



# SOUTHERN CITY

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES



CityVision  
N.C. LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES

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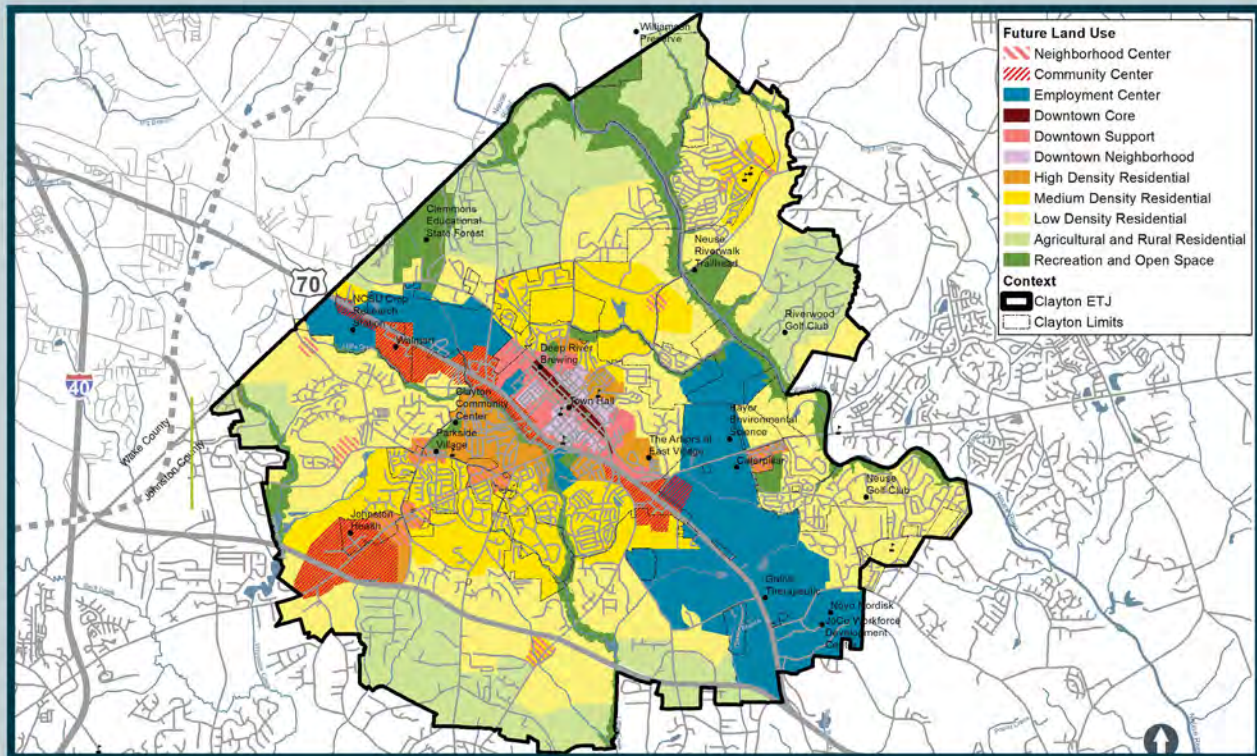


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## MAYOR JODY MCLEOD DESIGNS LOCAL LEADERSHIP



## SOUTHERN CITY

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## **SPEAKING OUT**

# **Reframing Our Issues, Refocusing Our Opportunities**



**WILLIAM HARRIS**  
NCLM President

At our recent wonderful annual conference CityVision 2023 held in Concord, I began my term as president of this organization with a pledge to use my tenure to try to make a difference.

Specifically, I spoke of the unique opportunity that the North Carolina League of Municipalities has to address emerging trends, and do so in a way that avoids political polarization that we have seen paralyze other levels of government.

It is interesting that I had considered these remarks even before all who attended our conference enjoyed a terrific keynote address from Matt Lehrman on emphasizing common values as a way to promote civility public conversations and interactions.

As I thought about these issues, I considered it this way: reframe our picture.

Reframing means redirecting people's attention away from positions and toward the task of identifying common interests, inventing creative options, and discussing fair standards for making decisions.

Just as you might put a new frame around an old picture, you put a problem-solving frame around the someone's staked out position. Instead of rejecting hardline positions, you treat them as an informative contribution to the discussion.

In what ways does this have to do with the League?

It's the League's focus to address training needs, to educate local elected leaders, and track legislation that impacts what we do at the local municipal level. The League informs us and helps arm us with the information to make those connections in common values.

As President of the League for the upcoming year, I'm encouraged to reframe our conversation and create opportunities to build stronger partnerships by promoting linkage among the League affiliates at the local level and creating even stronger connections to state and federal government.

As our communities deal with demographic and population changes, it is crucial that we continue to find ways to meet their needs. We must do so regardless of political affiliation or what might be happening in Raleigh or Washington.

These changes require that we, as local elected leaders, broaden the conversations regarding racial equity, diversity, and inclusion. They require that we focus on cooperation. And we must maintain the trust that our residents place in us.

That being the case, there are great opportunities for local government to form partnerships with surrounding municipalities, whether to address deteriorating infrastructure, emergency services, or planning needs.

There are changing demands for a qualified and trained workforce. Today, skill development is fundamental to meeting the needs of employers. Technology has created new job opportunities while at the same time causing a gap in the number of qualified workers.

Workforce housing and employment needs demand the attention of local elected officials. We need modern technology, including broadband, that work hand-in-hand in meeting these other needs.

To meet all of these connected needs requires that local leaders lead the way.

We can do so by reframing our own approaches to be civil, responsible and dependable, and by focusing on our common values as Americans and as members of our individual communities.

I look forward over the next year to working with all of you to make a great organization even better as we strive to meet the challenges and greet the opportunities in this changing time. ■





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# Harris, Middleton, and Hall to Lead NC League

## SELECTION OF NCLM OFFICERS, BOARD ANNOUNCED IN APRIL AT CITYVISION CONFERENCE

**F**uquay-Varina Commissioner William Harris will lead the North Carolina League of Municipalities as president over the next year.

Harris was chosen by representatives from cities and towns across North Carolina with his selection announced at NCLM's annual conference, CityVision 2023, held in Concord, NC. Joining Harris as officers for the organization are Durham Mayor Pro Tem Mark-Anthony Middleton and Albemarle Mayor Pro Tem Martha Sue Hall, first and second vice presidents, respectively, and Kings Mountain Mayor Scott Neisler as immediate past president.

Harris' selection as president follows a long tenure of public service. Harris has served on the Fuquay-Varina Town Board for more than 35 years, including two terms as Mayor Pro Tem. In addition to his elected service, Harris has been an Adjunct Professor in the Business and Public Administration Department at Shaw University and has received numerous awards for his service to the public, most notably, the Outstanding Citizenship Award presented by the Fuquay-Varina Chamber of Commerce. Harris previously worked for the Dept. of Health and Human Services for 30 years in various positions.

In his remarks at CityVision, Harris spoke about his desire to continue to build partnerships and connections across government lines.

"We must avoid the political polarization that can paralyze the other levels of government. And we must maintain the trust that our residents place in us," he said. "As President of the League for the upcoming year, I'm encouraged to reframe our conversation and create opportunities to build stronger partnerships by promoting linkage among the League affiliates at the local level, and even stronger connections to state and federal government."

League Executive Director Rose Vaughn Williams said Harris, through his extensive local government experience, will bring strong leadership to the organization.



NCLM Board Members are sworn in at April's CityVision conference. Photo credit: Ben Brown

"For decades, Commissioner Harris has been the vision of selfless public service in North Carolina. We are so fortunate to have his experience atop the North Carolina League of Municipalities, and I am excited to see how our state's cities and towns thrive under his leadership," said Williams.

In addition to NCLM officers, newly elected members of the Board of Directors chosen for either a first term or additional second term at CityVision in Concord, are:

- Jacksonville Council Member Brian H. Jackson, District 2
- Clayton Mayor Jody McLeod, District 4
- Morrisville Council Member Satish Garimella, District 6
- Huntersville Mayor Melinda Bales, District 8
- Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers, District 12
- Kinston Mayor Dontario Hardy, at-large
- Fayetteville Council Member Kathy Jensen, large city seat
- Raleigh Council Member Jonathan Melton, large city seat
- Winston-Salem Council Member Robert Clark, large city seat
- Gastonia Manager Michael Peoples, Municipal Manager
- Washington Manager Jonathan Russell, Municipal Manager

We must avoid the political polarization that can paralyze the other levels of government. And **we must maintain the trust that our residents place in us.**

» William Harris, Fuquay-Varina Commission, NCLM President



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# NCLM's American Rescue Plan Service Line

**THROUGH GENEROUS STATE SUPPORT, THE NC LEAGUE HAS LAUNCHED A NUMBER OF SERVICES DESIGNED TO SUPPORT YOUR INVESTMENT AND ACCOUNTING OF AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN FUNDS.**



or a bit of background...

The federal American Rescue Plan Act was signed into law on March 11, 2021. Among its many provisions was the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program, which directed funds to state and local governments. In total, North Carolina municipalities received approximately \$1.3 billion of these funds. In late 2021, North Carolina opted to grant the N.C. League of Municipalities a portion of its SLFRF allocation. The League is directed to use these funds to provide guidance and technical assistance to municipalities in the spending of their SLFRF funds.

**Now, through both a robust in-house staff and a network of statewide partnerships, NCLM is prepared to assist your local government with a suite of services in conjunction with your ARP spending.**

## LEGAL CONSULTATION

In addition to NCLM's in-house legal staff, the League has also arranged for partner attorneys to provide a set number of hours of guidance to our cities and towns as it relates to American Rescue Plan questions.

