



Media Contact:
Anna Frances Gardner
Marketing Coordinator
ag@councilforqualitygrowth.org
770-813-3388

PRESS RELEASE

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Chairman Harry B. Johnston to Delivers Annual 2026 State of Cherokee County Address *425+ Attended Annual Address & Lunch at Cherokee Conference Center*

CHEROKEE COUNTY, GA – On Wednesday, January 21, 2026, the Council for Quality Growth, [Cherokee County Government](#), and [Cherokee County Chamber of Commerce](#) hosted the 2026 State of Cherokee County Address at the Cherokee Conference Center in Canton. More than 425 Council and Chamber members, elected officials, business, residents, county staff, and partners of Cherokee County gathered to hear Commission Chairman Harry B. Johnston’s 8th State of the County address, along with updates from school district Superintendent, Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis, and an address from President of the Cherokee Office of Economic Development, Heath Tippens. The lunch program was presented by [LGE Community Credit Union](#), [Northside Hospital Cherokee](#), and [VHB](#).

Cherokee County School District (CCSD) Superintendent Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis spoke first, delivering her 2nd address. She began with crediting the “exceptional leadership in public education” from her School Board, who she said have worked hard to create clarity and hold educators accountable for student outcomes through a “laser-focus on learning.” The Superintendent proudly reported that CCSD was ranked 8th among the state’s 180 school districts in the state’s College & Career Readiness Performance Indicator (CCRPI) rankings last year. CCSD – home to 42,000 students and 3,000 teachers – currently offers 44 different career pathways, and 32% of high school graduates are pathway completers or are otherwise industry certified to enter the workforce. Through partnerships with the Cherokee Chamber and Cherokee Office of Economic Development, the school district’s new FLEX program works to partner students with community businesses and ensure every 8th grader has access to career readiness resources such as job fairs and interview coaching. Dr. Davis again thanked the school board for the financial infrastructure that makes it possible to be the 8th highest performing school district in the state. “We are putting resources where it matters most,” she said, “as close as kids to possible.” CCSD had a 99.9% fill rate for teacher placements at the start of the current school year, where the region averages 70-80%, and Cherokee County is among the highest in the per student investment in schools and education. “It’s not just the best place to live, work, and play,” said Superintendent Davis, “it’s also the best place to learn.”

Heath Tippens then took to the stage for his first address as President of the Cherokee Office of Economic Development (COED). He focused much of his remarks on investing in people, preparing sites and infrastructure, strengthening workforce pipelines, and supporting entrepreneurship across Cherokee County. Tippens highlighted the continued success of Be Pro Be Proud, noting that the program engaged 4,489 Cherokee students in 2025 and exposed more than 22,000 students statewide to high-demand careers. He also emphasized COED’s commitment to talent development, stating, “The job market is evolving, and families feel that shift every day. That’s why our work to connect talent to opportunity matters now more than ever.” Tippens emphasized major investments in product development, including Canton Corporate Park and The Bluffs, as well as expanded sewer infrastructure to bring sites closer to market readiness. He also noted the

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county's growing entrepreneurial ecosystem through Startup Cherokee, which impacted more than 1,000 entrepreneurs last year. Announcing a new \$25 million corporate expansion creating 70 jobs, Tippens emphasized the importance of intentional planning, noting that Cherokee's progress is driven by purpose and partnership. "When you truly love where you live, you don't just enjoy your community—you invest in it," he said. "When we choose to love this place, we choose to leave it stronger than we found it."

Cherokee County Chairman Harry Johnston then took to the stage for his 8th State of the County address, themed "We are Better Together." He began highlighting the key strengths – small town lifestyle, geography, public safety, low taxes, and education – as well as key challenges – growth, transportation, and housing – that his county faces. He touted the many achievements and accreditations of the public safety departments, including Eddie Robinson as the 2025 Georgia Fire Chief of the Year and the Real Time Crime Center launching later this year, and the robust community services and parks and recreation programs they've added or expanded for Cherokee citizens over the last year.

With just under 300,000 citizens, growing at about 2% per year, Chairman Johnston said Cherokee County is "in the range of growth that we can live with without harming our quality of life." He urged for collaboration between the county and the cities to ensure Cherokee growth in a way and at the rate that protects the future they're working towards. "There are people that we need to be part of our community and part of our economy that are struggling to live here" he said. "And we aggravate this problem a little bit with our slow growth policies." Chairman Johnston understands the housing challenges he faces, and he was frank about not yet knowing what the solution is. "The solutions are difficult, but we're dedicated to find one here in Cherokee County."

On transportation, the Chairman was encouraged by the recent passage of the TSPLOST. "Hallelujah and thank the voters of Cherokee County," he said. The 6-year 1% sales tax will bring in an estimated \$445 million dedicated to much needed transportation and road projects. The TSPLOST more than doubles the county's road improvement budget. The sales tax will increase from 6% to 7% in April, and road projects are lined up to start in June.

To conclude his remarks, Chairman Johnston emphasized the shared responsibility behind the county's success and future, noting that "the people who care about our county have built a county worthy of its people." He reiterated that continued collaboration and thoughtful leadership will be essential to ensure Cherokee County remains a place where growth and quality of life move forward together.

The Council's State of Cherokee County annually convenes the county's business community with its local government bodies and other local leaders from across the region. Michael Paris, President & CEO of the Council for Quality Growth, opened the program and acknowledged the sponsors and elected officials present. "We're proud to work alongside Chairman Johnston, the school district, and our economic development partners throughout the year," said Paris. "That collaboration allows us to better serve our members, support quality growth and development, and contribute to the strong and growing quality of life in Cherokee County for both residents and businesses." Gerald McDowell, Executive Director of ATL Airport Community Improvement Districts and 2026 Chair of the Council for Quality Growth, provided welcome remarks.



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The program also featured remarks from Ashley Rowe, Business Development Officer of LGE Community Credit Union, Katherine Pearson, Chief Operating Officer of Northside Hospital Cherokee, Matt Thompson, Senior Transportation Engineer at VHB, and Danny Johnson, Managing Director of the ARC’s Natural Resources Department.



[From left: Dr. Mary Elizabeth Davis, Heath Tippens, Chairman Harry Johnston, Gerald McDowell, Michael Paris]



[Chairman Harry Johnston delivers 2026 State of Cherokee Address]

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The full recording of the program and a photo gallery will be made 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 2026 Signature Events, including the State of the County/Agency series, can be viewed and downloaded here: [2026 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 41st 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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