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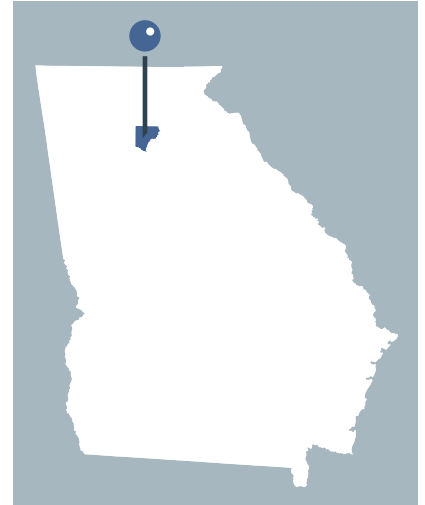
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FORSYTH COUNTY



Very Purposeful:
Alfred John, chair of
the Forsyth County
Commission

ERIC SUN

Abundance of Riches

Schools, Jobs, Growth

[By Linda Erbele]

Forsyth County has already performed a hat trick: top-ranked schools, high-tech business environment and access to excellent healthcare. But it aims to score even higher. Top in its sights: a National Hockey League franchise that may come to the metro area as the centerpiece of development that would include an 18,500-capacity arena.

That would be just one more element of robust growth that has enhanced the county's quality of life. But those accomplishments aren't happening by chance. It took planning, negotiation and community involvement.

Forsyth County's forward thinking is evident in its NHL aspirations. Vernon Krause, CEO of Krause Sports and Entertainment, and his development team presented the NHL-related development project to the Forsyth County Commission in April 2023. Planned for a 100-acre lot in the southern part of the county at the intersection of Union Hill Road and Ronald Reagan Boulevard, the project is called The Gathering at South Forsyth. In addition to the arena, it proposes to include 1.6 million square feet of

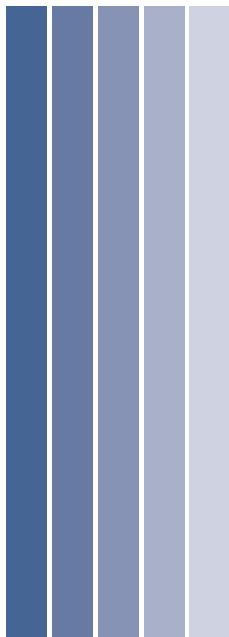
commercial and retail development, 500 hotel rooms with meeting space, 1,800 multifamily and 150 single-family residential units to be built in phases, as well as a 15,000-square-foot building that would house a fire station and sheriff's precinct station. The developers would also add a 1.2-mile extension of the Big Creek Greenway, a 12-foot-wide concrete and boardwalk trail that begins nearby.

"The developer could not build the kind of development that we as a community would want without a public partner," says James McCoy, former president and CEO of the Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce, who is now a consultant at executive recruiting firm The Chason Group. He led the chamber in working with the county commission and Forsyth County schools to create a workable plan to bring the project to fruition.

"We've been very, very purposeful about letting the public know that this is [likely] coming," says Alfred John, chair of the county commission. "Over a period of time, we got tremendous community buy-in, especially from the hockey community and parents seeing that there's one more sport available to their kids."

Making Way for the Future

Creating a Tax Allocation District (TAD) would allow both for bonds to provide funding and, importantly, to let the voters of the county have input.



SNAPSHOT



POPULATION

(2023 estimate)

County	272,887
Cumming	9,471

PER CAPITA INCOME

(2023)

County	\$55,936
Georgia	\$39,525

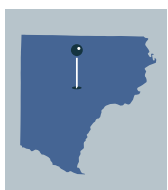
UNEMPLOYMENT

(January 2025)

County	2.7%
Georgia	3.5%

SOURCES

- + U.S. Census Bureau
- + Georgia Department of Labor



Gathering Place: Cumming Mayor Troy Brumbalow at City Center

In November 2024, a majority of voters approved the referendum granting the county commission redevelopment powers, which enabled it to define the project area as a TAD.