Law compliance, contracts, legal pitfalls—if you have questions about any of these topics or others in regards to your American Rescue Plan funds, then take advantage of this offerings.

## GRANT WRITING AND GRANT ADMINISTRATION

For many towns, the American Rescue Plan marks their first experience with federal grants and the many processes and requirements that accompany federal funds. This service will provide assistance and support in navigating those requirements.



## CYBERSECURITY SERVICES

A critical threat facing our municipalities, cybersecurity has only become more important in recent years, especially as you now begin investing American Rescue Plan funds. Through this service, NCLM and its partners will ensure that you are secure from phishing attempts, malware, and the many other attacks that threaten your town's digital network.

## MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTING SERVICES

Our most robust and important offering. The Municipal Accounting Services (MAS) program is designed to promote better financial accountability and reliability for smaller governments. Through this offering, the League will provide participating towns with access to financial software systems as well as direct support to accounting assistance.

You are making transformational investments in your community. We're here to help.

To get started or to learn more, contact NCLM's ARP team directly at [arp@nclm.org](mailto:arp@nclm.org) or 919-715-3938. ■

Now, through both a robust in-house staff and a network of statewide partnerships, **NCLM is prepared to assist your local government with a suite of services in conjunction with your ARP spending.**



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# Connecting the Dots: State Rep. James Roberson

**BEN BROWN**

NCLM Communications and Multimedia Strategist

**CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIPS,  
HIS PRIOR ROLES AS A MAYOR  
AND COUNCIL MEMBER, THE FAST-  
GROWING SPORT OF PICKLEBALL,  
AND HOW IT ALL RELATES**

It wasn't just the clean, spring weather that made the pickleball courts at Knightdale's Harper Park so active on the day *Southern City* pulled up for a visit. The easy temperature and sunny vibrance commanded outdoor fun, yes, but there was something extra about this city-developed spot and its rhythm of racquet pops, sneaker swishes, friendly trash-talk, laughs, and handclaps. "This was like a ghost town," said state Rep. James Roberson, who was looking over the busy courts and recalling the days before their development at what is one of Knightdale's oldest parks. "I saw an opportunity to bring something online to possibly get family members and their kids off the sofas, out into the community, where they can spend quality time with each other but, more importantly, to focus on the health and wellness." There was also a lack of activities for seniors in town, noted Rep. Roberson, formerly the mayor of Knightdale, while too noting the rapid ascension of pickleball among all ages in the United States. Clearly, the **James Roberson Pickleball Courts at Harper Park**—the facility was dedicated to him—have been a hot addition to town's portfolio and new-resident draw. For the former local leader, it all involves a healthy environment of communication that he practices today with the communities in his district, to set partisanship aside and talk about what's desired and achievable. While the goodtime pickleball games carried on, Rep. Roberson sat down with *Southern City* at a courtside shelter for some Q&A about his time in municipal government and what continues to motivate him as a state lawmaker today.

...

**Tell us more about what this place represents for Knightdale. How is this more than just a parks-and-rec project?**

**JR:** When we brought this online, the community rallied behind it, started out with seniors coming out, and now, if you see what's around you, you have folks from all various backgrounds, all ages. And the wonderful thing about this is being able to see family members spend quality time with each other, because so often you may have a parent that's working two or three jobs. And the kids, when they get home from school, they sit in front of the video games and that's where they park themselves. And then they begin to develop these bad habits of eating the wrong types of foods. Well, now, family members can come out here, they're



engaged, seniors can come out here, they're engaged, and they're focused on their health and wellness while having fun. This has been nothing but a goldmine... Now, fast-forward, eastern Wake County is deemed one of the healthiest communities.

**These pickleball courts are literally named after you. How does that experience—working with the community and seeing measurable change from the project you made together—help you as a state legislator today? Is there anything you can pull from this in your legislative day-to-day?**

**JR:** Yes, and I have. I don't think, when you leave local government, that you're veering off too much. There's that connection, that partnership, between local government, county government, and state government. So, this has afforded me the opportunity, now that I'm in state government, to continue to work on some of those objectives and goals that I started out with as an elected official on a local level. However, I get to elevate that by supporting my community and my district from a broader perspective. Which is great, because serving as the mayor of Knightdale or as a council member, we focused on things in our municipalities. Well, the obesity part ... it wasn't just a Knightdale

**I saw an opportunity to bring something online to possibly get family members and their kids off the sofas, out into the community, where they can spend quality time with each other but, more importantly, to focus on the health and wellness.**



issue, it was an eastern Wake County issue. Now, I'm able to extend those relationships and partnerships and continue to work on things like health and wellness, education. Those are the things that I'm passionate about. We have a community college that is being built right here in our backyard. It's not just going to serve Wendell, but it's going to serve parts of northeast Raleigh, Knightdale, Wendell, Zebulon, and Rolesville. And so in my experience as a retired administrator from the community college, I've seen the benefits of having this type of resource in your backyard and being able to connect the dots. But it's all about collaboration and partnership. So, I'm able to take what I've learned from local government and expand on it, and now look at introducing legislation that could better support my community. There's an education savings plan, which we have in the queue, it's a bill that would support folks from underserved communities. And the way this bill is written, for those that are born in poverty, the state will invest in this savings account. By the time they're 18 years old and they decide to go to community college or a four-year institution, their education is paid for. Now, some folks may ask the question: What if they decide not to go to college? Well, it's a win-win situation, because all of that interest that has accrued over that time, that money goes back to the state. When you help realize these opportunities for these folks who do not otherwise have the opportunity to further their education, now they can become business owners, they can go from \$8 an hour to \$30-40 an hour, realize the American Dream, really of having a family, providing for their kids, purchasing goods and services, starting their own businesses, and now they're giving back to the local economy. This is sitting right here in all of our backyards. It's investing in people. It's investing in education. And if you connect the dots, the communities come out ahead, the state comes out ahead, and now you have a robust community that is appealing to those who wish to migrate from up north, south, east, west. When they come and they see these things like the arts ... they see this wonderful state surrounded by institutions of higher ed, and they see their state legislators supporting these efforts and being creative in supporting these efforts and supporting the citizens, it would be an appealing place for me to want to live, work, and play.

**Was there a leadership example in your background? What brought you to public service?**

**JR:** You know, I get that question a lot. And when I speak to young folk, I have to go back to my childhood. It started with my mom—I just lost my mom a few weeks ago. The wonderful thing is I know she's smiling down on me, she's proud of me. My mom has always been a big proponent of education. And so, coming from a single-parent home, she wanted to make sure that all of her kids had the resources, the necessary tools, the critical thinking skills to pursue their education and to do much better than what she did, much better than what my father did. And so, I remember being around five years old and getting up on early Saturday mornings, going out with her, getting folks registered to vote... And for us, we only had three networks back then—CBS, NBC, and ABC—and she was a big fan of Walter Cronkite. So, every four years, we had to sit in front of the television and watch the returns, and she would educate us on how important it is to vote. So, I think that's where it started. But when I decided to go off to college, undergrad at Shaw University, I saw how involved Shaw University was with voting and commitment to community. And so those things just led to where I am now. And of course, my experience as an administrator at Wake Tech, being able to help realize opportunities for—well, for a lot of these kids, it's their last opportunity. And I'm so thankful I was in an area that really contributed to student successes. So, I'm able to go out as a legislator now and talk about how we've been able to help folks realize the American Dream.

continues on page 16



Rep. Roberson at Knightdale's Harper Park.  
Photo credit: Ben Brown



continued from page 15

**What's different about serving as a legislator after serving in local government?**

**JR:** I'm still learning because I'm in my second term. But I also understand, because of partisanship, it differs from serving on a local governing board. We were able to get things done, regardless of your party affiliation. And for me, since I'm in the supermajority, my party, I've been equipped with the resources to be able to work around things. Not everything needs to be accomplished with a bill or a law. There are things that you can do in your community. I'm very engaged with the schools... The challenges are from COVID, and with our teachers, they're leaving by the droves. Same thing with our community colleges because the pay is low. I know as a state legislator we can do much better than that and we should. If you want this place to continue to be robust, to continue to be a destination for those who wish to come and retire here, folks look at a strong educational component, a strong workforce component, services and amenities, and a strong artist presence. North Carolina has those things. But it is sometimes difficult to have a conversation with others because they may have a myopic view. So, over the past two years, I've learned to work around things and create my own pathway, as I did when I was a council member and a mayor. And if the community believes in what you're doing, they're going to rally behind you and they're going to help you find the resources to make things happen. So, I'm enjoying where I am. I wish there was more bipartisanship. It comes with the territory. But it makes me a stronger leader. It makes me work harder for my constituents. And I'm truly blessed to be able to serve them in this capacity. But I'm also able to think outside of the box to get some things done for my district.

