



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
CITY OF WOODSTOCK

MICHAEL CALDWELL
MAYOR

31 January 2025

Members of the City Council,
City Manager Moon,
City Staff,
Honored Guests,
My fellow Woodstockers,

Welcome to one of the most visited downtown destinations in Georgia.

One of the largest cities in our state. The economic engine of Cherokee County.

Welcome to the largest City in Cherokee County.

Welcome to one of Southern Living's best small towns in Georgia for a quaint escape.

One of Homes.com's five best suburbs in America.

One of Wallet Hub's best small cities in America.

Welcome to one of Money Magazine's top fifty places to live in America.

The rest of the nation has taken notice, but let me ask you: have you realized just how special this place we call home really is?

We have built a City that stands as the envy of all of our neighbors.

The Atlanta Regional Commission featured Woodstock as the example of a success story for their Livable Centers Initiative and downtown redevelopment at last year's State of the Region.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber is underway on a “Downtown Reimagined” campaign. At the Chamber’s annual meeting, they highlighted the importance of transforming the City of Atlanta back into a livable community. During their presentation, they used Woodstock as an example of the kind of downtown that Atlanta should be emulating. Our capital city is looking to us.

Our city streets rank among the safest in Georgia.

Our schools are among the best in the state.

Our unemployment rate is the lowest it has ever been. Our economy is the largest it has ever been.

Our city is the most diverse it has ever been and continues to grow in ways every shrinking town in America dreams of seeing.

In the past three years together, we have made the largest investment in police and fire department pay in our City’s history.

We have made the largest investment in our parks and trails in our City’s history.

We have made the largest investment in our City’s infrastructure - streets, water, sewer, parking - in our City’s history.

Ladies and gentlemen, the State of our City is brighter than ever before, and we are just getting started.

We have seen what happens when we focus our energy and attention on a concerted agenda.

When I came into office, we set out to accomplish an agenda centered on three key objectives. We would engage the largest wealth generating mechanism in human history, American Home Ownership, to establish a Woodstock where anyone can build generational wealth. We would empower and attract employers to Woodstock to create a deeper sense of place and connection to our community by enabling more of our citizens to work in their home city. We would construct a

record-breaking number of brand-new parks and trails that would be a lasting legacy for generations to come.

Because of this Council's vision for parks and greenspace, and our voters' dedication to seeing that vision come to fruition, we have delivered on that generational promise. Three years ago, our City looked forward to a day when we might convert the hundred acres of woods along Little River from the Woodlands to Trickum into a park our citizens could enjoy. In 2022, with a newly negotiated county SPLOST and the support of our voters we dedicated \$8 million to complete phase 1 of 3 of that park. In 2023, we asked Woodstock's voters to authorize an additional \$24 million investment in our parks and trails to get us through all three phases. You said yes. More accurately, you screamed yes. That referendum passed with an 87% majority, which was the largest majority I had ever seen on a referendum of any type in Georgia to that date. The voters of Woodstock were clear: establishing parks and trails in Woodstock is a fundamental policy priority of our citizens. We hear you, and we're hard at work. With that investment, which marks the largest investment in parks and trails in the City of Woodstock's 127 year history, we achieved 100% of the funding necessary to deliver Little River Park.

Little River Park has been in design and engineering, and construction will start this year. All three phases will be delivered to you by the end of next year.

This investment doesn't just deliver one park. This investment also marks the most concurrent active projects in parks development in our City's history as well.

Noonday Creek Trail which currently runs from Market Street to Highway 92 is being extended all the way to Noonday Park in Cobb County. This has been under construction since last year and will be open for use late this summer. Yes, our long awaited trail connection to tie us into the Silver

Comet Trail is finally just months away from completion. Our leg is done. Once Cobb County connects up to us at their Noonday Park, you'll be able to ride your bike from Woodstock to Alabama without ever leaving a trail. No longer a dream. After a decade of work, we have done it.

The long awaited Buckhead Crossing Boardwalk will connect Deer Run and Towne Lake into the Towne Lake Bypass trail. The project is going out to bid and is scheduled to start construction this year.

The Rubes Creek Connector's first phase is kicking off this month.

