

SOUTHERN CITY

A PUBLICATION OF THE NORTH CAROLINA LEAGUE OF MUNICIPALITIES



The 2023 Legislative Session

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18

**YVONNE JOHNSON:
A LIFETIME OF SERVICE
IN GREENSBORO**



**SOUTHERN
CITY**

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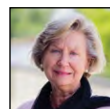
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SPEAKING OUT

Municipal Success and Innovation Not Limited by Size



WILLIAM HARRIS
NCLM President

At the North Carolina League of Municipalities, our motto of, “Working as One, Advancing All,” is one that we take seriously.

You see it when we advocate for land-use policies that allow our biggest cities and smallest towns to pursue their own unique visions of what their communities should look like. You see it when we provide legal services to help cities and towns of all sizes comply with the latest legal changes. You see it when we provide liability, health, and workers’ compensation insurance to municipalities of all sizes, and work with each to limit claims and make their communities and workplaces safe.

More recently, we have been developing and providing an array of services to help cities and towns wisely utilize the resources provided by the American Rescue Plan, as well as utilize those dollars to put some struggling towns on a firmer financial footing.

Of course, the reality doesn’t always match people’s perceptions.

By some, we are seen as focusing on the challenges of our small towns, where decades of job and population loss have certainly created some significant issues. Others see the League and the word “cities” as synonymous, and then only see “cities” as the state’s major cities.

Often, though, it is our mid-sized cities and towns that both rely on the most League services, and are among the most involved in League activities.

As a Council Member in one of those mid-sized communities, I don’t find that surprising at all.

Cities like Raleigh and Charlotte are large economic engines of state, and get a fair share of publicity as a result. But when you pull back the curtain a bit, you will find that mid-sized suburban communities are places of growth, innovation, and professionalism, too. Striving to meet that growth means that we are always looking for and sharing new ideas that allow us to be economically vibrant and maintain a strong quality of life for our residents.

You might be surprised to know that the 10 fastest growing cities in North Carolina, on a percentage basis, are not the state’s largest cities, but suburban communities. All 10 are in Wake, Brunswick and Union counties.

As for innovation, look no further than the creative and forward-thinking ways our municipal governments connect with residents.

I know of some municipalities in the state that spend a day each month sending workers to residents’ homes—not to hand them a bill or question them about zoning—but just to listen to anything on their mind regarding the community. What are you worried about? What can we do better?

In my town of Fuquay-Varina, we have attempted to make the process of getting feedback from our residents even easier.

Our “Let’s Talk Fuquay-Varina” program allows residents to register online to discuss a range of topics via the internet. Regarding various projects, we seek people’s engagement and feedback. It may include quick polls, more extensive surveys or ongoing community discussions. The program allows for anonymous comments without registration, but encourages users to provide emails—which are not shared—so that town officials can more fully engage and involve them in the different projects taking place.

That type of citizen engagement is just one type of innovation taking place in communities of all sizes all across North Carolina.

Driving through communities from the mountains to the coast, you can see other innovative ideas taking root, whether it involves downtown development, enhancing tourism opportunities, or making communities more attractive places to live through fun, inventive park designs.

We should all be proud to live in a state where this kind of vibrancy takes place in cities and towns of all sizes and knowing that NCLM represents them all. ■

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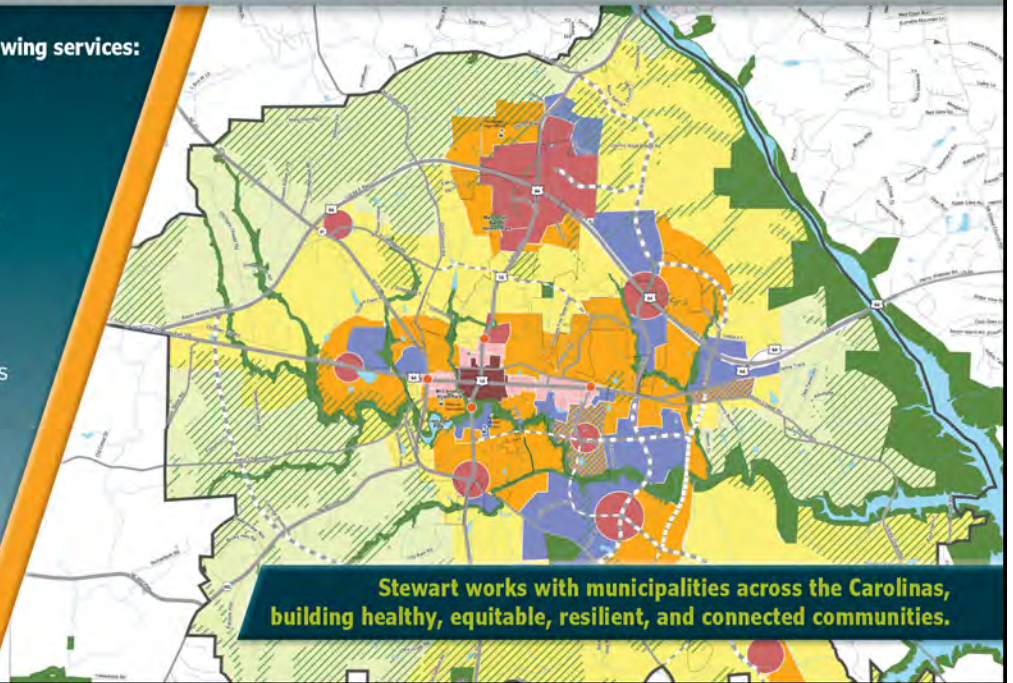


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NCLM Meets with Moldova Parliament Members

THE LONGSTANDING AND SUCCESSFUL NORTH CAROLINA-MOLDOVA RELATIONSHIP WAS RENEWED WITH A MEETING THIS SUMMER



NCLM President and Fuquay-Varina Commissioner William Harris, other members of the NCLM Board of Directors, and Fuquay-Varina town officials hosted members of the Republic of Moldova Parliament in Fuquay-Varina this July as a part of the North Carolina-Moldova partnership for peace program. The members of Parliament were in Washington, DC, before making their trip to North Carolina.

The Moldovan representatives were particularly interested in local government processes and finances, and they wanted to continue fostering a relationship with local government officials in North Carolina through programs like Sister Cities. Discussion topics included municipal budgets, local revenue sources, and how local governments work with county and state stakeholders to provide services to their citizens.