**You're clearly closely connected to your community. Do you keep a good flow of communication with local officials across your district?**

**JR:** I've groomed a lot of these folks that are serving on our local boards. I've helped a lot of folks get elected. I'm not bragging or anything like that. But I think if you're going to be an effective leader, and you believe in your values, you want to identify folks—and I'm just one who believes in succession planning—so our current mayor is someone with whom I groomed. We have a few council members I've taken under my wings and groomed. Because those relationships are important. I need to make sure that I'm supporting my district in the right way. So, if there's a controversial bill, I lean on the League of Municipalities. I have a very good rapport with them. So, I can pick up the phone and say, "Hey, what are the thoughts about this bill?" I can pick up the phone and call the mayor of Wendell, Zebulon, Knightdale, Rolesville. "What do you think about this bill?" Sometimes they get in touch with me: "James, this bill is coming down the pike. This is not a good bill. This is going to have a negative impact on us." I'm able to go to my caucus and say, "Hey, I've talked to some of my leaders in municipal government. They're of the opinion this is a bad bill and here's the reason why." And we can either take a caucus stand or encourage folks to vote no on the bill. So those relationships are very important. And I have a good relationship with every mayor in my district... And even mayors outside of my district. I served as the mayor for two terms. I had these relationships. And with our county commissioners... So, for me, I'm in a very good place of being able to work on behalf of my constituents. And on behalf of North Carolina. When I took the oath, it said I'm representing all of North Carolina... There's nothing like a valuable education, and your education doesn't just stop once you get out





## **I'm so thankful I was in an area that really contributed to student successes.**

So, I'm able to go out as a legislator now and talk about how we've been able to help folks realize the American Dream.

of high school, college, or grad school. I learn something every day. I learn from these people out here. These folks come from myriad backgrounds and to be able to have opportunities to learn about their backgrounds—some former nurses, doctors, lawyers. They give me advice and I listen intently because you never know. Some bill might come up and you say, "Oh, I remember having a conversation with Judy, she's a nurse, let me pick up the phone and get some feedback from her." It's a win-win situation.

### **What do you think is the effect when there isn't that communication between the local level and the state legislature?**

**JR:** I think you're in a failed community. I think the community is doomed to fail. Then all of a sudden you see relaxed policies that could have a negative impact on a community, and it no longer becomes a desirable place to live. And I can tell you, as local government, when there was an issue with a developer, we would hear from the citizens... You have to look at the long-term impacts and effects... Those are things that I have dealt with as an elected official, and I've been able to pick up the phone and seek advice from my representatives... "We have this homeowner who is having this issue. How do we get this person some help?" Those types of relationships are important. If it's not taking place, I think

you're setting the community up to fail, and you won't see the community advancing like other communities.

### **Elected office, maintaining healthy communication, pursuing issues to resolve—it can be a lot of work. How do you unplug and enjoy yourself?**

**JR:** Pickleball, tennis. I've been playing tennis for 48 years. I still play tennis. It's easy for me to get out here and play pickleball. I get out every morning around 6:15. And before going downtown, I get out and there's a gentleman, he and I have been playing probably for the past four or five years. We get up religiously, first thing in the morning. That helps to decompress me. And a lot of folks, when I go downtown, I see folks, they seem like they're stressed out—I had this rabbi come up to me and say, "You always seem positive." Well, I'm truly blessed. I've worked at the largest community college in the state of North Carolina. I've worked at what has been deemed twice the fastest-growing municipality in the state of North Carolina. Where there was nothing but vegetation, you see this urban-like community, mixed development taking place. And I've been a part of that. And so now I'm in state government, helping to realize opportunities for my constituents and other North Carolinians. That gives me that drive, that push. If I did not, or I felt like I was just burned out from this, I promised my wife a long time ago that I'd step away... But my wife says that as long as I'm enjoying this—which I am—I'm not saying it doesn't get frustrating—however, this is my outlet. I'm able to come out here, laugh, do some trashing talking—because I think I'm the Michael Jordan of pickleball—and fellowship. I mean, look at these people (playing on the courts)! They're just having a ball! This is what completes me. And, more importantly, I have conversations with others. If I feel like I'm getting stressed out, I have conversations with my wife, I have conversations with my friends... This is what helps, and this is what keeps me going. It is my hope and prayer that we can continue, through all the stuff that's going on, that we will find a way to work with one another on a bipartisan basis for our constituents. It's not about us. This position is not about me. ■

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# Mayor Jody McLeod Designs Local Leadership

**JACK CASSIDY**

NCLM Communications Strategist

**WITH A FOCUS ON BALANCE AND ALL PARTS WORKING TOGETHER, MAYOR JODY MCLEOD HAS LEVERAGED A UNIQUE SKILLSET TO TAKE CLAYTON TO THE NEXT LEVEL.**

Mayor Jody McLeod isn't your typical local leader, and he'll be the first to tell you.

"I'm not the usual," he said. "I'm the unusual."

Ordinary or not, there's no arguing he's a mainstay. For more than two decades, McLeod has led Clayton, North Carolina as both Mayor and as an integral part of the community. McLeod's presence has been felt for so long in Clayton that it can be difficult to remember the town before him. Credit that at least in part to his larger-than-life personality, constantly emanating enthusiasm and joy for his town.

It's a trait seen not just by his fellow citizens, but by television executives too. McLeod, along with his late mother, Mavorine, were cast in a 2016 ABC commercial to promote the new television show, "The Mayor," which follows a newly elected mayor and his mother in Chicago.

"Nothing like being upstaged by your 84-year-old mother," said McLeod, remembering the day of filming. "She died two years ago. It's a precious memory for me. I would trade nothing for that."

What drives McLeod though, even beyond a passion for his hometown, is a talent for design, seen most clearly in his day job as a florist. Mixing old with new, large with small, busy with quiet, and creating a unified, single piece—McLeod works with Clayton the same way he works with a bouquet. Unusual, as he admits, but now leveraging these skills in Clayton during a time of rapid change, his successes are readily apparent.

...

As the owner and operator of Annie V's Florist in downtown Clayton, McLeod started out decades ago among stiff competition. All within one block of each other were three florists. His goal, then, was to stand out—to be seen as unique, to provide a high-quality product and to stand as a top-tier option among a crowded field.

The parallels to Clayton and central North Carolina write themselves.

"Oh, there are similarities all over the place," said McLeod. "How do you become distinct, in the best way? How do you do things



Mayor McLeod stands outside the Clayton Center.  
Photo credit: Ben Brown

completely different than what everybody else is doing? Yeah. You know, customize it, make it novel."

Among a map of attractive, growing towns in the Triangle area, McLeod has worked to elevate Clayton among the very best and to make it, like Annie V's, a top-tier option. Five terms in, Clayton is now the fastest growing community in North Carolina's fastest growing county.

It began with storytelling—or rather, a need to prioritize storytelling. "If you don't tell your story, someone else will," said McLeod. "I needed to get involved and tell this story." McLeod first entered the local government scene in the late 1990s when he became the "first young person to the town council," as he puts it, during the same year too that a woman joined the previously all-male council. From there, he turned his sights to the role of mayor. He saw it as an opportunity for the town and for the role to be revitalized and reshaped through proper marketing.

"I felt like it was time to redefine the role," McLeod said, reflecting back. "It was more about economic development, marketing, and branding, all of that. The mayor could no longer be just two meetings a month and ribbon cuttings."

He lost his first mayoral election by under 100 votes—52 as he recalls it. Four years later, he tried again and won. "Again, by 52 votes. Or thereabout," he said.

Once mayor, the story McLeod immediately began to tell hit the high notes: prime geographic location, school quality, and affordability. Mostly, though, he pointed to the community. Telling the story now, he starts at the end. "Look at the people of Clayton

**Look at the people of Clayton and how welcoming they've proved to be.**

People continue to move here, and the people of Clayton continue to accept them. **Everybody knows everybody. It's what maintains our great sense of community through this growth.**



and how welcoming they've proved to be," McLeod said. "People continue to move here, and the people of Clayton continue to accept them. Everybody knows everybody. It's what maintains our great sense of community through this growth."

Things have moved slow but steady for McLeod in Clayton—a pace that can cover quite a bit of distance in the span of two decades. He's not shy about noting the problems that faced the town at the outset, particularly inside Town Hall. These included financial issues, a lack of diversity among leadership, and an overall close-mindedness towards new ideas. As a small business owner and lifelong community member, those concerns nudged McLeod into local politics. And now, Clayton of old and Clayton today are miles apart, evidenced by not only a booming community, but also what McLeod calls, "The most progressive-minded council in my 20 years."

Accomplishments along the way include both the magnificent and the mundane, and pieced together, there appears a cascade of positive cause-and-effects. The dominos start with McLeod's original goal of storytelling. Knowing what to share was the easy part. *How* to share it was a bit more difficult. McLeod worked to develop strong relationships with the regional newspapers and community organizations, and made himself available as the town's spokesman. With those avenues created, he then got to work making sure that the story being told was a good one. Clayton made significant investments into its Parks and Recreation department, including new facilities, organized events and other community-gathering activities. These gatherings not only bolstered a sense of community in town, but also served as an economic development recruitment tool. Clayton even adopted a slogan to accompany the investments, calling itself "the premier community for active families."

"Business and industry want to have good, smart employees, yes, but they also want them to have something to do," said McLeod. "They want a quality of life for them outside work. So, they enjoy relocating and investing in areas that are very committed to quality of life." Success is in the numbers: Clayton is now home to

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Governor Roy Cooper meets with McLeod and other members of NCLM's Board of Directors at CityVision 2023. Photo credit: Ben Brown





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OFFICES IN CHAPEL HILL, CONCORD AND RALEIGH

Through the role of Mayor, McLeod is taking the old parts of Clayton and incorporating new parts of Clayton. And **he's doing this all while keeping center that strong focal point—that essence of Clayton.**

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the biopharmaceutical industry, valued locally at around \$5 billion, according to McLeod.

There is also now in-town healthcare. Whereas in decades past, Clayton residents needed to travel to Raleigh or Smithfield for hospital care, UNC Health Johnston in Clayton—opened in 2009 and undergoing expansions presently—now offers quality health-care at home. McLeod was closely involved in the relationship building, site selection, planning process that landed the facility.