The Little River Park Connector Trail connecting the new park and Trickum Road down to Neese Road is in engineering and will open with the park next year.

Trails on Neese Road, Arnold Mill Road, the River Ridge Connector, the Downtown Depot Greenway trail, Dobbs Road, a nearly five mile stretch of water trail down Little River and so much more are already funded and on their way.

We partnered with Cherokee County this year to help establish their first master trail plan to ensure we are connecting to our northern neighbors in Holly Springs, Canton, Ball Ground and beyond. We have partnered with the Atlanta Regional Commission to build a plan to connect our City's trails eastward toward Roswell and Alpharetta. We have completed our connection south into Cobb County. Our City set out to be the trail-bound gateway to north Georgia. The dream that all trails would lead to Woodstock has gone from vision to execution.

We owe another thank you to Mr. Brian Borden and his outstanding team at Woodstock Parks and Recreation for executing on what was admittedly a huge vision to throw at our staff.

This City is only 13 square miles. Does it sound like we have a lot of parks projects underway? Parks and trails. We promised a generational investment. This commitment has been met, the funding has been secured, the staff is executing, and the City that our children inherit will be more vibrant for it.

Construction is only a portion of what we task our Parks and Recreation staff with. This year, with the help of Jamey Snyder and the department, I launched my first Mayors Youth Leadership Academy. We invited rising Juniors and Seniors from across Cherokee County to submit a video application explaining what made them a leader worth investing in. We selected twelve outstanding young men and women, and in partnership with the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute for Leadership we put them through a weeklong leadership intensive exposing them to leadership styles and strategies and sharing each of our City's departments and its leaders with them. Upon graduation, each of these students has now been engaging in quarterly coffee meetings with me to discuss the City's plans and how their generation's perspective can influence our public policy outcomes. As we envision a City built for our next generation, we are actively working to involve them in the process, and we are investing in the next generation of our community's leaders. If you know an outstanding rising junior or senior, applications for this summer are opening soon.

Our Parks department also completed the 26th year of the Woodstock Summer Concert Series. If you've never joined us for one of these shows, you are in for a treat. The Woodstock Summer Concert Series started as a group of public concerts held in the downtown gazebo, and it is now the largest free public concert series in the southeastern United States. With more than 14,000 crammed into the amphitheater to just one of our shows, it's an experience that is truly uniquely "Woodstock".

I know many of you come just for this part of the speech. For the first time, I am proud to announce the lineup for the 27th Woodstock Summer Concert Series. Starting from our finale and working back to the opening show:

On September 13, we will end our season with our 5th show featuring **Interstellar Echoes**, the southeast's premier Pink Floyd tribute.

On August 9, our fourth show will feature one of the most enduring and influential bands in alternative rock: **10,000 Maniacs**. With over 10 million albums sold and Grammy nominated hits, they are sure to be incredible.

For our third concert on July 12, we are featuring a multi-platinum-selling artist and Grammy nominee. We can't announce this country music icon's name until this Sunday, but his deep, soulful voice is sure to have you asking "Your Man", "Would You Go With Me?" and "Why Don't We Just Dance?" If we're lucky, maybe we'll see a "Long Black Train" come through Woodstock during the show...

The month prior, for our second show of the season on June 14, multi-platinum-selling rock legends **Gin Blossoms** defined the 90's, and now they take the stage at the Woodstock Summer Concert Series.

And for our opening show on May 10th. Some of you may not yet know that your Mayor has ranked among the top one percent of Spotify listeners for a particular artist for the past five years.

On May 10, we'll open this year's series with one of the largest and most celebrated Taylor Swift tribute acts in the nation: **Let's Sing Taylor**. If you think you've seen what it looks like to compete for chair space in that amphitheater before... Get ready for May and a City full of Swifties.

With three grammy nominated artists and two top-tier tributes, this is set to be one of the best seasons our City has ever put on.