In addition to Harris, NCLM Board members present at the meeting included First Vice President and Durham Council

The members of the Moldova Parliament were particularly interested in local government processes and finances, and **they wanted to continue fostering a relationship with local government officials in North Carolina through programs like Sister Cities.**

Member Mark-Anthony Middleton, Second Vice President and Albemarle Mayor Pro Temp Martha Sue Hall, and At-Large Member and Lumberton Council Member Owen Thomas. Spring Lake Mayor Kia Anthony, a NC Mayors Association Board Member, also attended, along with Fuquay-Varina Assistant Town Manager Mark Matthews and Lumberton City Manager Wayne Horne.

NCLM Executive Director Rose Vaughn Williams and other League staff members rounded out the NC delegation, promoting

the effectiveness of local governments working together and describing the types of services offered by the League to local governments.

The NC-Moldova partnership has been previously covered in a 2022 issue of *Southern City*. The NC League is extremely grateful for its continued participation in this international relationship, and looks forward to its next opportunity to work together with Moldova. ■

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UPDATES

Each month, your town's ARP key contacts are sent the 'ARP Newsletter,' which collects the most critical news and guidance, and keeps your local government up to date on need-to-know information. This publication also shares reminders and best practices on the most key elements of ARP administration, such as internal control development, required policies and key reporting deadlines.

Perhaps most importantly, the ARP Newsletter always provides the most updated contact information for NCLM's ARP team. Our staff is prepared to help you individually in any way possible, so please do not hesitate to contact us.

Stay tuned to your email on the second Thursday of every month for the ARP Newsletter!

TRAINING

Last year, with so many questions surrounding the American Rescue Plan, the League organized its traveling, four-stop American Rescue Plan Expert Tour, which served as a one-stop shop for local leaders as they began their ARP process.

This year, we're honing in on specific elements of ARP through our American Rescue Plan Webinar Series. These virtual learning opportunities address the most timely needs of ARP, from grant management to reporting deadlines to communication strategies. In the series' most recent edition, NCLM showcased its ARP Service Line—a comprehensive assistance program designed to help you with all areas of ARP.

As more needs arise, more editions of the ARP Webinar Series will be offered! We will share information on those events through the ARP Newsletter, described above. ▣

Perhaps most importantly, **the ARP Newsletter always provides the most updated contact information for NCLM's ARP team.** Our staff is prepared to help you individually in any way possible, so please do not hesitate to contact us.

Stay tuned to your email on the second Thursday of every month for the ARP Newsletter!



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Legislator Q&A:

Senator Paul Newton

SEN. PAUL NEWTON OF CABARRUS COUNTY SEES LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES AS FALLING INTO TWO BUCKETS: THE SHORT-TERM NEEDS THAT ARISE QUICKLY, AND THE LONG-TERM GOALS THAT HE MOVES TOWARDS SLOWLY AND INTENTIONALLY OVER MANY YEARS. AS THE SENATE MAJORITY LEADER, HE HANDLES BOTH.

Sen. Newton sat down with NCLM in early September to discuss his approach to leadership, the 2023 legislative session, and his vision for the state of North Carolina.

How's the current session been? Has it matched expectations heading into the year?

PN: It's been good in the sense of accomplishing some things that are really good for North Carolinians. It's been longer than we would've liked. We had hoped to be done sort of July time-frame. But one of the things you learn when you're here is that sometimes waiting is the very best thing you can do to get the best deal for North Carolinians. There's a pressure to get it done quickly, but I've seen in the past that the one who is willing to wait the longest sometimes gets the best deal.

What are some of those things that you mention, that you're most proud of?

PN: Well, the first one that pops to mind is a bill that solves a problem for our fast-growing counties. We have local government units that are under de facto moratoriums for new growth, new business, new homes, because they've run out of wastewater capacity. And that's not literally true. They have plenty of wastewater capacity in terms of their brick and mortar. But the NC Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has had a process over the years where they have built multiple conservatisms into their calculations, and so they take away available capacity from just a bureaucratic perspective. This is the rule that was set back in the early 1980s. The rule is, if you're going to build a new home, it's going to be 120 gallons per bedroom per day. You have to take that away the very first day you get the permit even. And if it's 500 homes, you got to take it all away day one from your brick-and-mortar wastewater capacity. It made no sense. So we got technical teams together, and went through a series of stakeholder engagements. DEQ was terrific. They were willing to basically acknowledge that with low-flow shower heads, low-flow toilets and what not, the wastewater calculation of 120 gallons per day is high. They agreed to reduce it to 75 gallons. Most engineers will tell you it's probably closer to 45 gallons per bedroom per day, but we took the 75 as part of a compromise, and that unlocked tremendous value for local government units.

For example, Cabarrus County alone had \$50 million of brick and mortar unutilized because the paper capacity took away their ability to use it. We had a moratorium in Cabarrus. But



this was not a Cabarrus issue—this is a statewide issue for every fast-growing county. As soon as we got this bill passed, suddenly Cabarrus could use that \$50 million worth of brick-and-mortar capacity. Now multiply that by every fast-growing county, and all of a sudden, those houses can be built to house the workforce that's coming because of the new job creators to the fast-growing counties. The next job creator can come and know they have wastewater capacity and can actually build and utilize a building.

If you think about the economic value of that regulatory reform, I'm sure it's in the billions of dollars for North Carolina. And the beauty of it is it didn't cost anyone a penny. No appropriation, didn't cost a dime. It's just people coming together in good faith, looking at an old regulation and being willing to recognize it should no longer apply. Once we fix that, we're rolling again and growing again in North Carolina.

That's a great example. It really ties in closely with the issues that arise at the League with the towns we serve. It's often not the big flashy issues. Rather, it's almost always related to water capacity and providing the foundation for new businesses and new homes.

PN: That's right. And as we speak right now, there is a group including DEQ meeting to look at water. Right now, the rules for intra-basin transfers are exactly the same as inter-basin transfers, even though they have very dramatically different potential environmental effects. And there's a pretty uniform belief that intra-basin transfers should be able to be done more efficiently, quicker, more effectively, and at less cost than inter-basin transfers. And that's what that group's talking about right now. Now we're trying to unlock water for local government units.