Supporting it all is the routine and critical work of city leadership. Infrastructure investment, water and wastewater system projects, public works, utilities, and more. “These aren’t the flashy projects,” said McLeod. “But they are so important for setting Clayton up for the future... In order for the community to thrive and for economic development to continue, you have to have these things.”

Through the town’s evolution, his florist business has boomed, as has McLeod’s standing as a leader in the industry. McLeod has presented for the American Institute of Floral Design (AIFD) and is one of 13 nationwide education experts for Teleflora, a national florist network.

Those achievements—both civic and floral—happening concurrently aren’t surprising to McLeod. If anything, they’re complementary, paralleled in the same way as the geography of both the Triangle and his in-town florist competition. He approaches each the same. In 2018, McLeod detailed this symmetry in a presentation for AIFD on a topic titled “Discovering the Art of Leadership.”

“I blew them all away,” said McLeod. “A leader should be balanced. So should a floral design. A leader should yield to unity. So should a floral design. Harmony, all parts working together, a strong focal point, rhythm, balance, movement. Civic leadership and floral design, same thing.”

The parallel didn’t occur to McLeod at first in his public service career, he admits. But at some point, a little over a decade ago, it clicked. “It just happened in a moment one night,” McLeod said. “And it was amazing.”

“You can take the principles and elements of design anywhere. You can do it in your house. You can do it in your backyard. I sit around tables with engineers and accountants and attorneys and all these brainiacs, and I’m not them and can’t do what they do. But I can bring the creative side and the visual side.”

In his own work, through the role of Mayor, McLeod is taking the old parts of Clayton and incorporating new parts of Clayton. He’s seeing through new developments, coming into town at a rapid pace. He’s balancing the residential and industrial. And he’s doing this all while keeping center that strong focal point—that essence of Clayton.

There’s no wonder the community-focused town has come as far as it has.

“I don’t mean to brag, but keeping it real, you gotta own it,” he said. “Sometimes leaders don’t want to own the good stuff, you know?” ■



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# NCLM Takes Active Role in Electricity Rate Case

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

NCLM Director of Political Communication and Coordination

**CITIES ARE AMONG THE BIGGEST ELECTRICITY USERS IN THE STATE, SO IT SHOULD COME AS NO SURPRISE THAT THE LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES TAKES AN ACTIVE ROLE WHEN IT COMES TO REQUESTS BY THE STATE'S PRIMARY ELECTRICITY PROVIDERS, DUKE ENERGY, TO INCREASE RATES.**

Five years ago, NCLM and Duke Energy Carolinas (mostly covering the western half of the state) reached a settlement that brought considerable benefits to cities when it came to the cost of street lighting.

In 2023, NCLM is once again engaged in the legal process that will determine the latest major rate case filed before the state Utilities Commission, this one filed on behalf of Duke Energy Progress, mainly covering the eastern half of the state.

At issue for cities and towns is not only a potential increase in the rates paid to keep the lights and heat on in buildings, but once again the cost of street lighting. In response, NCLM has hired outside legal counsel, through the Fox Rothschild law firm in Raleigh, and sought to intervene in the case on behalf of its members.

Just as in 2018, millions of dollars over many years are at stake.

That year, the settlement reached due to NCLM's intervening reduced revenue requirements by \$60 million over the first four years. The commission's eventual order, agreeing with NCLM arguments, also led to savings for water and sewer plant operations and recreational facilities through the incorporation of time-of-use and critical peak pricing options that also enhanced energy efficiency.

This year, Duke Energy Progress seeks a base rate annual increase of 5.7% going back to November 2022, and a total base rate increase of 16% over four years. The proposed increase, though, is not uniform across different usages, and the lighting category—covering street lighting, traffic signal, area lighting and sports field lighting—would rise 30.4% over four years.

In its petition to intervene, NCLM noted the substantial financial interest of its members in the outcome as a large user of Duke Energy-supplied electricity.

At a Utilities Commission hearing in early May, Mayor Bill Saffo of Wilmington and Mayor Terry Mann of Whiteville, with the assistance of NCLM and its outside counsel, submitted written testimony that noted the disproportionate increase on lighting relative to other uses, and how cities and towns would bear the brunt of that increase.

Mayor Saffo pointed out that the total revenue generated by the increase in lighting came to only 4.7% of the total additional revenue, even as the rates would rise above 30%.

"Consequently, the drastic increase in Lighting rates, while extremely burdensome to Lighting customers such as Wilmington and other municipalities, will have a relatively small impact on DEP's (Duke Energy Progress') overall returns," Mayor Saffo stated.

He also disagreed with Duke Energy's characterization of the increase as "gradual." "Increasing lighting rates almost twice as rapidly as any other rate class seems the opposite of 'gradual,'" he said.

Mayor Mann stated that the proposed increase would penalize municipal residents twice, with them having to pay for increases in their own personal electricity use and having to pay for municipal increases as local taxpayers.

"We agree that DEP needs sufficient revenue to operate, and we recognize that we must work cooperatively with our investor-owned utilities to try to meet all of these needs. However, we believe that the requested rate increases are far too high, and we believe that the proposed increases in rates for services to municipalities should be carefully reviewed to assure all steps have been taken to minimize any rate increases and to advance the policy goals discussed in my testimony," Mayor Mann stated.

Duke Energy initiated this rate case in October, and prior to the May hearing to consider expert witness testimony, the Utilities Commission had held five public hearings across the state and one virtual public hearing.

In its request, the company has stated that the increase is needed to pay for investments made since 2019 in nuclear plant safety and reliability, traditional and renewable generation and storage, ongoing work to retire coal-fired plants, the addition of carbon free technologies, and upgrading transmission and distributions systems.

As if this writing, settlement talks and/or a decision by the state Utilities Commission were expected in coming weeks. Look for an update in coming issues of Southern City and other NCLM communications. ■

Mayor Mann stated that **the proposed increase would penalize municipal residents twice**, with them having to pay for increases in their own personal electricity use and having to pay for municipal increases as local taxpayers.



# Local Governments Responding: The HOUSING CRISIS in North Carolina







The following are excerpts from “Local Governments Responding: The Housing Crisis in North Carolina, a report recently issued by NCLM and the N.C. Association of County Commissioners, and based on survey data taken from the fastest growing planning jurisdictions in the state. Please utilize these findings to help make the case that local governments are taking positive steps to address housing affordability in North Carolina, and that their actions to lead on this critical issue require local authority and flexibility.

## INTRO

North Carolina, like much of the rest of the country, faces a crisis in housing affordability. Few people question that is the case, as the median home price in the state rose by 25% in 2021. Added to that fact is that more and more renters in North Carolina are cost-burdened, paying more than 30% of their income in rent.

Housing affordability has been an issue that the state's most urbanized areas have been facing and addressing for years, but finding affordable places to live is increasingly a problem in communities of all sizes. Outside of places like Raleigh and Charlotte, tourism communities in the mountains and at the coast have especially struggled in recent years to meet the housing needs of a workforce that allows local economies to function. And as urban centers have become more attractive, booming suburban communities have also seen housing costs rise.

The cause of the rise in the cost of housing is complex. It encompasses everything from a 60-year trend of urbanization to labor shortages to supply chain disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, some critics have wanted to place the blame on cities and counties themselves, without recognizing that these same communities, with their job growth and attractive amenities, are simply facing the consequences of their own success. Land-use policies, as well as building approval processes, have come under scrutiny as the housing affordability crisis has escalated.

In response to the housing crisis, the N.C. League of Municipalities and N.C. Association of County Commissioners undertook a survey of some of the fastest growing jurisdictions in North Carolina to better understand the scope of the problem, local policies and processes related to housing, and possible ways to better address the issue of affordable housing. Thirty-seven local jurisdictions (building inspections and planning departments), representing 31 municipalities and nine counties, responded. These jurisdictions ranged in size from the City of Raleigh and County of Mecklenburg to several smaller municipalities in fast-growing Brunswick County, such as Shallotte and Oak Island. They also included three joint municipal-county departments, Durham-Durham County, Sanford-Lee County and Winston-Salem-Forsyth County.

**This report examines those findings, delves more deeply into the causes of the housing affordability crisis, and looks at ways that are or could be utilized to help North Carolinians better accomplish the goal of home ownership and finding housing that fits their budget.**

## A CRISIS IN AFFORDABILITY

As noted earlier, the housing affordability crisis in North Carolina has become increasingly broad, affecting a range of communities. Even before the economic fallout associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, 45% of renters and 19% of homeowners in North Carolina were considered housing cost-burdened, that is, spending 30% or more of their income on housing costs, according to the NC Justice Center.

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Over the last two years, the median price of a home in North Carolina rose roughly 25% in 2021 and an estimated 5% in 2022. Also, the state has 347,275 extremely low-income renter households, but only 156,365 rental units considered affordable for those families. The NC Budget & Tax Center estimates that North Carolina could see the gap between housing units and residents' need grow to 900,000 units by 2030.

North Carolina is hardly alone in this housing crisis. U.S. Census Bureau data shows that 40% of renters nationwide meet the definition of cost-burdened. From 2019 to 2022, the average price of a home in the United States rose from \$391,900 to \$543,600, a 38% increase.

The reasons for this affordability crisis are myriad and complex.