Our Parks and Recreation team do an incredible job for us. From special events - our 4th of July Parade was more than 8 times larger than any other parade in the county this year - to the management of our Senior center, to a generational construction initiative, they're helping build tomorrow's Woodstock. Because of this outstanding work, they earned the National Recreation and Parks Association's CAPRA Re-Accreditation this year. Out of more than 10,000 Parks Agencies in the United States, only 193 have earned this distinguished designation. Your City's Parks and Recreation Department is among the top 1% in the nation, and one of only 14 in Georgia to earn this honor.

It is in their capable hands that we leave my administration's priority for an historic expansion of our parks and trails. Moving forward, I will be shifting this priority to a focus on building the next generation of infrastructure for our City.

Generational Infrastructure. For fifteen centuries, the City of Ephesus stood as one of the most important port and commercial cities in the world. It was the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world and the Gospel of John was written in the City. Despite centuries of withstanding foreign armies, natural disasters, disease, Ephesus learned the age-old lesson that no city can thrive while also ignoring its infrastructure.

The City's harbor required a regular dredging to maintain access to the sea. By the seventh century, the city's leaders had lost the will to maintain it. The harbor became impassable, shipping ceased,

and the city died. This same pattern has been happening in once vibrant American cities for decades.

We have built a place that people want to be. With more than 28 million visits to the City of Woodstock last year, our City remains among the most sought after in the region. Our City's population was a mere 4,500 in 1990 and today we boast a population north of 40,000 and stand one of the largest cities in Georgia. Within a ten-mile radius of the center of our 13 square mile City, there is a population of more than half a million people. It turns out that building a City that loves beer, art and balanced budgets... a city focused on walkability, families and vibrancy... was a recipe for success. But, that rapid success brings infrastructure challenges.

When I came into office, the two fundamental priorities I heard from nearly every voter were "parking" and "traffic". In return, I promised you orange cones. In my first year in office, we adopted our City's annual comprehensive transportation plan. This was the first of its kind, envisioning decades worth of infrastructure improvements and laying out a clear vision for the direction of our City's transportation network. It placed us leaps and bounds ahead of our peer cities and changed the trajectory of our infrastructure possibilities. Since that time, we have made the largest investment in Woodstock's infrastructure in our history. With a combination of local, state and federal funding sources, we have partnered with the Georgia Transportation Infrastructure Bank, Georgia DOT, USDOT, Cherokee County, the Atlanta Regional Commission, the Georgia General Assembly and thanks to Congressman Loudermilk have even seen direct appropriations from the United States Congress in order to prepare for a once-in-a-generation-overhaul of our City's transportation network. We have already delivered on portions of this with projects like the Hub Transformation, and you can see the work being done on major arteries like Neese Road and Trickum Road. The truth is that every single major roadway or critical thoroughfare in the City of Woodstock is either currently being improved, funded for improvement, or being staged for the next available funding opportunity. In just 2024, we saw nearly \$10 million in additional grant funding for our infrastructure

plans including \$4 million for the Ridgewalk Parkway/I-575 intersection from the United States Congress, \$2.5 million from Georgia DOT for the Noonday Creek Trail Extension, \$1 million from the Atlanta Regional Commission to deliver our Robby Lee Hogan Pedestrian Plaza and more. This level of outside investment above and beyond our traditional funding sources exhibits our City's ability to engage our state and federal partners, and their confidence in our City's planning and ability to execute. It clearly shows that both Georgia and the United States' government remain bullish on the future of Woodstock.

With the Ridgewalk Parkway Diverging Diamond Intersection, the Towne Lake Parkway Interchange, Towne Lake Parkway Widening, a complete overhaul of Neese Road, an improved Trickum Road, new roundabouts, the brand new Brownlee Road Connector and continued development of our grid street system, we are investing in the roads and thoroughfares that our residents and visitors rely on in a truly unprecedented way.

