

Chairman Melvin “Skip” Alston’s 2023 State of the County Address

Good afternoon! Welcome to the 2023 State of the County address. Thank you all for taking the time to join us today.

First, I want to recognize my fellow County Commissioners here with us today as well as those watching remotely. I want to publicly thank all the County Commissioners for the great respect we show one another, and for putting partisan politics aside to put the people first. Please stand and be recognized – let’s give them a round of applause.

I want to thank our County Manager Michael Halford and the entire county team. Thank you for your commitment to responsibly managing the county’s tax dollars while managing a daunting array of programs and services that support the needs of our growing community. Let’s give them a round of applause.

I also want to show my appreciation for our other local, state, and federally elected officials here with us today. Please stand and let’s give them a round of applause.

I also want to thank our Clerk to the Board Robin Keller, Communications Director Julie Smith, and both their teams for putting together today’s event.

I especially want to recognize my Wife Gwen Alston who is here with us in the Chambers. They have stood by me and allowed me to advocate and represent the citizens of District 8 and all of the citizens in Guilford County. Thank you to all of you for being here today and for joining us in this important collaborative work.

It has been my pleasure to serve as Board Chairman this past year as we continue to make remarkable strides as One Guilford.

I am proud to stand before you today and report to you that the state of Guilford County is strong, stronger than it has ever been before.

Building.

Our theme for this year’s State of the County address is *One Guilford: Building Stronger Communities Together.*

As the saying goes, you really don’t know who you are as a person until you have been tested during hard times, and that holds true for our local government. Over the last few years, the pandemic tested both our community and our community leaders. I am more optimistic today than ever before because every one of us rose to the occasion and tackled every obstacle the pandemic threw at us.

Let’s give ourselves a round of applause!

Without hesitation, the leaders in this room and all across our community came together as One Guilford to address some of the most difficult and consequential challenges of our generation. With one united purpose, we aimed to build a stronger, more resilient, and more equitable

community than before. A community focused on collaboration and communication. As a result, in my opinion, we have moved the needle toward long-lasting transformational change.

I want to start today by talking about our commitment to building up our community together.

Like many other counties across our state, the Pandemic exposed some cracks in our foundation. We were forced to take a hard look at major issues through a different lens. Issues like food insecurity, the state of our community's physical health and mental wellbeing, access to healthcare, and childcare, the shortages in our housing market, and the need to strengthen our schools and our economy so we are better prepared for any future crisis. We studied the impact. We learned. And we not only passed the test, we surpassed even our own expectations – as a united community building a better future for all our citizens.

By working together, we developed a framework for our recovery and resiliency plans and in the last year, we leveraged federal, state, and local dollars to fund dozens of community-based projects. Our voters approved one of the largest School Bonds in the Nation and we reaped huge successes in economic development and job growth.

Let me share a quick snapshot of where we are today.

We are the third most populous county in the state of North Carolina. A little over half a million people call Guilford County home. We are proud that we embrace and celebrate diversity in Guilford County. Around 47% of our residents identify as White, 36% as Black, 9% as Hispanic or Latino, 5% as Asian, and 3% as biracial, multiracial, or another race. We are a community of higher learning. Home to NC A&T, UNCG, Bennet College, High Point University, Guilford College, Greensboro College, Elon University School of Law, and GTCC, our county is a center for educational excellence. The median household income in Guilford County is just over \$55,000. Top employers include Cone Health and the Guilford County School System, and our unemployment rate remains low – at 3.9%.

Guilford County was fortunate to receive \$104M from the federal American Rescue Plan Act – better known as ARPA. More than 2-thousand residents told us through community meetings, online surveys, and other forums how to best use those funds to support the community's near and long-term growth and recovery goals.

As a Board, we prioritized and funded projects supporting:

- Healthy Early Childhood Environments and Education
- Access to Healthcare
- Behavioral Health & Substance Use
- Small Businesses, Workforce, and Economic Development
- Broadband and Digital Inclusion
- Strong Community and Government

We also committed to deep collaboration with our community partners – and we delivered on our promise.

