

Canton, Georgia

*110 Academy Street
Canton, Georgia 30114*



Minutes - Final - Final

Thursday, January 29, 2026

6:00 PM

City Hall

110 Academy Street

State of the City Address

City Council

1. State of the City Address

*2026 State of the City
Mayor Bill Grant*

Intro

Good evening, and thank you for being here tonight or for joining us via livestream for my sixth State of the City address.

It is truly an honor to stand before you once again and reflect on where we are as a city, where we are headed, and how we are choosing to lead with intention.

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by recognizing those public servants who serve our community every day:

Our City Council—

Ward 1: Councilors Travis Johnson and Darrel Rice

Ward 2: Councilors Bryan Roach and Shawn Tolan

Ward 3: Councilors Dwayne Waterman and Farris Yawn

Our City leadership team—

City Manager, Billy Peppers

Assistant City Manager, Nathan Ingram

City Clerk, Annie Fortner

Chief of Police, Marty Ferrell

Our department heads, and the dedicated staff who make this city run.

Other Partners in Attendance:

Recognition those in attendance

I also want to welcome our Boards and Commissions, our county partners, and all of our civic and community leaders. If you serve on one of our boards or commissions, please stand and be recognized. Thank you for your service and your commitment to Canton.

State of the City

Tonight, I am proud to report that the state of our city is strong, stable, and well managed. But more importantly, Canton continues to aspire to be something more.

We are committed to becoming a city that grows thoughtfully, learns continuously, and leads with excellence—without ever losing our sense of place, our values, or our unique character.

As we continue to move Canton forward, it is worth pausing to reflect not only on what we are building, but how we are leading.

Roadmap for Success & Leading with Excellence

Our Roadmap for Success has always been about more than projects or checklists. It is a reflection of our shared values—priorities shaped by our citizens and grounded in what matters most to this community.

At the heart of that roadmap is a simple but powerful commitment: Leading with Excellence.

Leading with Excellence means delivering results, but it also means governing with intention, curiosity, and foresight. It means asking thoughtful questions, listening carefully, and making decisions that will stand the test of time.

As Canton continues to grow, the quality of our decisions matters more than ever.

That is why an important focus of our work moving forward is strengthening Canton's civic wisdom and public engagement—the way ideas, expertise, data, and community insight come together to guide smart, thoughtful decision-making.

This is not a new program. It is not a line item in the budget. It is a way of operating. It is a leadership mindset.

Community wisdom and collective know-how are more practical than they sound, and we build them when:

- *Public decisions are informed by knowledge, experience, and community input*
- *Residents, businesses, educators, and civic leaders work as true partners*
- *Learning is continuous and improvement is expected*
- *Local government is viewed not as a closed process, but as a shared responsibility*

This approach strengthens every priority in our Roadmap for Success.

Applying Excellence Across Priorities

When we talk about intentional growth and stewardship, excellence requires that we learn from peers, plan for the long term, and manage growth in a way that protects what makes Canton special while preparing responsibly for what comes next.

For example, when we invest in infrastructure, we are not merely addressing today's challenges; we are laying the foundation for decades of opportunity. Leading with Excellence requires that we build wisely, build once, and carry forward the lessons learned into every future investment.

When we focus on economic opportunity, strong civic innovation and intelligence ensure Canton remains a place where businesses can adapt, talent can grow, and people can build meaningful careers—again, without losing the sense of community that defines us.

And when it comes to governance, excellence begins and ends with trust. Trust is earned through transparency, sustained engagement, and open, informed dialogue. These principles build confidence not only in the decisions we make, but in the institutions that serve this city and safeguard its future.

In practice, this means deliberately creating space for meaningful conversation, welcoming expertise wherever it resides, inviting broad participation, and being

forthright about both what we know and what we are still learning. Governing with integrity requires that level of honesty—and our constituents deserve nothing less.

Let me be clear about this: Canton does not aspire to be the biggest city, the loudest city, or merely the “coolest city.”

We aspire to be a thoughtful city—one that grows with purpose, leads with discipline, and governs with care for all who live, work, play, and serve here.

Through our Roadmap for Success, we are building much more than infrastructure and amenities. We are strengthening the innovation mindset needed to steward this community well—today and for generations to come.

That work requires us to roll up our sleeves, continue collaborating, refine our strategy as the community evolves, and, most importantly, listen to one another—especially our citizens.

Now, let’s take a look at what we accomplished last year, and what we learned that will guide the transformational initiatives ahead.

Many of you received our 2025 Year in Review, which includes specific performance measures and data. Tonight, I will focus on the tangible results that strengthened Canton’s economic momentum, cultural vitality, planning discipline, civic intelligence, and—most importantly—our quality of life in what we proudly call the coolest small town in America.