I have a long-term perspective on the prosperity of our state. We are a lifecycle state, right? You can be born here, you can go to a great school here in North Carolina, **you can go to work and get a great job in North Carolina, and you can retire here and just have a great life with great amenities and quality of life being extraordinarily high.**

That gets to a question about legislative priorities and how they may have changed over your time in office, specifically thinking about that issue of growth—of exponential growth.

PN: I think of legislative priorities as two sets. One is a longer-range vision. The second set is dealing with problems that have arisen while you're here. So those change constantly. I didn't come into this session thinking I would deal with wastewater capacity issues—it just arose. But the first category though, those are long-term. I have a long-term perspective on the prosperity of our state. We are a lifecycle state, right? You can be born here, you can go to a great school here in North Carolina, you can go to work and get a great job in North Carolina, and you can retire here and just have a great life with great amenities and quality of life being extraordinarily high.

You can't get complacent about that. It's always been my goal to create a regulatory and a tax environment that makes job creators want to come here. Eli Lilly is a good example. If we had the highest taxes in the southeast like we had in 2010, they probably wouldn't have chosen North Carolina. But we don't. We've been working on this for better than a decade and creating the kind of environment that companies want to put iron in the ground. They know they're safe putting iron in the ground in North Carolina because we're rational on a regulatory regime and that we have a very favorable climate for them to prosper. And what that means is that our next generation of North Carolinians are going to have a great job right here. They don't have to leave. And as you know, you and I may be emotional about North Carolina. Are you from here?

I'm not from North Carolina originally, no. But I've been here for six years.

PN: Six years. Okay. Well, so you've been here long enough to know about the seashore and the mountains and everything we've got in between. And so we are emotional about North Carolina. But job creators are not emotional. They are counting the costs, looking at the benefits, thinking about whether they can look at the families they're going to ask to move and be proud of where they're going to bring them. And so to me, we've got to continue looking toward making North Carolina better for everyone, and job creators as well, because the minute we get complacent and say, 'You know what? We've done enough. We don't have to do anymore,' then Tennessee, South Carolina, or Virginia will move past us and they'll get the jobs we would've otherwise gotten.

I like that term: a lifecycle state. That's exactly right, I think. Does your background, your relationship with your hometown and your family—do those things inform that emotional connection to the state that you just mentioned?

PN: I think it does. I grew up in a small town, Eden, North Carolina, which was Leaksville, Spray and Draper, and we'd ride our bikes all over the place and walk all over the place and always felt very safe and just had a great childhood there. Then spent some time in Greensboro, some time in Chapel Hill before I returned back to Eden to graduate from high school. Fond memories for sure. That definitely makes a difference. So yeah, I think that does create an emotional connection if you're born here. And what we are trying to do is create an emotional connection with the CEO of the next business that's thinking about North Carolina, where



we're competing with Ohio and Texas, and we want to make that emotional connection for them. And that's where, to me, local government units play a huge role because when that CEO stays in a hotel, in that city, in that county where they're thinking about relocating, I've told the travel and tourism industry, the hoteliers, they play an unsung role in economic development for North Carolina because they're going to make an impression on somebody who stays there.

That hometown connections—we hear that so often with our mayors and councilmembers too. So many of them are from where they now lead. And yes, they lead rationally like you described, but the foundation of it is this pride for their town that they want to succeed so much. It's one of this state's great attributes.

PN: Yes. We have a lot of good local leaders, high quality local leaders in this state.

Growing up—going from Eden to Chapel Hill and then back home—were you always interested in holding public office?

PN: So, I didn't move back home after Chapel Hill. After Chapel Hill I actually went to New Mexico for five years, and then came back to North Carolina. And no, I'm not political by nature. I got involved in running for office because of personal asks that were made of me. My predecessor decided at the 11th hour back in late 2015 not to run for office. Surprised everybody. They scrambled to find a candidate. And I was asked by a number of people that I respect to consider taking it on. I had three people I ran against in the primary and then I won the general. I've been here for seven, going on eight, years now.

What was that process like? Deciding, 'Okay, I'm going to do it,' and then finding yourself in that first contested election?

PN: Well, it's a different world than most of us walk in on a daily basis. And that's a good thing. You have a range of personalities here. Some are very extroverted and ambitious politically. I'm more introverted. I love presenting and debating issues and whatnot—that doesn't bother me at all—but I'm not a public person. I like to live quietly and out of the public eye. But sometimes life calls you into stepping out of your comfort zone to do things for other

continues on page 16

I love presenting and debating issues and whatnot—that doesn't bother me at all—but **I'm not a public person. I like to live quietly and out of the public eye.** But sometimes life calls you into stepping out of your comfort zone to do things for other people. And that's what this is for me. It's just purely from a heart of service. ... I don't have political aspirations. **I just want to serve to the best of my ability and make the state better, make my county better, and the local government units there more successful.**

continued from page 15

people. And that's what this is for me. It's just purely from a heart of service. And I've always said, as soon as there's somebody better to represent Cabarrus County than me, then I will step away and I will support that person in running for my seat. I don't have political aspirations. I just want to serve to the best of my ability and make the state better, make my county better, and the local government units there more successful.

It seems like there's something to that style, and that this is a place that welcomes all sorts of different styles of leadership.

PN: It absolutely does. I think anybody can be successful. I think those that are really successful are putting constituents first. It feels like at the federal level, the government has forgotten who serves whom. We don't serve the federal government. It wasn't intended to be that way. The constitution reverses that. We are the people, the government is supposed to serve. And if you're here as an elected official, remember that it's not about you and it's about the people you represent, I think that's a theme that'll take you to success.

To wrap up, what do you hope for Eden, for Cabarrus County, and for North Carolina? What are your goals for it moving forward?