- We are under contract with 9 of our Municipal partners to implement water/sewer, mobility, and recreation programs.
- 43 Non-profit organizations are contracted by Guilford County to lead programs or initiatives in our community.
- And more than 100 Community Organizations are engaged in ARPA-enabled programming or are providing support for program implementations.

From better fire protection in our rural communities to increased opportunities for youth and young adults to stronger support for residents exposed to abuse, These funds are making a difference in all corners of our community.

When it comes to economic development – Guilford County is on the move! As a County, we continue to build upon our workforce development and job creation. Our Guilford County Economic Development Alliance has had extraordinary wins over the last year and a half. We have Welcomed companies like Boom Super Sonic, Gorilla RF, Marshall Aerospace, and ProKidney. We have added 973 new jobs in the last Fiscal Year Alone! Over \$690 Million in New Capital Investments have come to our community. These remarkable numbers don't include our regional mega site where Toyota is bringing an additional 3,500 Jobs and \$5.9 Billion in capital investments just on the edge of the Guilford County southeastern border.

Let's give a round of applause to all of our existing companies expanding in Guilford County and all the new companies choosing to locate here!

Let's talk about our community's commitment to building a stronger education system in Guilford County. \$2 Billion dollars! Our voters really delivered for our education system with a once-in-a-generation investment in our schools.

We know better education directly impacts economic development. A more educated community translates into a more skilled and more effective workforce. Today, we are reaping the fruits of our investments from 10 and 15 years ago in educational initiatives like our aviation training programs at GTCC and our Health and Bio-Technology education center at Union Square. Education is the common denominator in achieving economic development sustainability. Voters in our community understand this which is why they gave us their approval to continue our investments in K-12 education for our children today and for decades into the future.

We are starting to see the development of the first 11 school bond projects. Guilford County Schools' held the Last Beam placement ceremony at Claxton Elementary in August. We are looking forward to celebrating the completion of Foust Gaming and Robotics School, Brooks Global Studies, Kiser Middle School, and Peck K-9 Expeditionary Learning School come online at the end of January 2025. The remaining 6 projects in the first phase are also moving along in their various stages of planning and pre-construction. And the Board of County Commissioners is working together with our School Board to manage the timing and funding closely so we maximize the investment our voters are making.

From safety and technology improvements to long overdue facility maintenance – we are doing all of this so that our children have access to 21st-century learning, technological advancements, and all the educational tools necessary to reach their full potential. But it's not just better buildings, it's a stronger community. The projects funded by our School Construction Bonds also include safe, healthy community spaces.

I want to take a moment to thank our voters. Let's give a big round of applause for the investment our voters made in our schools!

Stronger.

Our next theme for today is: Stronger. In union, there is strength. As One Guilford, we are united in growing a strong workforce, both as a county and in our community. Our Guilford County government has some of the best, most talented, and most dedicated staff in the state; and the market for quality public service employees is getting more and more competitive. It is crucial for us to continue to train and establish a pipeline for highly competitive jobs like public health nurses, social workers, law enforcement, and emergency medical responders.

As a County, we have invested in our employees offering quality wages, better benefits, and recruitment and retention incentives so we can remain competitive with neighboring jurisdictions and the private sector. We have also made great headway toward building stronger employment pathways for people interested in Law Enforcement and Public Safety Careers. We have continued to explore creative recruitment strategies like the EMS Launch Pad which provides entry-level training for those interested in becoming emergency medical technicians. In partnership with GTCC, the Fire Academy supports our local non-profit fire departments, especially in rural communities.

Our residents in the rural parts of the county such as Whitsett, Sedalia, Browns Summit, and our unincorporated areas, deserve the same high-quality emergency response as those in larger urban areas. So, we have developed innovative strategies, like the IMPACT unit in E-M-S, to allow faster response times in all areas of Guilford County.