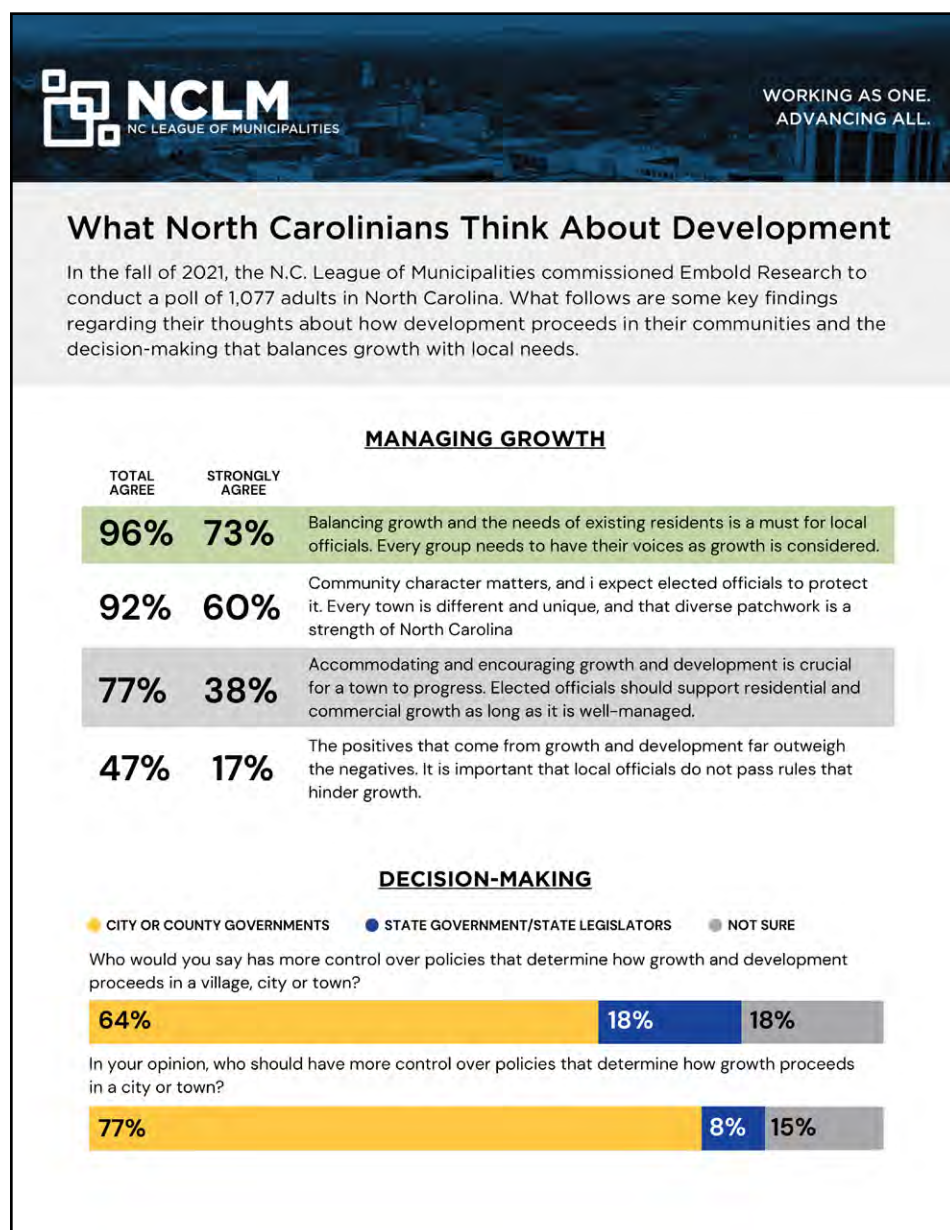
Looking specifically at North Carolina, and going back decades, the state has seen a huge increase in urbanization. Just 60 years ago, jobs were not concentrated in the urban core, but in smaller communities across the state, with cotton mills and less-mechanized agriculture serving as primary drivers of employment in the state. Losses in textile and agricultural employment, combined with the explosion of high-tech industries and the rise of concentrated professional service jobs, has caused North Carolina's largest cities and the surrounding areas to see a majority of job and population growth in recent decades.

Those changes in the state's economy began in the 1960s and accelerated in the 1980s, but they have continued to mean that land prices—which typically dictate the size of home that homebuilders construct—have risen fastest closest to the urban core.

The more recent surge in home prices has been driven by other factors, including cyclical building supply price increases and pandemic-related supply chain disruptions. According to the National Association of Home Builders, building material prices have risen more than 35% since January 2020, with 80% of that increase coming since January 2021. Examples include exterior paint rising by 50% and gypsum by 22%. NAHB also reports that skilled labor shortages mean higher labor costs and an increase in the time required to build a home. Meanwhile, interest rate increases pushed the average mortgage rate to 5.9% in January 2023, the highest level since 2008, making home ownership more difficult.

In this already challenging landscape, the rise of corporate buying of homes for both short-term rentals, like AirBnB, and longer-term rentals, puts more pressure on housing costs.

The cause of the rise in the cost of housing is complex. It encompasses everything from a 60-year trend of urbanization to labor shortages to supply chain disruptions created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, some critics have wanted to place the blame on cities and counties themselves, without recognizing that these same communities, with their job growth and attractive amenities, are simply facing the consequences of their own success.





Despite the complexity of the causes of the housing crisis, some critics have sought to shift heavy blame to local governments, and their land-use policies and building approval processes. These critics typically don't reveal that academic studies examining land-use reforms enacted to create more density have shown, at best, modest results when it comes to improving housing affordability.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENTS RESPOND

Among local officials who work in the field of land-use planning and building approvals, there is a clear recognition that housing costs are rising faster than the wages of most residents. Many of those professionals cite the cost of land as making the development of affordable housing difficult, whether due to expected profit margins by builders and developers, or the financing required to develop the property.

Nonetheless, the NCLM/NCACC survey results of fast-growing communities show that many have begun answering the call to allow more dense development in response to the ongoing housing crisis.

Of the cities and counties responding, 60% indicated that they had revised zoning codes in recent years to allow more density by right. Nine of those cities, counties or joint jurisdictions responded that they now allow construction of residential units other than single family units in 75% or more of their residential zones. Also, 26 of the represented local governments, or 65%, indicated that they now allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs), or in-law suites, on single family lots.

Land-use reforms designed to encourage affordable housing have not stopped there. Thirty-five percent of responding cities and counties indicated that they had loosened parking requirements, decreasing the amount of land required to be dedicated to parking for residential development, while another 30% allow density bonuses for housing construction.

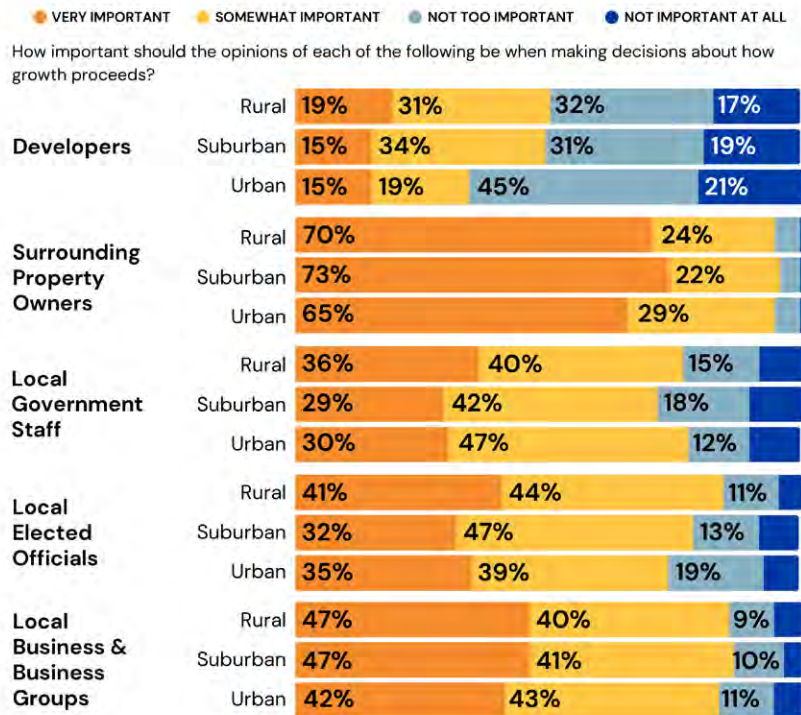
Residents in local jurisdictions across the state have also approved major bond initiatives in recent years aimed at infusing resources into various solutions aimed at increasing the stock of affordable and middle housing. (See *"Housing Bonds: Local Taxpayers Invest in Housing."*)

Those efforts to increase density and pursue housing bonds demonstrate that local officials, both elected officials and planning staff, are responding. They desperately want to find ways to address housing needs.

Equally clear from the survey results is that these local government staffs do not see themselves as having adversarial

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### WHOSE OPINIONS MATTER




### HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING WHEN IT COMES TO WHERE YOU CHOOSE TO LIVE?



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Among local officials who work in the field of land-use planning and building approvals, there is a clear recognition that housing costs are rising faster than the wages of most residents. ...The NCLM/NCACC survey results of fast-growing communities show that many have begun answering the call to allow more dense development in response to the ongoing housing crisis.









## LOCAL GOVERNMENTS RESPONDING: The Housing Crisis in North Carolina



In response to the housing crisis, the N.C. League of Municipalities and N.C. Association of County Commissioners undertook a survey of planning and inspections staff in some of the fastest growing jurisdictions in North Carolina. The survey was aimed at better understanding the scope of the problem, local policies and processes related to housing, and possible ways to better address the issue of housing affordability.