The City of Canton had a number of major initiatives in 2025, but none make me prouder as mayor than our tax cut last summer. Amid the many challenges facing our city, the leadership shown by our staff and Council has produced a meaningful and tangible result for our residents: a tax cut. The millage rate was not merely held steady, nor simply rolled back—it was deliberately reduced to 5.25 mills.

While the number 5.25 may not immediately resonate with the average Canton resident, its significance becomes clear when placed in context. Of the City’s total millage rate, 2.888 mills are dedicated to Cherokee County for essential fire services, leaving just 2.362 mills to support all other municipal operations.

Despite these constraints, our team delivers critical services every day, manages infrastructure, and maintains the quality of life our residents expect. This reduction reflects disciplined financial stewardship and a deep respect for taxpayer dollars. Our staff continues to do exceptional work with the resources entrusted to them—providing strong services, smart management, and excellent value for your investment in this community.

We were excited to welcome Ryan Luckett as our new Finance Director and are already enjoying his expertise in driving new efficiencies to our financial processes. He and his team assured the City received another excellent audit for the close of Fiscal Year 2024.

Work continued in 2025 on the expansion of the City’s water pollution control plant. This investment of \$60+ million will guide our sewer needs for decades. In

growing our operation from 4 million gallons of treated daily capacity to 7 million gallons, the City also improved the treatment technology to reduce odor, increase daily treatment, and provide a cleaner water return to the Etowah River.

The City closed on a development agreement with Cherokee County that will transform the eastern gateway into the historic downtown loop with a smartly planned mixed-use project along North Street. This project will include much-needed judicial office space and parking for the County, new downtown residential, upper-story office solutions for growing downtown businesses, and more retail. In addition, staff is working through the review of proposals for a downtown boutique hotel. This, along with pedestrian improvements and a new roundabout at East Main, North, and Brown streets, will signal a clear entrance into Canton's historic business district. This entire project is being led by our Downtown Development Authority and citizens like you who understand the direction of the City and want to leave a legacy of improvement.

Speaking of partnerships with Cherokee County, we are also excited about the remodeling of our historic fire station downtown. This joint project, being led by the Canton Building Authority, will restore grandeur to the old post office that has also served as City Hall and the Canton Fire Station. Once completed, the facility will return to its historic roots with improved equipment bays and a complete renovation of the interior for office and living quarters. I am told that the downtown station is now one of the most requested locations for firefighters in all of Cherokee County.

In the transitional area between Historic Downtown and Sunnyside, the remnants of old infrastructure, industry, and aging retail leave a negative impression for those coming into our city from the interstate at Exit 16. Another transformational project kicked off in 2025 to re-engage that corridor as a connection for cars and people, including solid infrastructure and new mixed uses of buildings and space. While we bid goodbye to Canton Village Shopping Center, we are excited to start the long-awaited pedestrian bridge along Canton Creek. Aided by a \$2.2 million grant, the project will move pedestrians off the old Canton Creek Bridge onto a safe space with new sidewalks. The next phase of this project is the construction of a new vehicular bridge and the realignment of Marietta Road into downtown. A series of renovations are underway to help move traffic more efficiently and safely through the area.

The City Council and staff broke ground in December on our newest park in South Canton. Our newest city park reflects the desires of citizens expressed during our Parks and Recreation Master Plan and our initial Roadmap listening sessions. In addition to exciting new recreational features, the venue will also be home to our world-class dog park, complete with dedicated areas for all sizes of our four-legged residents. It will also feature all-inclusive play areas, a pavilion, treetop walking paths, a small amphitheater, restrooms, and public art. This project is aided by a \$2.2 million state grant from Governor Kemp's office, and we hope to complete the project in 2026.

In addition to this new park, the City saw upgrades to all baseball and softball fields at Harmon and Boling Parks, a remodeled concession stand managed by our part-time staff at Harmon, and several electrical and HVAC upgrades at parks.

Only a decade ago, the City had limited partnerships with recreation programming. In 2025, the City hosted recreation programming that included

women's softball, adult men's soccer, youth soccer, youth baseball, Georgia High School sports including tennis, lacrosse, and cross country, collegiate cross-country, ultimate frisbee, and beginner sports. Field, court, and pitch space is at a premium in our city. In addition, passive use of our parks continues to grow. Etowah River Park had over 17,000 more visitors last year, and each of the City's largest parks recorded higher visitor levels than in 2024. Way to keep moving, Canton!