Pouring concrete is only one aspect of improving our infrastructure. As Woodstock envisions our next generation's transportation backbone, we are leveraging tomorrow's technology to make our assets more effective than ever. Our City's Chief Information Officer Katy Leggett spearheaded the establishment of a SMARTWoodstock Master Plan in October of 2020 to ensure Woodstock was positioned to leverage technology in our transportation projects. Her team, partnering with Georgia Tech and the ARC, conducted a public research and outreach project to learn how Woodstock's residents and visitors want the City to prioritize technology implementation. Tied for first place were the Improvement of vehicle, pedestrian and bicycle safety and improvement of transportation travel times. Tied for second place were Crime prevention and economic development. Illuminated crosswalks, parking occupancy sensors, traffic light preemption for public safety, adaptive signal timing, traffic monitoring and other groundbreaking technologies have been implemented here in our City since. We have built a global reputation for leading in technology, and in 2024 were awarded

the Intelligent Communities Forum's Smart21, naming us one of the top 21 cities globally for technology implementation. In April of 2024, I was invited to speak in Taiwan at the world's second largest Smart Cities conference on artificial intelligence in the public sector, economic development and technology implementation in the City of Woodstock, and to accept this award on behalf of our City. Later in the year, Ms. Leggett was invited to speak at the sister conference in Barcelona. The City of Woodstock is not just utilizing technology, we are fast building a reputation as a world leader. Ms. Leggett and her office are actively at work establishing the second iteration of our SMARTWoodstock plan, looking to improve our processes around technology implementation and measure the efficacy of these tools. From comprehensive technology and software inventories to mandatory evaluations by our staff technology advisory committee, we are focused not just on finding the shiniest new toy, but instead on boldly implementing cutting edge technology and rigorously measuring outcomes to drive success. Join me in thanking Katy and her team for the work they're doing to keep Woodstock on the forefront.

One of our most exciting technology implementations for the year also happens to be among the most visible infrastructure projects in our City. In last year's address, I promised you that we would deliver a parking deck for you before the end of calendar year 2024, and if you don't think I remember a few of you laughing out loud during the speech, you're wrong. I remember, and we delivered. On December 20th, Katie, the kids and I drove our minivan through a giant ribbon in the most suburban-dad ribbon cutting in history to officially open Woodstock's 633 space parking deck. This is the largest parking deck in Cherokee County, and I'd like to take a moment here to dispel a few rumors I've collected from social media about it. First, it is free to park in the parking deck. Second, it is free to park in the parking deck on any level - we did not hold on opening the top levels so that we could charge for them. Third, we did not forget to finish the outside. There are buildings going up in front of the less decorated portions. Fourth, yes, it's still free and no, we don't plan to change our mind as soon as we realize we can charge for it.

The parking deck includes dynamic wayfinding signage, directing you to the floors with available spaces and signifying the location of those spaces with green and red indicator lights. The security system is programmed to automatically alert our police department to the sound of gunshots and breaking glass. This is a truly modern, technology-forward parking asset, and it brings critical parking relief to one of the most visited downtowns in Georgia. It eliminates the need for cars to circle endlessly on Chambers and East Main Street, which directly relieves traffic congestion on the main arteries through our City center. It provides an alternative for downtown employees to park without taking up the spaces directly in front of their stores and restaurants. This has been a long awaited public resource, and I am proud to say that we delivered this project to you on time and on budget. We are delivering generational infrastructure at a pace that has never before been attempted in Woodstock, and we are doing so with record breaking success.

My administration's second major priority, delivering a strong, diversified economy for our City, remains in place and we have seen incredible progress in the past three years. The City Center Parking Deck has been a major component of one of our largest economic initiatives: our new City Center. As I shared in last year's address, this project will bring tens of thousands of square feet of new office, new restaurants, new retail, a new hotel, conference space and it has now delivered a six floor, six hundred thirty-three space parking deck. Enjoy the view of that parking deck, because it was designed to be hidden. Now that the public sector components of this project have been delivered, the private sector is hard at work to deliver the commercial components, and I'm proud to be able to share the most recent renderings of what will replace your view of the parking deck soon.

Along Chambers Street, sitting between the parking deck and Depot Square, you will find brand new retail and restaurants. A new restaurant will sit on the pad between Arnold Mill and the historic train depot. Between the parking deck and Arnold Mill, facing the Northside-Cherokee Amphitheater, you will find a brand new downtown hotel.

This gorgeous, skyline defining project continues to complement our City's downtown walkability, vibrancy and brings new offerings and amenities to residents and visitors alike. Perhaps most exciting, it adds thousands of square feet and multiple floors of new office space to the heart of our downtown.