**Key findings from the survey of 31 municipalities & 9 counties, included in a detailed report, *Local Governments Responding: The Housing Crisis in North Carolina*, are:**

-  82% of Respondents Have Adjusted Development Reviews Over the Last Two Years to Better Partner with Developers and Citizens
-  82% of Respondents Provide for a Concurrent Review Process
-  60% of Respondents Have Revised Zoning Codes to Allow More Density by Right
-  Median Time Reported for a Major Subdivision Plan Review was 20 Business Days

### WHERE REFORMS ARE HAPPENING (Out of 40 Respondents/Fast-Growing Communities)

- Local Governments Revising Building Codes for More Density by Right
- Local Governments Allowing ADUs on Single-Family Lots

The report notes the complexity of the causes of the housing affordability crisis, in North Carolina and across the country, explaining that decades-long urbanization, rising land costs, labor shortages and COVID-related supply chain and materials costs increases have all contributed to increases in housing costs. It also looks at some possible steps to make approval processes more efficient and address housing affordability.

### Local Government Best Practices:

- Approve concurrent review processes intended to speed overall building approvals and allow development to proceed more efficiently.
- Establish an option for pre-submittal meetings in which developers meet with planning staff to discuss the planned use ahead of subdivision or other development plan submissions.
- Create an ongoing process that allows developers, staff and citizens to meet to discuss development plans, land-use planning and building review processes, as well as development generally.
- Establish interlocal agreements with neighboring jurisdictions to allow for resource and personnel sharing during times of high-volume building or staffing issues.

### Potential State Policy Changes:

- Expand a state Department of Insurance pilot program to train more building inspectors.
- Create and fund uniform software for small jurisdictions that could streamline and speed up permitting processes and create more certainty for builders.
- Build a state-of-the-art educational lab where building inspectors and other personnel can be trained in seeing real-world examples of trade construction and how to correct code issues.
- Incentivizing investment in housing designed for various family income levels, whether through tax credits, land banking or public-private agreements, is time proven in addressing housing affordability.

### Housing Bonds: Local Taxpayers Invest in Housing

The housing affordability crisis has been ongoing for years in North Carolina's larger cities and counties. That is why local officials and residents in those places have approved housing bonds – typically by overwhelming majorities – over several years. These bonds have covered a range of needs and assisted people at a range of income levels through direct construction of low-income housing, down payment assistance and land banking.

Year	Amount	Location
2022	\$50M	Charlotte
	\$40M	Buncombe County
	\$30M	Greensboro
2020	\$12M	Fayetteville
	\$80M	Charlotte
2018	\$95M	Durham
	\$10M	Orange County
	\$12M	Winston-Salem

See the full report at [nclm.org/advocacy/housing-crisis](https://nclm.org/advocacy/housing-crisis) to see detailed findings & additional survey results.

continued from page 25

relationships with developers. Asked to best describe that relationship, a full 75% of respondents said that they “generally enjoy a good working relationship” with developers, that the development community understands the constraints faced by staff, and that staff works to accommodate their needs. None of those surveyed characterized the relationship as “difficult.”

What is clear, though, is that growth can create tension among residents. Fifty percent of respondents said that residents have differing views about growth, depending on the development or project, while 22% reported palpable tension between those favoring and opposing development.

## CONCLUSION

Communities across North Carolina clearly are grappling with housing affordability, and local officials have been at the forefront in attempting to find solutions to a complex and difficult challenge.

Given the complexity of the problem, no single magic wand can be waved that will suddenly produce more affordable housing.

What North Carolina can do is attempt to build upon and bolster the successes that are already working, and recognize that, when it comes to building approval processes, streamlining though technology and investing in human capital are likely to

produce the most noticeable improvements.

Local governments do have the ability to look to their neighbors and determine best practices that are creating better results for homeowners, developers and the larger community.

### Local government best practices include:

- Approve concurrent review processes intended to speed overall building approvals and allow development to proceed more efficiently.
- Establish an option for pre-submittal meetings in which developers meet with planning staff to discuss the planned use ahead of subdivision or other development plan submissions.
- Create an ongoing process that allows developers, staff and citizens to meet to discuss development plans, land-use planning and building review processes, as well as development generally.
- Establish interlocal agreements with neighboring jurisdictions to allow for resource and personnel sharing during times of high-volume building or staffing issues.

At the state level, a focus on how to put more people into the building inspections profession, or conversely, assisting them to be more efficient, would ameliorate a key concern of builders.

### Potential state policy changes that could accomplish those goals:

- Expand a state Department of Insurance pilot program to train more building inspectors.
- Create and fund uniform software for small jurisdictions that could streamline and speed up permitting processes and create more certainty for builders.
- Build a state-of-the-art educational lab where building inspectors and other personnel can be trained in seeing real-world examples of trade construction and how to correct code issues.
- Incentivizing investment in housing designed for various family income levels, whether through tax credits, land banking or public-private agreements, is time proven in addressing housing affordability.

Bringing together the expertise and experiences of everyone involved in housing, whether in the private, public or nonprofit sectors, would result in a better understanding of the causes of the housing affordability crisis and better solutions in addressing it. With that in mind, the creation of a legislative study committee, to meet over a period of months, would acknowledge the importance of housing affordability to the state's economy and residents' quality of life. ■





The LELA curriculum provides interchangeable pathways to help elected officials maintain constant awareness of the ever-evolving legal requirements of governing and creates opportunities for leaders to develop the personal leadership skills and behavior that promote effective governance at the local level.

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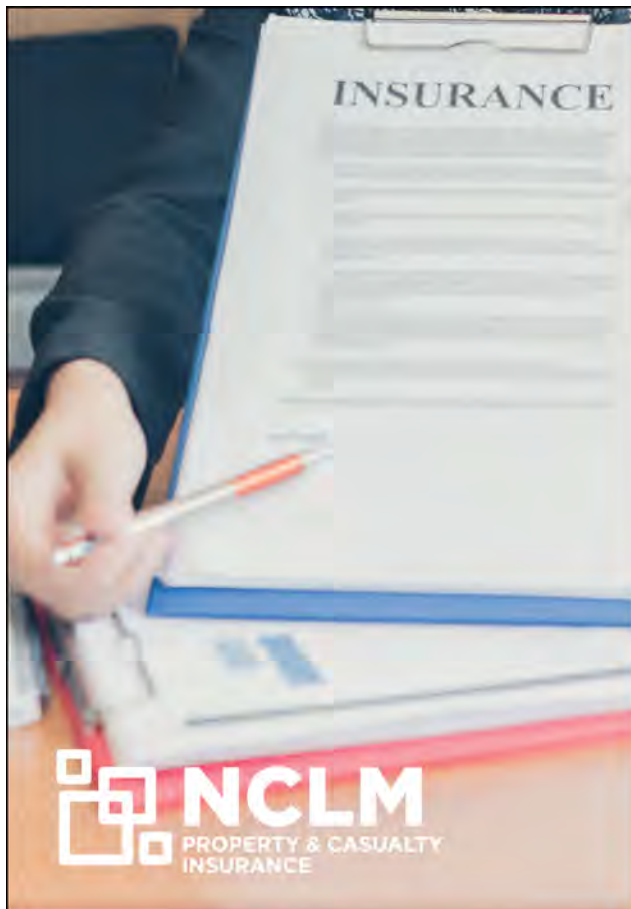
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Top 10 Primer: Engaging the Community in Public Issues	July 26 Online
Top 10 Primer: Tools for a Successful Strategic Plan	August 2 Online
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# **Vision 2030: At the Halfway Point,** **A Look at How Far We've Come**

## **SEVEN YEARS INTO NCLM'S STRATEGIC PLAN, A REVIEW OF THE MANY SUCCESSES AND STRIDES TOWARDS ACCOMPLISHING VISION 2030'S SIX MAIN GOALS.**

All across the membership of the NC League of Municipalities, we see incredible successes. When viewed through the lens of our strategic plan, Vision 2030, those achievements take on added significance.

Around 2014, the League kicked off its strategic planning efforts to set goals and organize resources towards a long-term vision for both the organization and the municipalities themselves. The result was Vision 2030, published in 2016.

This year marks the halfway point of our efforts towards reaching those goals. The plan, organized through strategic planning pillars, offered six "Operating Principles," which stand as strategic targets for the organization. Below, the Operating Principles are detailed, as is NCLM's progress towards each.

### **GOAL 1: MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS EXERCISE GREATER CONTROL OVER THEIR REVENUES, STRUCTURES, AND FUNCTIONS.**

The work of NCLM's Government Affairs staff embodies this target, and the many legislative victories that team has achieved mark significant progress towards that goal. These include wins in the areas of land use and zoning, short-term rentals, sales tax redistributions, and billboards, just to name a few.

Of course, those victories aren't achieved through our internal team alone. Equal, if not more important, is the tremendous work of our cities and towns. Through grassroots advocacy, the League's interests are strongly supported at the General Assembly.

### **GOAL 2: MUNICIPALITIES DEMONSTRATE THE VALUE THEY ADD TO THE COMMUNITY'S QUALITY OF LIFE.**

NCLM's Communications staff works tirelessly to share the incredible stories that happen across our state, and publish them in a variety of locations, including this magazine. These stories include case studies, best practices, and articles. More regularly, the team pushes information through its weekly bulletins and newsletters.

The American Rescue Plan has provided a clear case of the power of storytelling, both for our cities and for our organization. The League, working closely with city leaders, has published dozens of case studies illustrating the impact that our towns are having through their American Rescue Plan funds, and these case studies have gone on to be published in statewide news outlets.

Additionally, cities and towns have grown incredibly adept at telling their own tales. A quick walk around CityVision 2023 would reveal local leaders hosting a variety of panels and sessions, where their own stories of success provide tools and a roadmap to fellow municipalities.