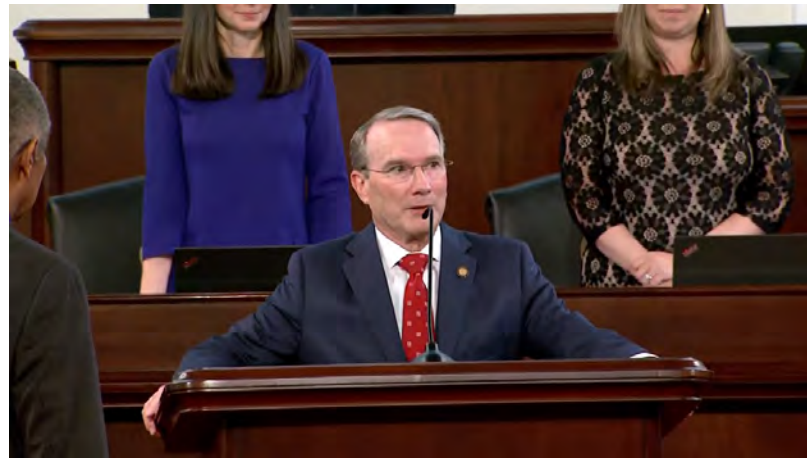
PN: I think government does have certain priorities. One is to create the kind of state that allows its citizens to prosper. That means doing the things that attract job creators and creating the infrastructure necessary for those job creators to come here. It's important to keep people safe. When you talk to a mom on the street with two young children and they look around the country at some of the crazy things that are happening, those local government units have forgotten the paramount issue, which is safety of the citizens.

I think education is right up there as well. We have an obligation to meet kids where they are. And for my party, it's been affording the opportunity for parents to choose the schooling that's best for their children. That makes traditional public school proponents nervous. But I'll never forget going to Union County, talking with a superintendent down there early on in my political career. He



said, I asked all my principals, 'How many of you have been to the charter school that's so successful here in Union County?' None of them had been. And he said, 'Every one of you have got to go spend a day at this charter school, take their best practices and bring them back here to our public schools.' That to me is the value of, you can call it competition. I don't know if that's the right word. I think the right word is, again, remembering who we serve. We serve those children, we serve those families, and we've got to meet a child where they are. And if it's better for that child, we ought to be able to make that happen. That means supporting K through 12, and it means supporting higher education as well. And we do that well. We get criticized in the media as a party for allegedly not doing that. But if you look at the data, I mean, almost 60% of our budget goes to education. So we're spending an awful lot of money. If you look at places like New York, there's no correlation between spending per pupil and outcomes. We're looking for outcomes.

I'll tell you right now, don't forget this: capital chases good ideas. If you've got a way to educate a child that makes them grow from wherever they came from educationally to a much higher place, you'll get capital. You will get funded for that. People will want to be a part of that. But when you cross your arms and just say, I should be funded because I am, even though my school is failing, you can't expect to get fully funded for that. I mean, you got to show this should be a meritocracy, just like the private sector is a meritocracy. And when superintendents and principals embrace that notion, that they're no different than any other service for people, I'll tell you, traditional public schools have so much to offer. They've got dedicated teachers, and that just needs to be pulled together and operated at an excellent level. And then the school choice issue will go away because everybody's going to be very happy going to that local school. ■



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Yvonne Johnson: A Lifetime of Service in Greensboro

JACK CASSIDY

NCLM Communications Strategist

FOR MORE THAN 60 YEARS, FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT TO NOW, MAYOR PRO TEM JOHNSON HAS SERVED HER COMMUNITY, ALWAYS WITH SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY FRONT OF MIND.

Yvonne Johnson's career as a public leader started long before her election to city council. Thinking back, Johnson points to its beginning as a freshman at Bennett College. More specifically, she remembers it beginning in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement—at protests and sit-ins and, most notably, at the March on Washington, where 60 years ago she walked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and stood in attendance at the “I Have a Dream” speech.

Johnson's work has not diminished in the decades since. If anything, it's grown, as has her status in Greensboro—a city whose place in the Civil Rights Movement is significant. Johnson is beyond simply a representation of that history. She is its living embodiment, and the central tenets of equity and social justice that defined her activism then continue to define her leadership today as Greensboro's Mayor Pro Tem.

The focus is on service, through people-centered issues that change shape but always remain front and center.

“It's not about me,” Johnson said. “It may be about my gifts and how I use them, but it's really not about me. It's about serving people. It's about making lives of people better to me.”

...

Johnson remembers her first ever protest at the Woolworth's Five & Dime, home to the famous Greensboro Sit-Ins. Four students from local North Carolina A&T, not allowed to dine alongside white patrons at the Woolworth's lunch counter, organized a sit-in on February 1, 1960. By February 2, the number of protesters had grown to 20. Then to 60. With each subsequent day, more people joined the cause, eventually having more than 300 protesting the store's policy of segregation.

Central to the success of the protest was the involvement of the local all-women Bennett College, where Johnson was attending.

“I grew up here and I experienced segregation,” said Johnson. “Colored water fountains, colored bathrooms, sitting in the back of the bus, the whole nine yards, and I always felt it was wrong, but I never really had that spark, that motivation to get out there and do something that might make a difference. The spirit at Bennett spurred me. Once I was on the bandwagon, I was there.”

The Greensboro sit-ins were considered among the most instrumental nonviolent protests of the Civil Rights movement, sparking similar sit-ins all across the southeast. Johnson would take part in additional protests, including a sit-in at Greensboro's Carolina Theater. Three years later, she was at the March on Washington.

The Greensboro sit-ins led to change. By summer, Woolworth's and other lunch counters in town were integrated. Johnson saw the power of action, and committed herself to a life of public



service, primarily in the nonprofit sector. She also served on a number of different Greensboro Boards and Committees, making a name for herself among the community.

Through those years, Johnson remembers it simply as “being in the right place at the right time.” Community members saw her another way—not as a passenger to history but a key player in it. Ultimately, she was approached about running for city council.

“I never thought about public office, really,” Johnson said. “But I considered it. And then I said, ‘Well, I probably don't have a chance to win, but I'll learn a lot about the city I was born in, the city I grew up in.’” She earned far more than just an education, though. She earned a council seat, winning election in her first attempt in 1992.

Since, Johnson has true mainstays among the Greensboro community. Johnson held an at-large city council seat from 1993 to 2007, when she ran for mayor and won, becoming the city's first African American mayor. In 2009, she lost re-election to that seat—the only defeat of her career—but rejoined the council upon winning election again in 2011, this time as Mayor Pro Tem.

In roughly 30 years of service, Johnson's list of key issues has stayed largely the same, and matches the priorities of cities around the country: housing, transportation, and workforce development. Johnson has done well to both chip away at the problems and keep the issues front and center in Greensboro as they evolve over time, leading the charge on new affordable housing developments, increased transit offerings, and the recruitment of outside industry to provide citizens with well-paying jobs.