In America today, it is highly unlikely that you live in the city that you were born in. It is even less likely that you work in the city that you live in. This shift to a transient culture, the ease with which Americans will pick up and go, has turned our cities into consumables. When the place we live starts to feel worse, we find a new place to live. When the place we work starts to feel less than it did, we find a new job. We have lost our sense of duty to improve the places we are in, and in doing so, have lost our sense of place. But in Woodstock, we're in the placemaking business. By building a strong economy that allows for our residents to work close to home, we are accomplishing so many positive things. We reduce the number of cars on the roads heading to distant offices. We are increasing the wealth generation for families and businesses here in our City instead of neighboring towns. We are increasing our residents' sense of place by allowing them to spend more of their lives here in the place that they've chosen to live. We are building a more resilient, self-sustaining community.

Our economy's story these past few years is nothing short of impressive. In 2016, our City's total business revenues measured roughly \$2.8 billion. In our most recent data for 2022, that number marked \$4.3 billion and presuming the trend has continued, our City's businesses are now generating well in excess of \$5 billion annually. Let's put that in perspective. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, Cherokee County's total GDP measured \$10.9 billion in 2022. That means that our City's business revenues account for roughly 40% of the total economic activity in Cherokee County.

At 13.1 square miles, we make up 3% of the geographic area of our county.

At 40,000 residents, we make up roughly 14% of the population of our county.

We account for 40% of the economy of our county.

This is why building vibrant, walkable downtowns matters. The economy that we drive in Woodstock powers the seventh largest county in Georgia, and is a major economic center for our region. The business revenues, and resulting sales tax revenues, from our 3% of the county's geography support infrastructure, schools, parks, and more throughout our City limits and in every corner of Cherokee County. This is how you ensure both a healthy, successful, sustainable community while also protecting the rural lifestyle that Cherokee County is and should be known for. Only by building walkable, economically focused, liveable, cities can the rural areas of our county truly flourish as well. Woodstock has done, and will continue to do this, exceptionally well.

As a business owner here myself, serving some of the largest companies in the world, I can tell you that Woodstock is a spectacular place to own a business. It's a great place to host a visiting customer, and it's never difficult to get employees excited about our downtown. As we continue to watch developments like our City Center, Adair Park, Trillium, and so many more the homes and footprints available for new businesses and relocations continue to grow. If you own a business in a county nearby because that seemed like the right move to make in the late nineties, I warmly invite you to explore relocating to the economic and population center of Georgia's seventh largest county. You won't regret it.

For both residents and businesses alike, the most important function of our government is to deliver a safe City. I have proudly shared in each of my previous addresses that in the time period from 2010 to 2020, despite an increase of population in our city from 23,000 to 35,000, we saw a 45% decrease in crime. I am proud yet again to report, that thanks to the incredible work of Woodstock's

Finest, the City of Woodstock saw another 21% decrease in reported crime from 2023 to 2024. We live in one of the safest cities in Georgia, and we owe it the outstanding work of Chief Robert Jones and his officers. Will you help me thank them?

When I came into office, we had 57 sworn officer roles in Woodstock. We had a record 15 vacancies. Our Council passed the single largest pay increase in our city's history for our police department, increasing starting police salaries by 26%, and as a result I was able to report to you last year that for the first time in more than a decade our department was fully staffed. Despite turnover, we have maintained that metric throughout the year, and this year we will be fulfilling another promise our Council made to you. We will be hiring new officers to serve our downtown district. During peak hours, they will be tasked with foot patrol in our downtown and they will also support our growing trail system. This added presence will provide even more exposure to our community for our best-in-class police department, and will serve as an early investment in ensuring we maintain our city's status as one of the safest in Georgia. Chief, thank you again.