The Forsyth County Commission then voted to approve an overlay of the area, required for the project to go forward, and to issue bonds in the amount of \$225 million to help fund the \$2 billion project, should the NHL award the development of a professional hockey franchise.

No tax increase is involved – the bonds will be paid for with millage collection from the project area, including both county and school millage.

“As part of our ability to help with this project, while the county government’s bond is being repaid, we will only collect taxes as if the property had not been developed,” says Mitch Young, superintendent of Forsyth County Schools. “Once that bond is paid off, which we have been told is projected to be 12 to 15 years even though it’s a 30-year bond, we would collect property taxes on the fully improved property.”

Meanwhile, Young says that the school system can use the facility for graduations, without cost, rather than renting the Arena at Gwinnett Center, as they do now.

“And of all the rental housing that they will develop, they will hold a portion of those back to give first responders and teachers a discount rate where they’re only going to have to pay about 60% of retail be able to live there,” he adds. “One of the challenges we have is when new teachers come in, they can’t afford to live here.”

Another part of the agreement is that the school system will receive land on which to build another career tech-focused facility.

“But none of our money and none of the public support of

the project goes into effect until there’s an NHL team,” McCoy says.

This wouldn’t be the first professional hockey team in the region. The Atlanta Thrashers played downtown from 1999 to 2011, before relocating to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Prior to that, the Atlanta Flames were based in the city from 1972 to 1980. And from 1992 to 1996, the Atlanta Knights from the International Hockey League was Atlanta’s home team.

Game Changer?

So the question is: Will the National Hockey League expand here?

As part of their due diligence, chamber and county officials visited New York and met with Gary Bettman, the NHL commissioner.

“And of course, he’s not going to commit to who’s going to get the hockey team,” John says. “But what he did say was, ‘We are very interested in the Atlanta market.’”

Sharon Goldmacher, president and CEO of communications 21 and part of the development team for Krause Sports and Entertainment, remains hopeful.

“We are encouraged based on news around a potential hockey expansion,”

she says. “But nothing is certain.”

Goldmacher adds that at 80 contiguous acres, the project is actually bigger than The Battery where the Atlanta Braves play.

“There’s a huge economic impact not only within The Gathering, but also there’s a halo effect,” John adds. “And that’ll be felt a good 10 to 15 miles around.”

The entire project would be completed over a span of 10 years.

Anthony Rodriguez, executive director of South Forsyth Community Improvement District says if all goes as planned, The Gathering at South Forsyth could be a game changer. “It’s an epic project – a glorious vision. It’ll do for South Forsyth the same sort of thing that The Battery did for that area of Cumberland [in Cobb County].”

Creating Excitement

The Gathering at South Forsyth is just one effort championed by the South Forsyth CID, which was established in 2019 by property owners who agreed to



Talk of the Town: Rendering of The Gathering at South Forsyth

voluntarily tax themselves in order to fund improvements within the South Forsyth district boundaries.

“[The CID] can span a wide variety of projects,” says Rodriguez. “It could be art installations, or it could be working on intersections to make them safer or completing sidewalks that perhaps are not finished. We can beautify our district with vibrant murals dotted along our boundary lines by local artists.”

The South Forsyth CID has invested \$1.5 million in landscaping and maintaining four quadrants at State Route 400 and McFarland Road, he says.

“We’re not necessarily tasked with economic development,” he adds. “Certainly, we create an environment where economic development can thrive.”

Rodriguez says the CID works with the county to ensure that projects align with any branding or other plans the county has for the area.

His goal is “to work with not just the commercial property owners but to understand what will benefit the county as a whole,” he says. “When you create an environment where success can thrive, entertainment can thrive, businesses can thrive and be proud of where they are located, those things help to attract new and other businesses that also want to be here.”

The CID’s boundaries extend in each direction from the Georgia 400/McFarland Road interchange down to the county line between Forsyth and Fulton. It includes Halcyon, a large live-work-play area with more than 20 restaurants, a hotel, movie theater, indoor golf and access to the Big Creek Greenway.