Always, her work is informed by the community itself.

“One of the things I enjoy most is meeting with the neighborhood groups,” Johnson said. “Really listening to what their dreams for their community are and helping them accomplish those dreams.”

It's the little things you can do to make a difference in the lives of people in this community to lift the quality of their life. That is what our motivation was. **Service is the rent we pay for living on this Earth. I truly believe that.**

» **Yvonne Johnson**, Greensboro Council Member

Johnson's work in the nonprofit sphere ran alongside those efforts, often supporting them. She served on housing coalitions and launched initiatives to provide workforce skills to young people in the community. Usually, she worked directly with people in need, whether it was supporting a food pantry that served more than 4,000 people a week or launching an initiative to reintegrate previously incarcerated peoples back into the community. This is work she still does today.

"You never get rich with the nonprofits, but boy you can do great service," Johnson said. "That's what's important."

Service permeated into Johnson's family life as well, particularly with her late husband, Walter T. Johnson, who was one of the first African American students at Duke Law School and who later served as the chairman of the Greensboro Public School Board, "helping usher in the desegregation of the city's schools," as noted in his Duke University obituary. He died in 2021. The Johnsons had four children, each of whom, like their parents, also ended up in public service—one working for Guilford County, and three working in education.

"It's the little things you can do to make a difference in the lives of people in this community to lift the quality of their life," she said. "That is what our motivation was."

Yvonne Johnson's work has been appropriately recognized over the years, winning awards for her nonprofit work, economic development successes, public leadership, and more. But perhaps no accolade better sums up her work than the honor presented to her this year by Greensboro's International Civil Rights Center & Museum, during a gala that commemorated the anniversary of the March on Washington.

Johnson was honored with the Lifetime Community Service Award.

"Service is the rent we pay for living on this Earth," Johnson said. "I truly believe that." ■



A 2023 Legislative Session Recap: Grinding to a Slow End



THE 2023 LEGISLATIVE SESSION HAS BEEN A LONG AND WINDING JOURNEY, AND ONE THAT, AS OF THIS WRITING IN MID-SEPTEMBER, STILL HAD NOT ENDED.

(A budget bill has been drafted, but not yet signed into law. NCLM will closely review all provisions included in the budget and provide a detailed report in our End of Session Bulletin, detailed in the sidebar here. Stay tuned.)

Budget aside, much of the specific legislation affecting city and towns had either passed or was unlikely to do so in the remaining time that state lawmakers expect to meet in Raleigh. Instead, the remaining chores before the General Assembly mostly centered some pending votes to override vetoes by Gov. Roy Cooper, the likelihood of another round of electoral redistricting and, again, that yet-passed budget.

Land Use and Local Authority Challenges

The legislative session began quite differently than those of recent years, with a renewed push on policy fronts of all sorts. That was not surprising given that a lot of policy matters, since 2019, had taken a back seat to dealing with the effects of the global pandemic, including sorting through the available federal money pushed out to the states to keep local economies and government going.

With that shift came very significant challenges to local land-use and planning authority. A nationwide housing affordability crisis served as fodder for homebuilders and other groups to blame local regulation on rising home prices. In response, legislators filed bills to eliminate extraterritorial jurisdiction, abolish single family-only zoning and require that accessory dwelling units, or in-law suites, be allowed in all residential neighborhoods.

NCLM staff and members were not unprepared. A report on housing, produced in association with the N.C. County Commissioners Association, used real data from local planning and building inspection departments to show how much growing jurisdictions across the state are doing to address housing and increase density in areas where appropriate (see sidebar). It also demonstrated the efforts that local governments are undertaking to improve inspection processes, and included recommendations for similar procedures to duplicate those efforts.

Armed with this report and other educational data, by the summer it appeared that NCLM members and staff had successfully pushed back against much of the legislation eroding local land-use planning authority. That local officials had focused for several years on developing better relationships with their state legislators played a key role in that success. Reinforcing the need for local control in order for local economies to thrive paid off during the legislative battles over these issues.

Infrastructure Funding

When the House and Senate had moved into mid-August without final budget approval, the budget proposals from both chambers continued a trend of investing large sums in water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure, which remain key legislative goals of cities and towns.

More than \$750 million was poised to go to water, sewer and stormwater programs. State aid to municipalities for roads, better known as Powell Bill, was expected to increase by 10%, with a total allocation of \$170 million for the new fiscal year. Substantial new investments also were proposed for law enforcement training programs, reflecting another key priority of cities and towns. Hundreds of millions also went to economic site preparedness, local parks and capital improvements for local airports.



Grassroots advocacy in action. Newport Mayor Dennis Barber speaks at a League event with Sen. Michael Lazzara—a former local elected official himself. Photo credit: Ben Brown



Pictured here, some images from this session of both legislative leaders and NCLM Government Affairs staff. Photo credit: NCLM

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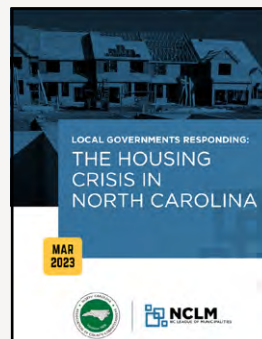
More Information to Come

Without a final gavel falling on this year's legislative session, the possibility of surprises always remains. Still, the likely results proved again that the voices of municipal officials, exercised collectively, are a powerful force.

There may have been days, filled with hurried committee meetings or exasperating floor votes, where the gloom blocked out the sun, where it appeared those voices weren't being heard. Then they were.

A legislative session is not a sprint, but a marathon.

It certainly has been in 2023. ▣

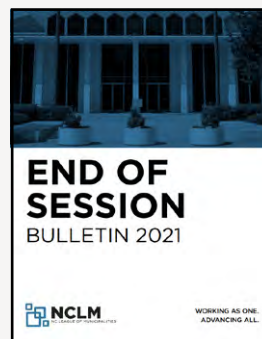


NCLM'S HOUSING REPORT

North Carolina, like much of the rest of the country, faces a crisis in housing affordability. In response, NCLM, along with its partners, undertook action to understand the scope of the problem, local policies and processes related to housing, and possible ways to better address the issue of affordable housing.