### **GOAL 3: TECHNOLOGY IS WIDELY USED FOR SERVICE DELIVERY, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT, AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT.**

Perhaps no goal has a clearer example than this one: the COVID-19 pandemic. In the blink of an eye, cities had to leverage technologies to quickly adapt their operations online and remote.





Crucial offerings had to become digital, and technology became a necessity. They haven't looked back. In the years since, our towns have developed faster and more efficient ways of reaching their citizens and providing services.

Through those trying times, and in the years that followed, we saw our towns commit to the use of technology through "smart" investments, such as smart utility meters, updated vehicles, and cybersecurity programs.

NCLM as an organization is also leveraging technology through its new Municipal Accounting Software program (see ARP Service Line article page TK), which will bolster and support the administrative capacity of small towns across North Carolina.

#### **GOAL 4: MUNICIPALITIES WIDELY PRACTICE PRODUCTIVE PARTNERSHIPS WITH COUNTIES, OTHER GOVERNMENTS, AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR.**

and

#### **GOAL 5: URBAN AND RURAL MUNICIPALITIES ROUTINELY WORK TOGETHER FOR ECONOMIC SUCCESSES.**

These two goals go hand-in-hand, and they are seen clearly through the pressing investment need of our time: water and wastewater infrastructure. Due in large part to the changing economic landscape of North Carolina over the past several decades, nearly every region of this state faces the problem of aging infrastructure. Our towns have responded through flexibility, leadership and, most importantly, partnerships.

Regionalization has proven incredibly successful in our cities and towns. By partnering (Goal 4) and working together to pursue economic successes (Goal 5), cities have found an attainable solution to a large problem. Bethel and Greenville provide a great case study. By regionalizing their water systems, those municipalities have developed both a sustainable and cost-efficient arrangement to addressing the water needs of their communities.

For examples of partnerships with counties and the private sector, we can look to the incredible downtown investments happening across North Carolina. The City of Kannapolis provides a strong example. By working with private investors and Cabarrus County, the city was able to undergo a massive and ambitious downtown renovation. Take a visit to Kannapolis sometime soon, and the results speak for themselves.

#### **GOAL 6: MUNICIPALITIES ARE ABLE TO QUICKLY ADAPT TO CULTURAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

Small towns have shown themselves to be nimble and flexible over the past several years, and large towns have expertly navigated the challenge of growth.

Notable towards this goal are our cities' and the League's strides in the area of racial equity. NCLM released at CityVision in 2021 its report on "City Leadership and Racial Equity," which examined and offered policy recommendations on the areas of housing, policing, infrastructure location and leadership development. Shortly after, we launched DIRECT—Diversity, Inclusion and Racial Equity for Cities and Towns—programming that helped strengthen communities by identifying and addressing racial disparities at the local level.

Seven years in, we're well over halfway there. Now, just seven more to go to finish these goals off strong. There are certainly many more successes ahead. ■



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# **Taking the Lead: How City Officials Can Promote Civility**

MATT LEHRMAN

**CIVILITY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS SIMILAR TO THE GUARDRAILS ON A HIGHWAY—PROVIDING STRUCTURE BY WHICH MUNICIPAL LEADERS AND THE PUBLIC CAN NAVIGATE AROUND EACH OTHER. SECURING THE TRAVEL LANES PROVIDES MUTUAL SAFETY FOR PEOPLE HEADING IN ALL DIRECTIONS.**

When civility breaks down, however, people and perspectives collide—resulting in misunderstandings and disagreements that can harm relationships and fracture a community’s sense of togetherness.

Guardrails can’t provide complete protection from conflicts, but they are the fundamental structures of cooperation and coexistence.

In the first half of this article, I’m going to make the strategic, and perhaps idealistic, case for celebrating disagreement. If you’ve already been on the receiving end of anger and vitriol, I’ll understand if you skip to the second half, which offers thoughts on how to stand strong against incivility.

## **TAKING THE LEAD**

Every city official owns the responsibility for the infrastructure of civility in their municipality. Whatever your personal agenda or philosophy, you are—by nature of your position—undeniably responsible for ensuring access, information, and respect for all, including for those with whom you disagree.

Creating an environment that is open, fair, and considerate to everyone is crucial. This means basing your decisions on factual information, being transparent in your actions and decision-making processes, and being accountable for promoting a sense of pride and togetherness throughout your community.

By prioritizing civility, you set a positive example and build trust and confidence—not just in local government, but in your community’s essential quality of togetherness. A civil local government is not just nice to have but a must-have. It is the foundation upon which a healthy and functioning democracy is built.

## **WELCOMING DISAGREEMENTS**

Disagreement is not a sign of dysfunction, but rather a prerequisite for effective decision-making in a free society. The ideal of democracy is that it enables people with assorted knowledge, values, and lived experiences to come together to recognize and solve community problems. The civic leadership for which you’re responsible cannot be achieved without the presence of diverse and even passionate perspectives and viewpoints.

Disagreement also helps to expose underlying assumptions and biases. When individuals with different perspectives come

together, they are often forced to articulate and defend their assumptions and values—a process that reveals hidden biases and assumptions. By engaging with dissenting viewpoints, municipal leaders can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problem they are trying to solve. Diverse perspectives can help to identify issues that may have been overlooked or underappreciated. In this way, disagreement can be a catalyst for creativity and innovation.

When citizens are encouraged to express their views and engage in constructive dialogue, they are more likely to hold their leaders accountable for their decisions. Can you make yourself comfortable with feedback and criticism? By engaging with—rather than avoiding or repelling—diverse perspectives, even dissent, you have the potential to create a culture of accountability that ensures decision-making is truly transparent and responsive.

As a civic leader, when you say “community,” it’s especially important for people to remember that you are responsible to serve not a specific constituency but the entire population of your city. While it may be tempting to focus on the interests of your most vocal supporters or a community’s loudest voices, doing so can lead to short-term thinking and neglect of the long-term interests of the broader community.

Disagreement builds trust and strengthens relationships. When individuals feel that their opinions are valued and respected, they are more likely to be invested in that decision-making process. By creating forums for meaningful dialogue, municipal leaders demonstrate their commitment to the community and build relationships of trust and mutual respect. In this way, disagreement can be a powerful force for social cohesion and community building.

While disagreement can be challenging and uncomfortable, leaders must foster an environment that encourages open and honest communication. This may require the development of formal mechanisms for soliciting feedback and dissent, such as public forums or advisory committees. Leaders must also be prepared to model constructive dialogue and demonstrate a commitment to the values of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity.

## **STANDING STRONG AGAINST INCIVILITY**

The American ideal of government is rooted in the belief that reasonable people can work together to find solutions to shared problems. Compromise is not a weakness, and ample time and space exist to make community decisions. While not everyone will always agree on the final outcome, the process must be fair and thorough—ensuring that everyone feels heard. This is encapsulated in the American motto, *e pluribus unum*: “Out of many, one.”

Unfortunately, this ideal is being threatened by the prevalence of anger and outrage in American media, where clicks, shares, and time spent engaging translate into profit. This business model has created a market for incivility and negativity that pervades our society, leading to issues such as polarization and divisiveness. It’s a conundrum.

To counteract this, local governments must actively practice respectful communication and behavior that promotes





Matt Lehrman speaks at CityVision 2023. Photo credit: Ben Brown

collaboration, compromise, and constructive dialogue. Incivility, which demonstrates a lack of respect and consideration for others, creates a self-centered attitude that can leave others feeling hurt, disrespected, and excluded. It can extend beyond individual interactions to affect relationships, productivity, and broader societal issues community-wide. Therefore, it's essential to strive for an environment that encourages civility and respectful engagement, helping to restore the American ideal of government.

If you want to stand against incivility, you need to recognize and call it out when you see it, in particular:

- **Obstinace**—stubborn adherence to one's own opinion despite reason or persuasion.
- **Demagoguery**—emotional and prejudicial appeals to sway public opinion, rather than engaging in rational argument.
- **Dogmatism**—the inflexible adherence to a particular set of principles, beliefs, or ideology, without considering alternative viewpoints or evidence.

Changing these behaviors is not something that can be achieved overnight. If you're looking for a quick fix, I'm sorry to disappoint, but there is no magic phrase or verbal jiu-jitsu tactic that can instantly reverse an instance of incivility during a council meeting.

The following is the civility that all local leaders need to get good at:

**Energize obstinance.** Find shared goals and values that underlie the debate. By identifying common ground, you can frame the conversation in a way that encourages compromise and collaboration. Bring in outside experts, facilitators, or neutral third parties to provide fresh perspectives and objective feedback.

**Counter demagoguery.** Focus on presenting the facts and evidence that support the proposed course of action. By presenting data and statistics in a clear and compelling way, you can help to move the conversation away from emotional appeals and toward rational and fact-based decision-making. Engaging in active listening and making space for the consideration of alternative solutions is vital.

**Overcome dogmatism.** Frame the debate in terms of outcomes rather than ideology. By focusing on the practical implications of different policy choices, you shift the conversation away from entrenched beliefs and toward pragmatic solutions. Building alliances and coalitions across ideological lines can also be an effective way to seek out common ground and work together toward shared goals.

You have a crucial responsibility to govern your community in a fair, equitable, and just manner. This requires standing strong against incivility and disrespect, even when it's being thrown at you. By modeling respectful behavior and promoting constructive dialogue, you set the standard for your community.