We value our recreational partners, such as Canton Dizzy Dean Baseball, Cherokee Impact, the Cherokee Youth Foundation, Reinhardt College, Cherokee High School, and the G. Cecil Pruett Family YMCA, which recently celebrated its 20-year anniversary. Children and adults from across Canton can receive free swimming lessons from the Y thanks to the leadership and efforts of our City and former Mayor Pruett.

Have you noticed the new high school on the hill? Slated to open August 1, our City staff and the Cherokee School District are working to ensure it is a safely built facility, and we are collaborating closely with GDOT to reimagine traffic patterns once it opens in August.

You may have also noticed a new parking deck at Northside Hospital Cherokee. Our partners there continue to push the envelope of care and employment opportunities for our region. Or the new apartment homes at The District on Etowah, providing trendy in-town housing. Maybe you have seen the progress on the Becker Robotics Campus on Technology Ridge Parkway, or the new Canton Corporate Park moving earth on Knox Bridge Highway. These projects are testaments to the need for more space for creative workers to craft Canton and call it home.

Behind each of these projects is a team of staff working on land development, erosion control, site planning, development code regulations, and building and safety inspections. Last year, there were nearly 14,000 building inspections in the City.

Our team also tracked nearly 1,800 business licenses last year. These included new businesses such as Three Roses Tavern downtown, Café Floralia in Prominence, and a new Mavis Tire in Laurel Canyon. Each of these businesses represents a need to provide a good or service to our local community. They also remind us that Canton is unlike many suburbs—we grow in density during the day due to regional commuting patterns along I-575, I-20, and Highway 140, and as the county seat of government for Cherokee County.

Speaking of traffic, voters overwhelmingly approved a new Transportation Sales Tax in November that will generate over \$50 million for Canton over the next six years to fund intersection improvements, bridge replacements, roadway expansions, and signalization enhancements. The City is well positioned to begin utilizing these funds due to careful planning through the recently approved Transportation Master Plan, which was again informed by our citizens.

We strive to maintain great city streets. This past year, we completed two rounds of paving projects. Unlike many cities, Canton and the cities of Cherokee County partner with the County on one large paving bid to ensure competitive pricing and efficient paving schedules.

Because we can never fall behind on paving like we did a decade ago, the City

recently completed a paving status overview utilizing artificial intelligence and staff review of all roadways to create a pavement management system for determining future paving needs. This same strategy will be used in 2026 to review all sidewalks, curbs, gutters, and street signs.

Chief Marty Ferrell approached the Council last winter with an idea to improve operational efficiencies by creating a quick-response team of non-sworn personnel who could handle safety and policing-related items that often slow the work of sworn officers. The Canton Ambassadors for Public Safety, or CAPS unit, launched last spring with gleaming new silver Tacomas and has already made a major impact on the City. These four rockstars average 300 calls for service each month, as well as taking reports, assisting stranded motorists, working private property accidents, directing traffic, and patrolling our parks.

And when it comes to our amazing Police Department—when was the last time you heard of a police unit that was fully staffed? Last year, this was achieved through the dedication of our Chief and city leadership, the promise of annual step increases, improvements in equipment, the absolute best and most reliable fleet of vehicles, and continued training. Thanks to a grant from the Chris Conti Memorial Foundation, our officers and all City staff can also take advantage of a new fitness facility that opened last fall.

Much of modern law enforcement revolves around emerging technology, and it is always a partnership between our Police and IT departments. This year, we launched our new Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) integration to improve officer safety and support while keeping data in the hands of our patrols in the field. We also launched a partnership with Sheriff Frank Reynolds as the first Cherokee County municipality to participate in a Real-Time Intelligence Center. This provides us with a broad network of information to help find bad actors, fight crime, and bring justice to our citizens each day.

We were excited to see the completion of Tanner Place by our amazing Canton Housing Authority. Let's be real—the public housing built by the Authority over 50 years ago was an eyesore. Tanner Place is a powerful testament to what partnerships can accomplish and to the idea that subsidized housing does not have to be substandard. This project, the replacement housing at Oakside, and the hard work of our Georgia Initiatives for Community Housing—or GICH—team demonstrate the City's commitment to providing affordable housing options. We also congratulate our GICH team on graduating from the program this year. Their work has helped assist with home repairs, build bridges between service providers and residents seeking assistance, launch our down payment assistance program, and implement Accessory Dwelling Units.

When it comes to sustaining our natural resources, we added a solar canopy to City Hall in 2025. You cannot see it from the street—and that is intentional. What makes these grand old buildings special does not always align with rising energy costs. Our partnership with Schneider added HVAC efficiency while also looking toward the future. By using SPLOST funds for the solar canopy, the City will help offset energy costs, allowing us to reduce general fund expenditures.