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

Read the full report at
<https://www.nclm.org/advocacy/housing-crisis>.



The cover page from NCLM's End of Session Bulletin, published after the last legislative long session in 2021.

WHAT'S NEXT?

At the time of this magazine's publication, the state budget is only just reaching the finish line. A detailed review of the yet-passed budget will be provided this autumn in our End of Session Bulletin.

This document will not only review the intricacies of the budget, but will recap the entirety of the 2023 session. If you receive the weekly Legislative Bulletin, then you will receive this special document as well.

NCLM's ARPA Service Line Assisting Towns with Financial Bookkeeping

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

Director of Political Communication and Coordination

A UNIQUE, VALUABLE SERVICE OFFERING FROM NCLM

There is little question that many small towns across North Carolina have struggled financially in recent years.

For the town governments, those struggles can take many forms: a lack of revenue to meet maintenance needs for water and sewer systems, meaning those systems are not run efficiently; vacant properties that no longer produce economic activity or contribute much to the tax base; trouble finding qualified personnel to fill key jobs, including those involved in keeping the financial books; or an inability to find an accountant to perform a required annual audit.

As rural communities have lost population and jobs, that loss of tax base in those communities has amounted to a double blow, affecting both the private and public sectors, even as they have worked together to try to overcome those challenges by redefining local economies.

While the global pandemic appeared to be yet another blow, the resulting American Rescue Plan Act funding has served as a lifeline. And now, thanks to a direct appropriation to NCLM of ARPA dollars from the N.C. General Assembly, that lifeline is being extended to the very financial operations of North Carolina's municipalities.

That effort began as a means of ensuring municipalities met the compliance requirements of ARPA, that expenses are eligible under the federal law, records are properly recorded and retained, and reporting deadlines to the U.S. Treasury Department are met. As a measure of that success, in a state with more than 550 municipalities, only two missed the latest reporting deadline.

NCLM's ARPA-related effort has now evolved. In addition to a range of other services, a major focus is assisting municipalities with accounting software intended to strengthen all areas of financial oversight, whether that involves payroll, general expenses and revenues, procurement, or utilities.

The Municipal Accounting Software initiative follows criticism by the state auditor and state treasurer of local governments failing to meet deadlines for performing annual audits, something that has caused more than 30 per year to end up on the state Unit Assistance List in recent years.

Carla Obiol, NCLM's Chief ARP Officer, explained that the process begins with outreach and then assessments by field staff to determine whether the transition to the uniform software makes sense for the municipalities.

Working with consultant Black Mountain Software, which specializes in public sector accounting software, the company then provides a demonstration of the software, and for those who move forward, the conversion from a town's existing system to the new software begins. "This process can take up to three months but is comprehensive," Obiol informed.

That's because the process includes an initial financial assessment, and then a migration of information into the new system has to take place, while officials also must learn the ins and outs of the system.

As of July, the towns of Pikeville and Jonesville became the first to be converted. Old Fort, Hertford, Kingstown, and Caswell Beach are in the pipeline to be converted before the end of the 2023.



In fact, NCLM's Technical Assistance and ARP team expect to have eight to 10 towns converted by the end of this year. By the end of 2026, the goal is to convert at least 43 towns and as many as 60.

Meanwhile, as those conversions take place, NCLM is also assisting towns with cybersecurity assistance to better protect against ransomware attacks and phishing schemes.

Both Black Mountain and League staff offer ongoing support, with the ability to assist by monitoring the system remotely and offering advice.

Obiol said the Municipal Accounting Software initiative should have those participating cities and towns audit ready at the end of each fiscal year.

Obiol, though, points out that funding for that contracted audit assistance will run out at the end of 2026, which means those towns would either have to fund that cost themselves or require more assistance at the state level.

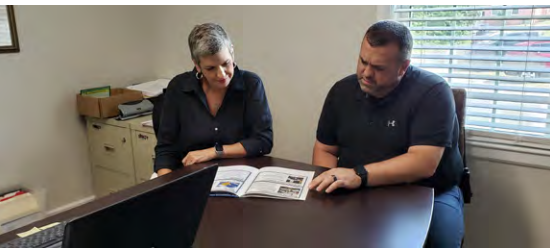
"Nonetheless, for many towns, the program should offer the tools and training to avoid many of the issues that often lead towns to land on the state's Unit Assistance List."

As for NCLM's other ARPA-related technical assistance services, those are also well underway, and include legal services, grant writing, planning, and engineering and communications.

Obiol sees those as a means of helping towns and cities close the gap between their individual ARPA funding and the cost of the projects for which they have chosen to spend the money.

"We want our towns to take advantage of the additional services such as legal services and grant writing. We want to help!" she said.

Stayed tuned to future editions of *Southern City* in which will discuss in more depth the range of services that NCLM is making available to assistance cities and towns of all sizes across the state. ■



NCLM ARP staff members travel across the state to meet face-to-face with cities and towns.



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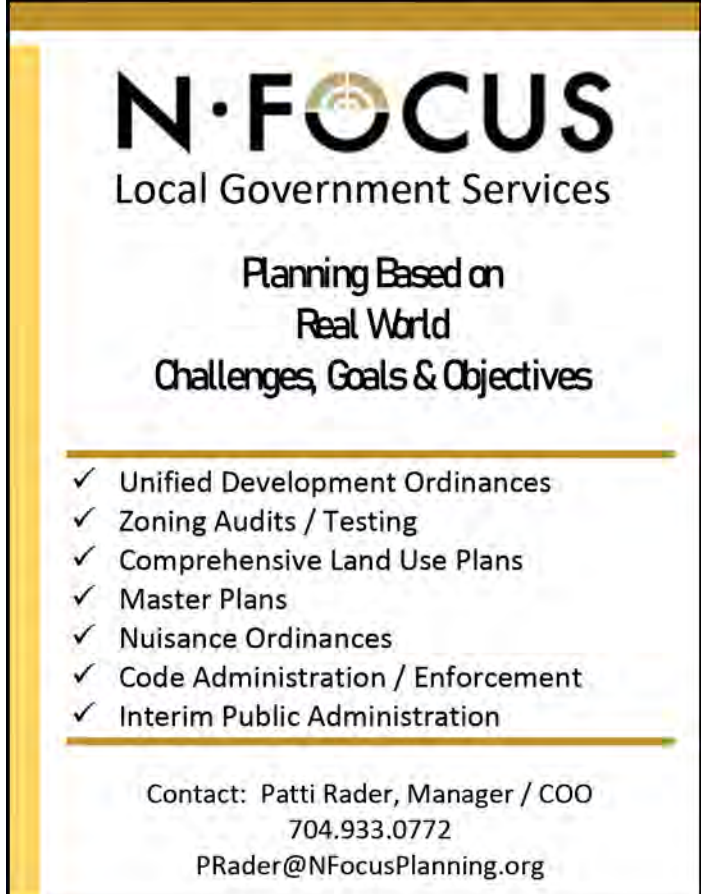
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A Look at Pension Reform

