

Remarks as prepared for delivery by Dr. Romona Jackson Jones, Chairman of the Douglas County Board of Commissioners' 2020 State of the County Address in October 2020.

Greetings, I am Dr. Romona Jackson Jones, Chairman of Douglas County Board of Commissioners and I stand before you to deliver my third State of the County Address. Today, my message comes from a place of optimism and hope, an optimism based on the strength and perseverance I've witnessed by our community in the last six months and a sense of hope that will guide our steps into what the future will demand.

We are one hundred and fifty years strong and with a population of over 140,000 residents, Douglas County remains resilient even in challenging and unprecedented times. We may bend and lean, but we never break. Speaking of resilience, I would like to take the time to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my fellow Board of Commissioners, Vice Chairman and District 2 Commissioner Kelly Robinson, District 1 Commissioner Henry Mitchell, III, District 3 Commissioner Tarenia Carthan and District 4 Commissioner Ann Jones Guider. Thank you for working tirelessly to serve, shape, and sustain the governmental affairs of Douglas County.

Certainly, I would like to take this moment to recognize the Executive Cabinet Members, County Administrator Mark Teal, Communications Director Rick Martin, County Attorney Ken Bernard, County Clerk Lisa Watson and External Affairs Director, Tiffany Stewart Stanley. Thank you all for your tremendous support during such a challenging era.

Also, I would like to take this moment to recognize all elected officials, constitutional officers, appointed officials, department heads, managers, government employees, first responders, healthcare workers, our state legislative delegation, community partners, clergymen, veterans, and citizens who call Douglas County home. Thank you for exuding a unified commitment and dedication to our community.

By no means has 2020 been a traditional year. Together, we have faced and continue to face a public health crisis in the Coronavirus Pandemic which has led to an economic downfall across the nation. We are also confronting the horrific reality of racism and social unrest leading us all to look within ourselves to address our troubled history and its effect on our present.

America must see its true self and those genuine aspirations originating from liberty and equality and the reaffirmation of better days. This year, we have lost several American heroes, individuals who stood firmly on the belief of liberty, equality, justice for all. We must take their life's work as our marching orders to ensure that real change takes place.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic, we were introduced to a new reality, a new normal consisting of washing our hands, social distancing, and wearing a mask. As a

community, we bonded together to protect ourselves and our neighbors to minimize the spread of the coronavirus. As of October 2020, Douglas County has more than 3600 cases, 405 hospitalizations, and sadly 69 lives lost.

Many of our families and friends have left us too soon but without the bold action of the Douglas County Public Health Board led by Dr. Charles Craton, Cobb & Douglas Public Health Director, Dr. Janet Memark, Public Health Deputy Director, Lisa Crossman and the entire public health team the death toll would be much worse. The Board of Commissioners and I thank you and most importantly the citizens of Douglas County thank you for taking such swift actions to protect the safety and welfare of our community.

In light of these turbulent times, I commend the Board of Commissioners for advocating for a COVID-19 testing site that has bode well for our citizens. I commend the tenacity and the robust capacity of our first responders and public safety staff because your levels of excellence are unmatched. Special thanks to Sheriff Tim Pounds and the Sheriff's Office staff, Fire Chief Scott Spencer and the Fire Department staff, Emergency Management Director, Jason Milhollin and support staff, E-911 Director, Greg Whitaker and staff, Douglas Wellstar Hospital CEO, Craig Owens, Physicians, Nurses, Clinical and Ancillary staff, thank you for a job well done.

Throughout the COVID-19 Pandemic, Douglasville/Douglas County Water and Sewer Authority has continued to provide the same award-winning service our community has come to know, and respect and they continue to demonstrate deep commitment during the extraordinary challenges set forth by the pandemic. In addition, thank you Greystone Power and Georgia Power for sustaining and maintaining our lights and electricity during the trials and tribulations of this pandemic.