Our investment strategy extends to our community workforce and small businesses because they are the backbones of our economy. Our work this year included allocating \$7.2 Million dollars toward Small Business initiatives, and workforce development programs. This includes programs like:

- The Forge, a maker space designed to remove barriers like costly equipment, tools, and rental spaces. At Forge, trade professionals share space, resources, and knowledge, learning from one another as they build their trade and their small businesses.
- The Steelhouse, where the former headquarters of Carolina Steel will be converted into a small business incubator in East Greensboro, providing opportunities and workspaces for start-up companies looking to scale up their manufacturing.

I am very proud of the improvements the County has made this year in our MWBE Program. We completed our Disparity Study, hired a New MWBE Program Director, implemented the

County's first official MWBE policy, and truly relaunched our MWBE efforts. We have created a more open and equitable purchasing program offering minority and women businesses more opportunities to secure County government contracts and offer more support and partnership to our growing MWBE community.

A strong community supports its creative economy and this year Guilford County invested 2.5 Million to support the Arts. These funds enable small business management training and serve as a connector for artistic entrepreneurs with arts patrons and job opportunities. Whether you attended the Folk Festival earlier this month, took in the Greensboro Art District, the colorful murals in High Point, or visited the International Civil Rights Center and Museum, you saw firsthand the value that Arts and Culture contribute to our local economy.

Maybe you visited one of our parks and enjoyed the natural beauty all around us in Guilford County. We are truly blessed to live in a place with so many outdoor recreation spaces for all residents to enjoy. The County is home to seven regional parks and ten passive parks – encompassing all kinds of activities from Pickleball to putt-putt to the annual Big Pick. Over the past year, as we met with members of the community, you told us how much you cherish our outdoor recreation spaces. And our Parks team does a fantastic job each year of providing quality spaces and quality programming for everyone to get out and enjoy the natural beauty of our community.

A strong community is a connected community. We are also working to strengthen our transportation connections because it's hard to thrive when you can't get from point A to point B. This past year we allocated 1 Million dollars of our ARPA dollars to begin work to build better transportation connections between our citizens and the critical services they need. And we are strengthening our virtual connections.

In the last year, we continued to push forward our broadband connectivity work, completing our comprehensive gaps analysis. Our study showed that 49% of our residents have needs in either availability, affordability, or adoption of connectivity. Everyone in this room and watching online can relate to the fact that high-speed internet is vital to our daily activities. And we believe it is important that this service be equally distributed across Guilford County.

In the coming year, we will continue to invest in digital infrastructure, equity, and equipment programs to provide access to more residents so that they can be better prepared for a digital future.

Community

Everything we do is in the interest of our final theme today, community. We would not be here were it not for our residents.

As a county government, the essential services we provide make significant impacts on our community's daily lives. We play a significant role in maintaining safe and secure communities. We sit at the forefront of promoting public health and well-being and we are trailblazing in our

education support and our workforce development. Most importantly, when you are facing your strongest challenges, we are here to support you.

In the last year, we continued to build on our investments in Behavioral Health Services by expanding our Crisis center to add Facility-Based stabilization care as well as working to better connect with our community's existing mental health programs.

Across all corners of our community, we are still feeling the impacts of the opioid epidemic. As settlement dollars begin to flow into our County, we are working with our community of providers, advocates, and survivors to build a strategic plan and to launch pilot programs to save lives, stop the suffering, reduce the stigma, and address the ongoing impacts of the Opioid Epidemic.

We are also making important strides in reducing the high number of infants in our county who die before their first birthday. In 2019, we made a bold decision to create a collective impact movement called Every Baby Guilford. This program is centered in the community. It works not by telling people what they need, but by listening to our parents and engaging with them actively before and after childbirth. This community-driven solution aims to eliminate the racial disparities we see in infant mortality and was recently recognized nationally at our National County Commissioners Convention for its work to save lives.