Speaking of power, we are a unique city in that our residents are served by four different electric providers: Georgia Power, Cobb EMC, Sawnee EMC, and Amicalola EMC. We appreciate their hard work keeping the lights on during storms and their partnership with our Public Works and Public Safety teams to

remove debris and restring lines quickly. We had a few of those storms this past year.

Often forgotten are the hardworking men and women of our Public Works Department. Under the leadership of Scott Hooper, this group are the unseen heroes who keep Canton moving forward. From cleaning up after park flooding, removing fallen trees, maintaining rights-of-way, keeping parks clean and mowed, picking up bulk items at the curb, maintaining stormwater systems, and setting up for events—we appreciate their hard work. Please join me in thanking them.

2025 also saw us say goodbye to former Councilor Sandy McGrew. Her 12 years on the Council were years of growth and forward momentum. She consistently championed environmental stewardship and animal welfare in decision-making. Her leadership helped the City achieve recognition last year as a Bronze-Level Atlanta Regional Commission Green Community. Thank you, Sandy.

When we talk about community, we must ensure everyone feels included and welcomed. Our new Economic Development Director, Aundi Lesley, partnered with the Small Business Development Center at Kennesaw State to host business classes fully taught in Spanish. Our Hispanic business community—led by leaders like Raul and Cynthia Cifuentes of La Luna Bakery, Jose Luna of Luna del Rio, and media newcomer Raíces y Negocios—continues to highlight hardworking Hispanic-owned businesses and their substantial impact on our local economy.

I think you all share my belief that Canton is truly a magical place. Just look for the magic at First Fridays, River Rock Concerts, the fireworks over Riverstone on the Fourth, Farmers Markets, Canton City Limits serenades at the Theatre—a building recently restored to its grandeur with assistance from the Fox Theatre's "Fox Gives" grant—or, for the first time in our city's history, a drone show over downtown welcoming the jolly old man himself. Thank you, Velinda Hardy. Magic happens when we come together to celebrate place, and we are all fortunate to call Canton home.

And that's not all, folks. These are just a few examples of our work in 2025—all progress, all partnerships, all teamwork and collaboration—and all achieved alongside a historic tax cut.

It would be typical to talk about the many projects occurring across our city and how they have been paid for using debt, but the reality is Canton's debt remains very low. Currently, the only debt we carry is related to the completion of our water pollution control plant, funded through water and sewer fees, and the pledge to repay fire station renovations through future impact fees.

With all of this innovation and progress, Canton remains a fiscally conservative city. In fact, over the past couple of years, our staff has obtained grants and sponsorships for road construction and paving, pedestrian upgrades, parks, Theatre renovations, and the public safety gym.

But as I have stated before, Canton does not rest on its laurels. There is always more work to be done. 2026 promises to be a year of even greater progress, with many thoughtful projects identified as priorities by our residents and businesses. Some of the more notable initiatives include:

- *Breaking ground on the North Street Gateway*
- *Completing the Water Pollution Control Plant*
- *Opening the doors of Cherokee High School in August*
- *Vertical construction of a \$25 million headquarters for CBBE—just announced last week*
- *Completing the South Canton Park*
- *Addressing water planning for the coming decades*
- *Breaking ground on a new pedestrian bridge from The Mill on Etowah to the Etowah River Trail*
- *Our first overhead-to-underground utility conversion downtown on the West Main Street Pedestrian Corridor*
- *Opening the first phase of the Becker Robotics Global Headquarters*
- *New medical office development at Northside Hospital Cherokee*
- *Completing all background work with GDOT to begin construction on SR 140 North improvements*
- *A new traffic signal at Prominence Point*
- *New pedestrian safety beacons throughout the city*
- *Construction of a new elevated water tank for South Canton*
- *Reimagining, with partners, the future of the former Cherokee High School*
- *Ensuring developers build what benefits our community—not just what maximizes profit*
- *Reviewing and enhancing our Roadmap for Success after five years of progress*

Among many others.

Conclusion

As you can see, Team Canton—your Mayor, Council, staff, and partners—continues to hold ourselves to the highest standards of excellence and accountability.

As our state and region continue to grow, we face real challenges. And I want to be candid with you: this work is not always easy.

For we have chosen not to accept the status quo.

We will not leave Canton's future to chance, unchecked development, or demographic trends alone. Growth is inevitable—but how we grow is a choice.

Our growth must be intentional, thoughtful, and guided by the priorities our residents care deeply about.

We remain fully committed to positioning Canton as an aspirational city—a vibrant, forward-looking community that creates opportunity and offers all residents a real chance to build a better future for themselves and their families.

Thank you for your time. Thank you for your trust. And thank you for loving this special city we are proud to call home.

Bill Grant, Mayor