“When you come to South Forsyth, you are coming to an incredibly dynamic, fun place to be,” says Rodriguez. “It’s one of the most exciting areas in Georgia at the moment, between the assets we already have and [the potential development of] The Gathering. It’s an incredible place to live, work and play, but it’s going to go well beyond that in the near future.”

Three other live-work-play communities either currently exist in the county or are being built or planned, including the 630-home Vickery Village; The Crossing, which is under construction at Coal Mountain Town Center; and Cumming City Center, which is still in the development phase but includes plans for housing in the future.

“City Center created a gathering place for people,” says Cumming Mayor Troy Brumbalow. “Every week beginning in March we have a concert on the weekend. It brings in [crowds



Glorious Vision: Anthony Rodriguez, executive director of South Forsyth Community Improvement District

of] anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000.”

The concerts are held at the amphitheater in the center, sponsored by Lou Sobh Kia. Admission is free. Paved trails lead from the amphitheater to the edge of the property and beyond. A new municipal court and police headquarters building are also planned at the center.

Brumbalow says the city is working on extending the multi-use paths to nearby neighborhoods. Golf carts are legal on the paths and on designated city streets, but not on state highways. Plans are to build connector roads and expand the fairgrounds, which annually draws over 250,000 people to town for the Cumming Country Fair and Festival.

“There are a lot of reasons to come to Cumming,” he says. “As a suburb of Atlanta, we have a tremendous school system, a tremendous hospital system and a low crime rate.”

Quality of life is a focus of Alfred John, the commission chair, as well. He is especially proud of the large number of popular parks and trails that the county maintains.

“When I go to our parks, they’re heavily used,” he says. “They’re not crowded. They’re being well used by our residents.”

There are even four dog parks.



CONTRIBUTED

Dynamic Environment: Halcyon is a live-work-play community with more than 20 restaurants and access to the Big Creek Greenway.

“They let their dogs run around and play, and people are congregating and talking to one another ... about life and work,” he says. “In all of these, we’re building community.”

Community Brings People

One of Forsyth County’s largest employers, Scientific Games, is the world’s largest creator, manager and producer of lottery scratch-off games. It provides games, technologies, analytics and services to government-sponsored lotteries in 50 countries, encompassing nearly every North American lottery, including Georgia’s.

“We’ve grown from a small Georgia-based company many years ago into a global leader in our industry,” says Patrick McHugh, CEO. “I love the area. It’s a great environment, both personally and professionally.”

Of the 1,000 or so employees at its global headquarters, many are residents involved in the Forsyth community. The company was a founding member of the Forsyth County Arts Alliance, donates gently used laptops to local schools and has executive representation on the Forsyth County Chamber’s board of directors.

“This is our home,” McHugh says. “We are connected to the community, and we operate that way as a business.”

The attributes that attract new residents, such as having a sense of community, also help recruit businesses.

“It’s the quality of life that we offer, the superior education we offer our children and the business environment that’s been created here,” says Jan Rooney, chair of the chamber. “The schools really help. Everyone wants their children to go to a fabulous public school, and we actually offer that.”

Superintendent Young agrees. For the 2023-24 school year, the graduation rate was 96%, the highest in Metro Atlanta and among large districts in the state.

“We have great hospitals, we have a great sheriff’s office, and we have great parks and recreation,” he says. “When you put the school system as part of that equation, you know, we’re quite often the headliner on drawing people here.”

Young credits the community for being very supportive of the school system. Businesses that partner with the schools provide internships, externships, industry tours, assistance with mock interviews and subject matter experts for classroom visits. Some business leaders sit on advisory boards assisting in new lab design or choosing equipment for the schools. Others help with events or offer employee discounts. In addition, the chamber of commerce and the Board of Commissioners work with the



WOODIE WILLIAMS PHOTO.COM

Quality of Life: Jan Rooney, chair of the Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce



Global Leader: Patrick McHugh, CEO of Scientific Games

schools as drivers of economic development, he says.

“I think that that’s one thing that makes our community so unique – just the investment that our community makes and the relationships that we have,” he says.

Educational Options Expand

Students have ample opportunities beyond high school by staying right in the county.