Woodstock's Bravest have continued their incredible work protecting lives and property throughout our City under the exceptional leadership of Chief Shane Dobson. As I reported to you in last year's address, the department maintained its ISO rating of 1 which places it in the top 450 of more than 50,000 departments nationwide. Yes, the Woodstock Fire Department performs among the best 1% in the United States. Chief Dobson successfully restructured the department last year, and with Council's support has started the process of building our third fire station on Ridge Walk Parkway, west of I-575. This new station will enable our department to better serve pockets of our City that are currently harder to reach while also enabling an even quicker response times up and down the I-575 corridor. Our City's fire department works seamlessly with the Cherokee County Fire Department through our service delivery strategy, and this additional capacity enables us to better partner with CCFD to respond for both City and County residents when they need us the most.

Please join me in thanking Chief Dobson and his department for the professionalism, class and respect with which they serve our City.

The final priority of my administration's agenda remains making the American dream of home ownership available to every resident of our City.

All American public policy is American housing policy.

Three generations ago, the United States of America set out on the largest public-private partnership in the history of the world, and we called it the "American Dream". But why do we equate the American dream with home ownership? Because wealth is built not on salary, but on appreciating assets. Every level of our government set out to help Americans gain a universally accessible appreciating asset, their home. We passed the GI bill. The federal government provided federally subsidized mortgage interest rates. State governments passed tax laws incentivizing ownership. Local governments zoned their cities to incentivize developers to build product their citizens could own. The private sector rose to the occasion, and built more housing in a shorter time span than the world had ever seen. It worked.

We built the largest middle class in the world, and more wealth in a shorter time span than any civilization in world history. As a result, each generation of American families found themselves wealthier and better off than their parents. This coincided with 75 years of geopolitical stability unlike anything the modern world had ever seen. When the American middle class believes that tomorrow will be better than today, our political rhetoric and national divides don't keep us from coming together in moments that matter. When that isn't true, the world notices. American political stability is good for the world, and that is a direct product of American home ownership.

Today, we stand on the edge of a different story. Our young professionals today are objectively making more money than their parents, even adjusted for inflation, and they are objectively poorer than their parents were at their age. Housing prices have skyrocketed at an unprecedented rate, and before you count on a 2008-like correction, we must recognize that this is a result of inventory shortages. We simply did not build enough housing over the last few decades. In metro Atlanta, there is a 350,000 unit housing deficit in just the core five counties, and we anticipate adding the population of Nashville to this region by 2050. If we are going to get serious about making sure our children are better off than us, we must get serious about delivering more affordable, ownable inventory for them.

In Woodstock, that may not come with two acres and a white picket fence at a pricepoint that a new family can afford. If we focus our City's development on inventory that they can own - be it a single family home, a town home, a condo, or something in between - we give them a real opportunity to match the wealth generation of their parents, and their grandparents, and their great grandparents. In our City, we will care less about how many walls a unit shares and more about who that unit is building wealth for. We will focus on continuing to build the economic engine that built America, and by doing so, we will ensure both the City of Woodstock and Woodstock's families have a bright financial future.

All American public policy is American housing policy, and in Woodstock, we plan to get it right.

These are issues that truly matter. These aren't issues just unique to our City. From infrastructure deficits to technology management, public safety and housing inventory, these problems face every community in America. In our City, we will not turn a blind eye and wait for another to take the lead. Instead, we will boldly pursue real solutions and lead the way for communities across the nation.

We are able to invest and face these challenges because we are financially capable. Because we have built an environment in which our private sector continues to perform, and because our City is fiscally responsible. As I reported to you last year, our City achieved Aa1 and AA+ credit ratings, the second highest rating possible of our credit worthiness. In the three years since I have come into office, we have nearly doubled our unassigned general fund balance - think of it as our rainy day fund - to roughly half of our general operating budget to ensure our City's government is prepared for whatever comes our way. Even as we invest in historic ways, our City continues to build a stronger, resilient financial foundation on which we can build tomorrow.

Welcome to one of the most visited downtown destinations in Georgia.

One of the largest cities in our state. The economic engine of Cherokee County.

Welcome to the City that raised me.

To the City where I married my high school sweetheart.

To the home of my business, and the livelihoods of so many.

To the only home my children have ever known.

Welcome to a City that feels like home.

Because home is where you shape your memories, and it's the foundation upon which our children build their futures. We will boldly pursue what's next. We will invest and lead the way. But we will not forget the calling of every generation. We will build a home, and we will leave it better for our children than we found it.