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

Director of Political Communication and Coordination

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA HAVE SEEN THEIR PENSION FUND CONTRIBUTIONS ESCALATE DRASTICALLY TO KEEP THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES RETIREMENT SYSTEM ON A SOUND FISCAL FOOTING.

In 2022, the total employer contribution to the North Carolina pension fund—including LGERS, the Teachers and State Employees Retirement System and a handful of smaller public employee funds—was \$3.75 billion, more than double the total employee contribution. That comes after years of equal employer and employee contribution rates of 6% of salary.

The \$111 billion fund paid out roughly \$7 billion in benefit to retirees, according to the National Association of State Retirement Administrators (NASRA).

The rising rate of employer contributions by local governments, now 12.85% of salary, as well as a lack of cost-of-living-adjustment increases for retirees, is largely a result of investment gains not keeping pace with benefit needs. And those contributions now account for 2.33% of all state and local government general operations spending.

With that in mind, this article explores ongoing pension reform in other parts of the country and looks at general shifts in public pension fund stability as a result of economic downturn.

STATE REFORMS

According to NASRA, every state since 2009 has made meaningful changes to pension plan benefit structures, financing arrangements, or both. Some states have made more than one change to its system during that timeframe.

“There has been no broad shift to defined contribution plans as the primary retirement plan, with most states electing instead to retain a reformed defined benefit plan either on its own or as a component of a combination (DB+DC) hybrid plan. Common types of reforms—some of which faced legal challenge—include higher employee contributions, lower benefit levels, increased eligibility requirements, and COLAs that were reduced, suspended, or eliminated.”

Thirty-nine states have increased employee contribution rates to at least one of their pension plans since 2009, according to NASRA. North Carolina is not among those states.

“Most increases applied to current workers as well as new hires, but in some cases higher rates applied to new hires only. Some higher employee contribution rates were temporary, but more were permanent or indefinite,” according to the organization.

The NASRA study also found that a majority of states had automatic COLA increases (North Carolina was not among them), and of those, most had reduced, altered or forgone those increases in some years since 2009.

While all of these changes occurred with existing defined benefit plans, some states have adopted broader reformers. Eleven states adopted either hybrid defined benefit/defined contribution plans, or a cash balance plan, with the changes typically applying to new hires only.

Other studies looking at changes involving shifting new hires to defined contribution plans, including one in North Carolina in 2010, concluded that the change would do little to reduce costs for decades. Meanwhile, public employers continue to view defined benefit plans, with vesting schedules of five years like North Carolina’s, as a strong employee retention tool.

ECONOMIC TROUBLES, PENSION TROUBLES

It is important to note that, in many states, pension costs have only become a fiscal challenge in recent decades, with the 2001 recession and concurrent monetary changes causing returns on the bond components of plan portfolios to decrease significantly, according to a 2017 National League of Cities study.

“Pension funding took an even bigger hit as the Great Recession in 2008 materialized. The recession had an added component, beyond its depth and length, that previous recessions did not: a nearly decade-long period of exceptionally low interest rates. This feature of the recession resulted in lower expected returns and therefore higher pension funding requirements,” that study said.

That resulted in North Carolina and other states lowering assumed rate of returns, which had typically been at 7% or above in most states. Once those assumed rates of investment returns are lowered, the formulas that are used to examine future system needs end up recommending higher contributions into the systems, as also occurred in this state.

While the North Carolina system’s funding remains strong relative to its peers, it has not been at or above 100% fully funded, using the Government Account Standards Board criteria, in a number of years. More recently, the fund’s investment gains have also not kept pace with most of its peers. (You can find comparisons of those fund returns at the following link: <https://www.pionline.com/section/returns-tracker>.)

Although some studies project that defined benefit pension demands will ease within a couple of decades, that will do little to change the fact that taxpayer funding could continue to escalate until then, and that shifts to defined contribution plans for new workers also will not ameliorate those effects.

Instead, reforms that would save taxpayers and lower employer contributions, such as higher employee contributions or changes to benefits, are likely to be politically difficult.

But as the NASRA study shows with its review of previous state reforms, fiscal reality can force changes even if politically challenging. ■



Rail Response: Getting on Board for Passenger Rail Expansion

SCOTT MOONEYHAM

Director of Political Communication and Coordination

OVER THE COURSE OF LATE SUMMER AND FALL, CITIES ACROSS NORTH CAROLINA ARE HOSTING A SERIES OF LOCAL MEETINGS EXAMINING THE OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPAND ACCESS TO INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL IN NORTH CAROLINA.

Rail Response is a project of the North Carolina Metro Mayors Coalition and this series of meetings is meant to look at how intercity passenger rail—and an expansion of routes throughout the state—could bring economic and other benefits to North Carolina.

The series' first two meetings, in Wilmington and Durham, have showcased the public interest in this topic.

The meetings are designed to explore funding streams for rail systems and the resources a municipality needs to compete for intercity rail funding, as well as understand the limits of municipal authority when it comes to the expansion of rail.

The project is led by a workgroup of mayors and former mayors, with its co-chairs Susan Kluttz, former Salisbury mayor and former Secretary of the NC Dept. of Cultural Resources, and Nick Tenyson, former mayor of Durham and former Secretary of the NC Dept. of Transportation. The other members are Durham Mayor Elaine O'Neal, Winston-Salem Mayor Allen Joiner, Salisbury Mayor Karen Alexander, Asheville Mayor Esther Manheimer, Mooresville Mayor Miles Atkins, Rocky Mount Mayor Sandy Roberson, Concord Mayor Bill Dusch and Wilmington Mayor Bill Saffo.

