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PRESS RELEASE

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Chairman Harry B. Johnston Delivers Annual 2024 State of Cherokee County Address *380+ Attended Annual Address at Cherokee Conference Center*

CHEROKEE COUNTY, GA – On Wednesday, January 24, 2024, the Council for Quality Growth, [Cherokee County Government](#), and [Cherokee County Chamber of Commerce](#) hosted the 2024 State of Cherokee County at the Cherokee Conference Center in Canton. Over 380 Council and Chamber members, elected officials, businesses, residents, county staff, and partners of Cherokee County gathered to hear the Chairman Harry B. Johnston’s annual state of the county address, along with updates from Superintendent Brian Hightower on Cherokee’s school district and Misti Martin on the economic development agency. The lunch program was presented by [Northside Hospital Cherokee](#) and [VHB](#).

Superintendent Brian Hightower delivered his update first, reporting another year of increasingly impressive performance from Cherokee’s teachers and students. “The school district is a selling point for the County,” he said. Under his leadership, the school district has adapted to the changing demographics of students in Cherokee County. What used to be a predominantly white school district is now full of diversity. Hightower admits the changes, such as adapting to students that speak different languages, have been a challenging but necessary part of the schools’ growth. The Cherokee County School District employs 5,300 people, including 3,000 teachers. Hightower is prioritizing competitive salaries as a means to keep attracting the right talent. Cherokee has remained a top competitor, despite neighboring counties with larger populations and higher tax revenues. The County continues to make capital investments to improve the school environments through a 5-year ESPLOST that ends in 2025. Dr. Hightower is retiring at the end of the current school year, after 38 years serving Cherokee’s schools, the last 8 as Superintendent. He received a standing ovation from the room for his dedication to educating Cherokee’s youth as he concluded his final State of Cherokee address.

Misti Martin also reported impressive numbers from the Cherokee Office of Economic Development (COED), with over \$1 billion in investment and 8,000 jobs in the last decade. In 2023, COED was able to help 74 businesses sustain and grow with the help of small business grants through ARPA funding and create two new councils for international business and Latino businesses trying to invest in Cherokee. “Economic development is the investment with the best return,” said Martin, “and we need to preserve the land we have that is primed for business if we want to see this kind of return.” Martin said the 100-acre Cherokee 75 Corporate Park provides \$1.5 million in annual tax revenues, a much higher return when compared to a similar sized residential neighborhood at \$321,000. Martin is looking 5-10 years ahead for Cherokee. Her team are making strategic investments to keep the growth momentum, such as conducting wage benefits and skills gap analysis to attract the kind of businesses that keep Cherokee’s residents working in the County. Martin is looking to grow the commercial diversity and light industrial business portfolios in Cherokee. “We’re committed to working on the type of growth that doesn’t just happen because of population growth,” said Martin.

Chairman Johnston began by introducing his theme of “nurturing greatness” in Cherokee County. According to Johnston, this greatness comes from the county’s prime location, geography, people, and value proposition. Cherokee is “the collision and intersection of good luck and good work over a long period of time by a lot of good people,” Chairman Johnston said. He commended the public safety department for being the core of what the local governments provide, highlighting the Sheriff’s office, Fire Department, EMS, and 911 center, all of which hold national accreditations.

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With an average household income of just over \$100,000, Cherokee ranks third of the most affluent counties in the metro Atlanta region. The Chairman reported the county's long history of being fiscally conservative and responsible, being among the lowest debt, taxes, and expenditures per capita. Collectively, these factors add up to "a quality of life that is increasingly rare and really precious" for the county and its 5 thriving cities.

To nurture this greatness, Chairman Johnston believes the focus should be on maintaining the value proposition, managing growth, keeping up with roads, and keeping attainable housing in the mix. He urged his fellow leadership to maintain the 5-year planning model to evaluate the tax rates needed to reach the county's goals. Johnston believes that conservative growth management is needed to maintain the current quality of life. The county has used Growth Boundary Agreements with cities to find areas for growth that are reasonable for both sides.

The Chairman described the path to keeping up with roads in Cherokee as a more challenging goal, with 317 projects in the 20-year Comprehensive Transportation Plan. Johnston called for at least a 25% bump in the county's annual road improvement budget to fund these projects using either a Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (TSPLOST) or a Homestead Option Sales Tax (HOST). He concluded his address by recognizing the national housing crisis and its complexity. "It takes ongoing diligence, even vigilance, to protect and nurture the great treasure we have in Cherokee County," Chairman Johnston said.

The Council's State of Cherokee County annually convenes the county's business community with its local government bodies, as well as with other local leaders from across the region. Sally Riker, the Council's 2024 Chair and the Founder & CEO of Terminus Transformation Group, opened the program. As a former resident of Cherokee and graduate of Etowah High, she has witnessed the growth of the County and is impressed with the thriving communities and downtowns that have developed over the last years. "The Council's ability to collaborate with Cherokee County ensures everyone has a voice here," said Riker. "We could not serve our members at this high level without the support of leaders like Chairman Johnston and the other elected officials here today."

The program also featured remarks from Katie Pearson, Director of Operations for Northside Hospital Cherokee, and Fabricio Ponce, Managing Director of VHB and Board Member of the Council for Quality Growth. Katherine Zitsch, Deputy Chief Operating Officer of Atlanta Regional Commission, provided an update on the regional stormwater management efforts of the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District.



[From left: Dr. Brian Hightower, Misti Martin, Chairman Harry B. Johnston, Sally Riker, Michael Paris]



*Chairman Harry B. Johnston delivers his
2024 State of the County Address*

A photo gallery will be available in the coming days at <https://www.councilforqualitygrowth.org/news-press/>.

About the State of the County/Agency Series

The Council for Quality Growth hosts 10 ‘State of’ events across the region, including 8 counties and 2 agencies. We work in close collaboration with the office of the County Chairs in Cherokee, Clayton, DeKalb, Douglas, Fulton, Gwinnett, Henry, and Rockdale, as well as with leadership at MARTA and the Atlanta BeltLine, to provide a platform for our counties and agency partners deliver an update on achievements, projects, and the future that is specifically geared toward the business community and the Council’s membership. A full calendar of the Council’s 2024 Signature Events, including the State of the County/Agency series, can be viewed and downloaded here: [2024 Programs Calendar](#)

About the Council for Quality Growth

The Council for Quality Growth is a trade organization that works to ensure continued growth and economic success for generations to come by providing advocacy, information, and education to its members. In its 39th year, the Council is committed to the mission of promoting balanced and responsible growth and is proactively involved in the formulation of policy and legislation critical to the growth and development industry. The Council addresses, head-on, strategic economic planning, infrastructure needs, and tough quality-of-life issues throughout the metro Atlanta region and state. For more information, please visit <http://www.councilforqualitygrowth.org>.

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