## CONNECTING, RESPECTING, AND LISTENING

As a civic leader, you are the guardian of a thriving community, responsible for making decisions that impact the lives of your residents. Facing incivility and negativity during council meetings and community events can be disheartening, but giving up is not an option when it comes to civic leadership.

Remember that your mission is to create a positive and inclusive environment for all. By prioritizing respect and collaboration, you set an example for others to follow, creating a ripple effect that can spread throughout the community. Keep your focus on how people in your community deserve to feel about civic engagement—connected, respected, and heard—and find the motivation to push through challenging situations and work toward constructive solutions.

Local leaders hold the power to shape decisions that impact people's daily lives. Making those decisions with integrity, fairness, and a commitment to the greater good is crucial. By bringing people together, bridging divides, and creating a better future for your community, you have a responsibility worth fighting for.

Stay strong, stay committed, and keep striving toward creating a more positive and inclusive community. ■

Matt Lehrman is managing director of Social Prosperity Partners. He delivered the opening keynote "From Conflict to Conversation" at the NC League's Annual Conference, CityVision 2023. A version of this article originally appeared in the Minnesota Municipal League's Minnesota Cities magazine.



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**BEN BROWN**

NCLM Communications and Multimedia Strategist

# CityVision 2023 a Success in Concord

**NETWORKING, EDUCATION, AND A VISIT  
FROM GOVERNOR ROY COOPER**

## **IT WAS THE BIGGEST WEEK OF THE YEAR FOR THE NORTH CAROLINA LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES.**

As our government affairs staffers were hard at work at the Legislative Building in Raleigh for the lawmaking scramble known as “crossover” (a live-or-die point for most bills), hundreds of municipal leaders were in Concord for the largest gathering of its kind—CityVision 2023, the League’s three-day annual conference that featured more than 20 engaging speakers and multiple tracks of focus on timely local government issues.

CityVision 2023 brought out attendees from cities and towns of all sizes. The conference, which also featured tours of Concord’s operations and attractions, was, as always, geared to empower officials in attendance to bring fresh ideas, knowledge, and perspective back to their own municipalities for the betterment of the state as a whole. Special guest Gov. Roy Cooper in remarks to CityVision-goers noted that those in attendance were most likely to hear concerns directly from the people they represent and were as such best suited to make a difference.

“It makes you really and truly the most qualified leaders in our entire government system to make decisions,” Governor Cooper told attendees, adding he’d like to see cities and towns have more autonomy in charting their futures. The governor further noted the great communication his team has with the League and its members on goals and other matters of interest to cities and towns. “I am deeply grateful for your work,” he said.

Governor Cooper also provided updates and perspective on overarching issues, like the pandemic and public health, the economy, education, and funding streams that have helped communities succeed in such hard or demanding times. He spoke specifically on the federal relief funds that have come down since the pandemic and legislation to build for better infrastructure.

“I talked to President Biden just yesterday and he wants to work with us to make sure that we can implement these significant funds that we have in place,” the governor said. “And that’s a challenge for us. But we’ve got to keep these same relationships and the same cooperation in order to make sure that we do the implementation that we know needs to happen.” Governor Cooper also encouraged attention toward community resilience and funds supporting it. “Storms are getting more severe,” he said, but he noted the presence of resources to help communities fare better.

It’s a rewarding challenge to serve in public office and see goals through, the governor emphasized. “I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for being willing to step up and run for office,” he told the audience of mayors, council members, managers,

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## With eyes toward success, city and town officials at CityVision attended informative sessions on hot topics in the muni-sphere—the power of diversity, strategies on infrastructure, federal grants, regional partnerships, and much more.

continued from page 33

clerks, and others from local government. “It’s really hard these days. In particular with social media and how vicious people can be. But I am a prisoner of hope ... I believe that if we continue to present facts, evidence-based policy, that we work to convince people that we’re all trying to work toward the common good, we will be successful.”

With eyes toward success, city and town officials at CityVision attended informative sessions on hot topics in the muni-sphere—the power of diversity, strategies on infrastructure, federal grants, regional partnerships, and much more.

CityVision also featured the installation of a newly elected League Board of Directors, featuring a new president in Fuquay-Varina Commissioner William Harris along with First Vice President Mayor Pro Tem Mark-Anthony Middleton of Durham and Second Vice President Mayor Pro Tem Martha Sue Hall of Albemarle. Kings Mountain Mayor Scott Neisler, who served as president in the previous year, will continue his League leadership as Immediate Past President. (See ‘New Board’ article on page TK for more information.)

continues on page 36





## The world of municipal government continues to change and become more complex. Staying ahead means not only being educated, but understanding a vast number of evolving topics and issues.

» **Scott Neisler**, Mayor, Kings Mountain

continued from page 35

Lastly, CityVision 2023 saw honors given to standout municipalities that participated in the League's Advancing Municipal Leaders (AML) program. AML is a governance education program to help municipal officials gain the knowledge and skills needed to be effective leaders. Mayor Neisler, from the stage and before a packed ballroom, presented awards to officials from Gastonia, Laurel Park, and Ramseur, in addition to the Mid-East Commission.

"The world of municipal government continues to change and become more complex," Mayor Neisler said. "Staying ahead means not only being educated, but understanding a vast number of evolving municipal topics and issues."

Since 2020, the AML program has trained close to 1,100 municipal officials through a variety of delivery methods.

The annual conference importantly provided time for municipal officials from across the state to network with one another,

exchange ideas, and strengthen bonds. Concord Mayor Bill Dusch and the city's council made all feel welcomed and empowered to enjoy thoroughly the event, which also featured a Concord-hosted dinner and entertainment with impressive and laughter-inspiring magician Bryant Saint.

The League would like to thank the City of Concord and all others who made CityVision 2023 such a rousing and memorable success. Every town and city in North Carolina depends on local government services to keep communities running. So, more than any other sector, your work impacts all North Carolinians every day. CityVision 2023, even more than an opportunity to gather and learn from one another, was a celebration of that accomplishment.

And that turns our eyes to the next one: CityVision 2024, set for April in host-city Winston-Salem. ■













Every town and city in North Carolina depends on local government services to keep communities running. So, more than any other sector, your work impacts all North Carolinians every day. CityVision 2023, even more than an opportunity to gather and learn from one another, was a celebration of that accomplishment.





## **TAKING THE FIELD**

# **The Demands, Pressures, and Rewards of Public Service**



**ROSE VAUGHN WILLIAMS**  
NCLM Executive Director

Travel around North Carolina and the wonder of our cities will be on full display, in towns large and small alike. These places are our economic engines and our hubs of both history and community, and they are the reason North Carolina has become the toast of the nation.

While the greatness of our cities is evident, however, the work to create these places too often goes behind the scenes—out of sight and out of mind. The work happens through investments to underground infrastructure, like water and sewer. It happens during decision-making processes regarding the provision of critical services. And it happens in the difficult, every-day tasks that ensure our cities continue to run smoothly for their communities.

Unheralded, though, does not equal unimportant. Just the opposite, in fact. The successes happening in towns across our state are nothing short of astounding, and they are as present in the massive downtown project as they are in the small, subtle work relied upon by our businesses, homes, and communities. These duties are consequential and critical. It brings meaning to my work at the League in supporting the efforts of our cities and towns, and knowing the public service mindset that is pervasive across our state, I know it brings meaning to your work as well.

Importance and meaning accompany responsibility. And responsibility brings with it pressure and stress. So many of you take up the obligations with pride, but that does not mean that the lift is not heavy. Especially here, in North Carolina, our state faces rapid change and city leaders are faced with significant and evolving challenges, from growth to infrastructure needs to economic uncertainty to staffing concerns, just to name a few. The responsibility of meeting those challenges is inevitably demanding.

This past April at our annual conference CityVision, the keynote speaker Matt Lehrman presented on the topic of civility. (A companion article also appears in this issue of *Southern City*.) Lehrman has presented to organizations around the country, including many states' municipal leagues, and has a great deal of experience in addressing the conflicts that arise from exactly the types of pressures that our local leaders face. When a group of leaders—whether it is a council or staff or a leadership committee—need to address serious challenges, there are often disagreements and opposing viewpoints. This is normal, according to Lehrman. Beyond that, it is *productive*. Through varying perspectives and ideas, we better represent and serve our communities, and through dialogue—as difficult as it may sometimes be—we work to the best possible solution.

As Lehrman notes, it is important to remember that at the root of our stresses and anxieties is a true, committed concern for the wellbeing of our communities and our citizens. Additionally, I encourage you to remember that the League is here to assist in any way we can—to support, advise, consult, advocate, and do all else possible to make your work easier.

Thank you for your public service, for your ability to lead through difficult situations, and for your dedication to the places you represent. While your demanding, tremendous work may go unnoticed to some, it is both apparent and inspiring to me and all of us at your League of Municipalities. I look forward to working with you on your continued successes. ■

**The successes happening in towns across our state are nothing short of astounding**, and they are as present in the massive downtown project as they are in the small, subtle work relied upon by our businesses, homes, and communities. These duties are consequential and critical.





More than 1,000 municipal officials and staff have participated in the Advancing Municipal Leaders web-based education program this fall.

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## **Introducing DIRECT, a new racial equity program for League members.**

DIRECT works alongside municipal leaders to acknowledge existing racial inequalities, identify local history and data, and examine municipal policies and procedures that contribute to structural and systemic racism in local communities. Through this shared understanding and knowledge, DIRECT empowers local officials to develop strategies that work toward stronger, more equitable communities.

Learn more at [www.nclm.org/DIRECT](http://www.nclm.org/DIRECT)





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[nclm.org](http://nclm.org)



# We start at the **curb** and continue through the **community**.

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