Lanier Technical College, which has a campus in Forsyth, is currently in the design phase for renovation of one of its buildings to better serve the high-tech industries in the area, including, among many, Siemens, Alcon and L3 Harris.

“It’s going to be very much automation, robotics and engineering,” says Tim McDonald, president of Lanier Tech. “We’re going to be able to build out a more advanced lab and really bring some other features to the campus, expanding the student success center and renovating space for both our horticulture and our interior design programs.”

He says he expects construction to begin later in 2025 and be completed within 12 months.

Another strong partnership for Lanier Tech is with Northside Hospital Forsyth.

“They support our healthcare programs,” McDonald says. “You just can’t say enough about what they do for us, providing clinical spaces and opportunities for our graduates.”

A key component to success, he says, is the relationship with Forsyth County

Schools and the dual enrollment program, which allows high school students to earn college credit for their classes.

“We’re still 50% first-generation college students,” says McDonald. “A great number of people are making generational change at Lanier Tech. Everything we do is [geared toward] workforce development, which really is the root of economic development, in my opinion.”

The University of North Georgia recently completed a state-funded 27,000- square-foot expansion of its Cumming campus.

“We can now accommodate up to 2,200 students on campus,” says Michael Shannon,

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Prime Location: Alex Warner, president and CEO of the Forsyth County Chamber of Commerce

president of the university. “That allows us to deliver a full-scale bachelor’s degree [there]. Not only are we the only four-year college or university in Forsyth County, we are now offering five different bachelor’s degrees in elementary and special education, nursing, computer science, business administration and international affairs. A student could start and graduate from there in four years.”

The Cumming campus is home to UNG’s master’s in counseling program, helping to fill a growing need for mental health professionals.

“We also serve ... dual-enrolled students,” he says. “We have several hundred on the campus that come and go every day from the high schools around Forsyth County and beyond. We’re really excited about that, particularly in the areas of business, teachers and nurses, which we see as the greatest needs for the skilled workforce.”

“There was a lot of foresight by the leaders at this university years ago that said, ‘Hey we need to have a presence in Forsyth County,’” says Shannon. “The fact that we are literally on exit 16 right off 400 makes our presence just so impactful. We are able to be in the middle of what is going on in the county, from the growth of its economy to the growth of its communities.”

He says Forsyth values its citizens, their quality of life and their education.

“We’re just honored to be a part of that inspiration and growth,” he adds. “Our presence in Forsyth is very strategic to us, and we look forward to seeing what comes next.”

Northside Hospital

Shannon also credits Northside Forsyth as an asset in the county, which has been named by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as the Healthiest County in Georgia for a number of years.

“Forsyth County’s remarkable economic growth over the past two decades has gone hand in hand with Northside Hospital Forsyth’s

ongoing expansion,” said CEO Lynn Jackson via email. “Our strong partnership with Forsyth County has not only enhanced access to high-quality health-care but also contributed significantly to the local economy – creating jobs, attracting businesses and supporting a thriving community.”

Healthcare is just one of several industries that Forward Forsyth has targeted as part of its economic development strategic plan. Forward Forsyth is a public-private partnership of the Forsyth County government, the Development Authority of Forsyth County, the school system, the chamber and Lanier Tech. The other industries it has worked to attract are data services, e-commerce/distribution, advanced manufacturing, technology and R&D and corporate headquarters.

The county has also recently prioritized the bio/life sciences industry. Last year, the nonprofit Georgia Life Sciences (formerly Georgia Bio) certified Forsyth as a BIOReady bronze community.

“Our goal is to attract top-tier industries that would allow the talented workforce ... of Forsyth County a place to work in the same county that they live,” says Alex Warner, the new president and CEO of the chamber. “With having the highest educated workforce in the state and the No. 3 [ranked] school system, Forsyth County is a prime location for businesses to be successful on day one.”

All those assets should add up to a power play for Forsyth County.



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Campus Expansion: University System of Georgia Chancellor Sonny Perdue, center, and University of North Georgia President Michael Shannon, holding scissors, attend a ribbon cutting at UNG’s enlarged campus in Cumming in July 2024.