Our strength is defined by our tolerance to overcome setbacks. Our vision is clear, and we cannot pivot away from progress during uncertainty. Our credit position is favorable, and our debt burden is extremely low. The housing market in Douglas County is thriving with sales up by 7% with average sales at approximately \$215,000. Despite our circumstances, I often remember the echo of my Army Drill Sergeant stating, "we should limit our complaining because our situation could always be worst."

Together, we will continue to build a strong economy by maintaining our track record of attracting reputable companies bringing high paying jobs committed to hiring Douglas County residents. Within the last year, a merchandizing company called Stitch Fix opened a 985,000 square building committed to bringing over 900 jobs to Douglas County. On the western side of the county a \$200 Million global wellness center called Preserve Life is under construction on an 1100-acre development and will add 400 jobs and the list keeps growing.

By design, our future is fixed on the fundamentals of investing with intention, cultivating talent and building business success. Our competitive reputation is indisputable with a \$4.9 billion-dollar economic development pipeline worth more than Truist Park and Mercedes Benz Stadium combined; placing Douglas County in an elite class all by itself. My administration will continue to work with the Douglas County Chamber and Douglas County Economic Development Authority to support the needs of small businesses to promote sustainability today, tomorrow and in the future.

Douglas County received a boost of good news in September 2020 that the Bandwith Infrastructure Group, a metro dark fiber network provider in Northern California and Greater Atlanta is expanding its high capacity, dark fiber network within Douglas County, Georgia. The Douglas County Economic Development Authority is working in partnership with the company to attract and support new development and investment in our area.

Growth in median household incomes in Douglas County from 2013-2018 increased by 21% outpacing the US at 18.5% and slightly less than Georgia at 22.8%.

Young professional residents between the ages of 25 and 44 years old represent a critical segment of the local workforce. Recruiting and retaining this population helps ensure a region can supply a growing labor force for existing and prospective companies.

Employment growth in Douglas County from 2014-2019 increased nearly 17%, outperforming both the US and Georgia averages. Most recently, Douglas County's unemployment rate dropped significantly in August 2020 to 6.9 % as compared to 9.3 % in July 2020 according to Georgia's Department of Labor. This decline, in the midst of a pandemic, is proof we are moving forward in the right direction.

Special thanks to Executive Director of Economic Development, Chris Pumphrey and staff for advancing targeted industry sectors that has contributed to skyrocketing employee growth in transportation and logistics by 205%, software/IT by 297% and research and development grew by 205%.

Upon entering my second term in office, my vision will align with the crisis of today. The Board of Commissioners' five-year strategic plan starting 2021-2025 will be deliberate and will guide our mission, vision, and values. Fiscal Policy Reform is crucial at a time when revenues are lagging. My administration will continue to seek robust grant funding as part of our sustainability model while withstanding added budget expenses related to personal protective equipment and supplies, testing, and treatment resources including essential pharmaceutical vaccine products needed to address the contagious mutation of this virus as we go forward.

Together, we will emerge and ultimately restore our economic prosperity. Our small businesses and corporations are playing key roles in flattening the curve in Douglas County. We must remain vigilant and we all are responsible for protecting one another because if we take this virus lightly it will take us. I urge you to continue practicing and following current health guidelines by wearing a mask in public places, watch your social distancing and stay home if you're sick.

Moving into 2021 and beyond, the Board of Commissioners will continue to double down on reducing expenses and cutting spending due to the volatility of a slow economic recovery associated with the pandemic. Our strategic focus will shift towards identifying every possible cost savings opportunity combined with exploring various revenue generating opportunities to offset the lingering effect of this virus.

Our hard work during the 2020 Census in Douglas County will pay off by shaping our future with much needed federal funding to build hospitals, schools, roads, and public works, increase Medicare and Medicaid funding and much more.

Our promising future is inevitable with so many exciting projects under construction. A special thanks to Douglas County voters instrumental in the passing of the 2016 SPLOST. Your vote is building our future with \$51 Million dollars committed to transportation and road resurfacing projects, \$32 Million committed to Fire and EMS and \$17 Million committed to Parks and Recreation projects.

