marc Martel in July and 11,500 attendees. If you haven't come out to one of our city's concerts, I promise it will be more than you expected. And you have some fantastic opportunities this year. I'm excited, for the first time publicly, to announce the 2022 Concert Series Lineup:

On May 14th, the 2022 series begins with The Purple Xperience - a five-piece group hailing from Prince's birthplace, Minneapolis, MN. They've been touring around the country since 2011. Front-man Marshall Charloff brings the greatest and most authentic production of Prince and The Revolution to audiences of all generations.

Sister Hazel takes the stage at the Northside Hospital-Cherokee Amphitheater on June 11th. Their song "All for You," topped the adult alternative charts during the summer of 1997 and the success propelled their album to platinum status. Since then, the band has become firmly established not only in rock and alternative music, but now in country with four back-to-back *Billboard* Top Country Albums.

The artist for the July 9th show has asked not to be revealed until February 15th, but it's going to be a great show and you won't want to miss it.

The Black Jacket Symphony returns to Woodstock on August 13th to recreate The Eagles' Hotel California live in its entirety—note for note, sound for sound—plus a full set of The Eagles' greatest hits. No sonic detail will be overlooked, with the musicians doing whatever it takes to reproduce the album. It's a full night of rock and roll magic—plus a visual experience unlike any other.

The season will close on September 10th with American Idol winner Scotty McCreery. The North Carolina native earned 3 back-to-back No. 1 hits from his album Seasons Change. His most recent album Same Truck debuted on the top 10 and its lead single You Time was McCreery's fourth consecutive single to reach number one on the US Country chart.

May 14	Marshall Charloff & Purple Experience
June 11	Sister Hazel
July 9	TBA after 2/15
August 13	Black Jacket Symphony - Hotel California
September 10	Scotty McCreery

Conclusion

This December 8th, our city will reach its 125th birthday. Much has changed in the last 125 years, but our story hasn't. In the midst of a rapidly changing world, and a rapidly changing city, our community remains. The people you walk by on Main Street, or Chambers or Elm or Fowler, are yours. They are your neighbors. This place is yours. It's ours.

We've built it into something special.

The challenge now is to build it into something lasting.

We have an amazing city staff working day in and day out to help accomplish this goal, but communities aren't built by the government.

Today I'm calling on you.

Today, we decide to lean in together.

Together, we will build a community that is connected through walkable grid-streets and trail systems.

Together, we will build a forward-looking city by ensuring our home ownership rates remain high and our plans for the future are data-driven.

Together, we will build a safe city that values the public safety personnel and public servants who work on our behalf each and every day.

Together, we will build a city that will be worth passing on to our children.