The effort comes as the Federal Railroad Administration begins considering an expansion of passenger rail routes through funding provided by the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed by Congress in late 2021. The focus is on intercity rail between cities, and not commuter rail within them.

The legislation includes \$66 billion in passenger and freight rail infrastructure investment, with \$44 billion to be distributed through the Federal Railroad Administration's discretionary grant program.

As a part of the planning process, the NC Department of Transportation has applied for 13 planning grants of \$500,000, each corresponding to proposals to connect more North Carolina cities by passenger rail or make improvements to existing routes.



Photo credits: City of Durham.

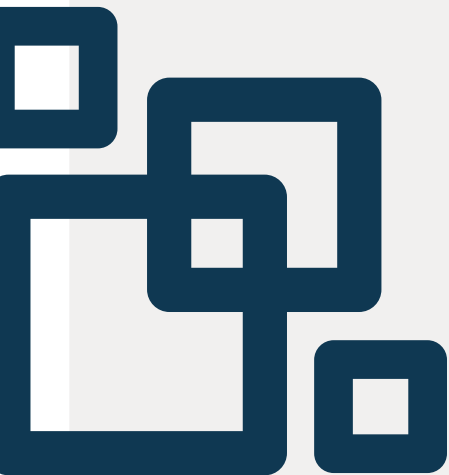
Currently, 16 cities in the state are served by passenger rail service. The Piedmont and Carolinian trains, part of North Carolina's Amtrak service, each make a morning and evening run between Raleigh and Charlotte. The trains stop in Cary, Durham, Burlington, Greensboro, High Point, Salisbury, and Kannapolis. The Carolinian also makes stops in Selma, Wilson, and Rocky Mount in the eastern part of the state.

The NC Department of Transportation Rail Division is currently looking to build upon earlier plans devised in the 2000s to update the feasibility of intercity rail expansion, both in western and eastern North Carolina.

The goal is eventually to have passenger rail service connect cities and towns from the coast to the mountains, from Wilmington to Asheville.

The Rail Response effort and the workgroup members hope that by fostering more community conversations around intercity passenger rail and an expansion of service, the state will build momentum to see the dreams become a reality.

We will keep you up to date in future editions of *Southern City* as the project moves forward and the funding awards are decided. ▣



NCLM Hosts Congressional Luncheons

THE LEAGUE'S ONGOING SERIES CONNECTING FEDERAL AND LOCAL LEADERS CONTINUED THIS SUMMER WITH REP. VALERIE FOUSHEE AND REP. DAVID ROUZER

At the beginning of the summer, the NC League brought together federal lawmakers and local leaders through its Congressional Luncheon series.

First up was Rep. Valerie Foushee, who met with mayors and council members in Chapel Hill. Conversations ranged widely, from infrastructure and federal grant access to housing affordability and community health. Foushee is no stranger to these conversations from the municipal perspective, as her longtime governmental experience includes state legislative and local office. On a panel including NCLM President and Fuquay-Varina Commissioner William Harris with Chapel Hill Mayor Pam Hemminger, Congresswoman Foushee and her team recorded officials' concerns and ideas. She also discussed the priorities of Congress and its need for focus on such pressing issues in our communities. The luncheon event, held at the Rizzo Center and arranged by the League with the NC Mayors Association and the NC Metropolitan Mayors Coalition, recognized the individual roles that governmental officials at all levels play together to achieve transformative changes across our state.

Next up was Rep. David Rouzer, who met with municipal officials from around his southeast North Carolina district in Wilmington. Over the course of the program, Congressman Rouzer provided updates from the Capitol and answered municipal officials' questions about topics like federal grant access, coastal storm-damage reduction projects, broadband and more. The District 7 congressman also spent time in conversation with individual attendees.

NCLM thanks both Rep. Foushee and Rep. Rouzer for these incredibly productive events! When our federal and local leaders meet, build relationships, and discuss meaningful issues, all of North Carolina benefits. ■





















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Affordable Housing Seminar: Tools, Strategies, and Case Studies for Local Government Leadership
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LELA 301 Managing Difficult Conversations with Constituents
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ROSE VAUGHN WILLIAMS
NCLM Executive Director

As I've traveled around this year, visiting our communities and meeting with the tireless public servants that lead them, I've been consistently reminded of the mission behind the League—of who we work for and why we do the work we do.

That notion has been particularly felt in the past few months. With summer turning to fall, it is a time of life and activity, and I have seen our state abuzz with full calendars of events and gatherings. It's as true for our organization as it is our cities themselves.

On the League-side of things, the changing of seasons this year brings with it the end (or near end) of the legislative session. The successes we've earned this year in advocating for our cities and protecting their local authority have been outstanding. Those wins are noted throughout this issue, ranging from issues of land use to housing to infrastructure. Always, we are guided by the legislative priorities set forth by you, our cities and towns, and in following those priorities, we've been able to continually support our local governments as they face ever-evolving problems.

The 'we' that I mention extends far beyond just the staff or leadership of the League. It includes the hundreds of municipal leaders that support the work too, whether by advocating back at home on the key

issues, by contacting your legislators directly, or by simply attending an NCLM event that builds relationships with state leaders. These efforts make a significant impact. Truly, our advocacy successes would not be possible without the grass-roots work done across North Carolina local governments.

It is not taken for granted, and it speaks volumes of the people we have leading our cities. The business of city leadership is difficult, challenging and time consuming. And yet, you take up that mantle every day, year after year, with a true sense of public service. The life we see in our cities is as much credit to you as it is the citizens, families and businesses that make up your community.

So, with the work of state lawmakers just about done for the year, I would encourage each of you to take a moment and enjoy the fruits of your labor. The vitality of your downtowns, the continued well-being of your citizens, the beautiful amenities, and the many social gatherings—these are signs of the successes that you have earned.

We are thrilled to be a part of it, and we are ready to continue to serve you any way we can. ▣

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Southern City is the official publication of the North Carolina League of Municipalities. This professionally designed quarterly magazine is a critical component of the League's communications program and features relevant editorial for people directly involved in North Carolina's city governments. When our readers are ready to contract services and products for their programs and facilities, make sure they think of you first.

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