Due to SPLOST, dirt is moving all over the county and currently a brand new 18,000 square foot Senior Center is about to complete its construction in Lithia Springs, a 30,000 square foot multipurpose recreational center is under construction at Boundary Waters, new tennis courts and amenities are under construction at Deer Lick Park, new concession stands, press box and new restrooms are under construction at Fairplay and Bill Arp Parks. Other noteworthy SPLOST projects include a new state of the art E-911 radio system, robust road resurfacing/construction projects, road widening projects, fire station renovations, new fire trucks, new ambulances, a new fire station, additional streetlights and sidewalks throughout the county.

Without a doubt, Douglas County is moving forward. We launched a brand-new interactive County government website in September after 20 years. Soon and very soon a long-awaited Veterans Court System will be opening, and Douglas County DUI/Drug Court most recently was selected as a Model Court in the state of Georgia. Optimism is our sanctuary and I am proud to announce that a new Driver Services Center is being built in Douglas County in the very near future. I extend heartfelt appreciation to Georgia State Senator Mike Dugan, Georgia State Senator Donzella James, and the entire Douglas County State Legislative Delegation for making a dream come true in Douglas County.

Serving as the Chairman of Douglas County is an honor and privilege. I appreciate your confidence in my ability to lead us forward during these vulnerable times. Our body of work is massive and our message of striving for excellence is resonating all over the state of Georgia and we should be proud. Our bias stigma is diminishing rapidly as we are leading best practice and promoting diversity in all sectors of our government. Douglas County government has become a proud affiliate of Disadvantaged Business Enterprise and thank you Commissioner Carthan for leading the charge. Disadvantaged Business Enterprise programs are designed to remedy ongoing discrimination and the continuing effects of past discrimination in federally assisted highway, transit, airport, and highway safety financial assistance transportation markets nationwide. Let it be known today and henceforth, Douglas County is open for business!

In light of our circumstances, my first and ultimate priority is to protect the safety and welfare of every citizen as we weather the storm of this unprecedented virus. We must pace ourselves because this is a marathon not a sprint; we cannot afford to collapse before crossing the finish line.

Together, we will continue to work while we wait on a safe and approved vaccine. Meanwhile, we cannot sit still, and we must keep moving with a new era of development, growth, and productivity. We must seize the opportunity to address our severe housing shortage and tackle our smart growth, development roadblocks and accommodate the growing needs of our seniors and millennials. Our roads in our subdivisions are aging and I will be introducing a robust resurfacing plan to address this pressing matter. Our roads are congested due to the growing population and our SPLOST road widening projects are in progress throughout the county and we all look forward to a day of relief.

We are a resilient county; our 150 years of existence is not in vain. We are standing in the footprint of past generations and it is our responsibility to seize the opportunity of this crisis in order to generate genuine and lifelong change. Most of us understand the danger of the coronavirus and we are willing to make simplistic sacrifices to protect ourselves and others. These difficult months have demonstrated our true resiliency, thrown our deficiencies into sharp liberation, and has established the platform for what we as a unified One Douglas can accomplish. Trepidation blocks out hope, kindness and commonsense thinking, traits which we need now, more than ever.

In the words of Albert Einstein, "strange is our situation here upon earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to a divine purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: That we are here for the sake of other men, above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our happiness depends, for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy".

As we find our way, the principles of hope, justice, and opportunity will channel our path. Just in a matter of a moment, all our lives transformed from congregating to quarantining. This crisis has opened doors to innovation as we wait for the day of a vaccine. Without reservations, this is a year we will remember for a very long time.

While this pandemic will one day recede, it is our responsibility to press through to the other side and we cannot return to the status quo of the failures of our past. It is incumbent upon all of us to move beyond division and embrace diversity for our greater good. Our future is fixed on our morals to catalyst change to soothe the unfamiliar stress of an invisible virus and to address the setbacks of racial and social unrest in the nation in order to change our trajectory. Together, we are a resilient county equipped with a moral compass that will guide our future and set the tone for those who will succeed us.

May God continue to bless Douglas County, the State of Georgia and the United States of America.