We continue to lead the state in domestic violence prevention and intervention efforts through our Family Justice Center – serving more than 13-thousand people this year alone. More children attended our Camp Hope this summer than ever before. And our Elder Justice Collaborative is a gold standard across the state. Our Family Justice Center is regularly spotlighted by the North Carolina School of Government as a best practice for supporting vulnerable older adults.

Our Public Health Department is tackling the continuing issue of Gun Violence in our community – working with our partners to bring together many voices in our community to develop strategic, multidisciplinary goals to reduce community violence and violent crime in Guilford County.

We are also preparing to serve even more people through expanded Medicaid. We expect some 33-thousand people in Guilford County will be newly eligible for Medicaid as the program expands in North Carolina.

Today, I'm pleased to announce the creation of a new Medicaid Division, led by a new director – and I'm pleased to share we have already hired more than half of the staff needed to support this important expansion.

As I said a moment ago, when you are facing your toughest challenges, we are here.

During this past year, I have had the opportunity to engage with a wide variety of people working to address the experience of homelessness in our community and the growing issue of housing insecurity. According to some studies, as many as one in three Americans are just one paycheck away from homelessness. From the loss of a job, the loss of a relationship, the loss of

one's mental health, the on-set of an addiction without the resources to afford treatment, the reasons for homelessness are as varied and unique as each individual who experiences it.

This topic is very close to my heart. Many of you may not know that as a young man, I experienced a time when I had no home. I experienced the eviction process, lost my vehicle, and had few places to turn. Fortunately, a friend of a friend allowed me to rent a room for a few months until I could regain my stability. Not everyone has a friend of a friend to lean on. My experience was mild compared to those sleeping outside, under a bridge, or on a cold, hard sidewalk. We can do better for our residents in need in Guilford County.

Homelessness and Housing Insecurity are more common than you may realize.

In North Carolina, there were roughly 135,000 affordable housing units available for 3 million people earning low incomes. That represents just 4% of affordable homes for the people who need them in North Carolina. There are 7 evictions filed every minute in the U.S. for those who are not housing secure. Sadly, eviction cases are filed against black renters at almost twice the rate of white renters.

In the last three years, the Guilford County Cares Emergency Rental and Utility Assistance Grant Program has provided relief to thousands of Guilford County residents unable to make rent or utility payments as a result of COVID-19. Guilford County processed more than 15,000 applications and provided a total of \$47.4M in direct payments to prevent evictions and keep people housed.

When facing a date at eviction court, we are there at the courthouse to provide support. Both at the Greensboro and High Point Courthouses, partners from our ARPA-funded Eviction Mediation program are in-person twice a week while court is in session. These services are provided in partnership with UNC-Greensboro and Legal Aid of North Carolina. They work to find common ground between residents facing eviction and their landlords.

Other County programs help offset expenses for food, childcare, medical care, energy and water bills, behavioral healthcare, medication management, and addiction and recovery programs for qualifying individuals and families.

Still, too many people are ending up in homelessness in our community. In the last year as a primary service provider, we have become laser-focused on the crisis of homelessness in our community.

According to the 2023 annual Point in Time count, more than 450 people were experiencing homelessness on a single night in January in Guilford County. This year, I joined numerous volunteers as we fanned out across the community to connect with people experiencing homelessness and understand very basic information about who they are, how they are surviving, and what they need to move away from the experience of homelessness.

I was honored to join these volunteers, led by our Continuum of Care (CoC), for the Point in Time count but I want to give a shout-out to the people who show up every day – whether it be a

weekend, holiday, or during extreme weather conditions – to ensure people without a home have access to basic amenities and services.

Let's give our volunteers and staff a big round of applause!

We can do more to address this issue and together with Mayor Nancy Vaughn in Greensboro and Councilwoman Monica Peters in High Point – we partnered on a Homelessness Taskforce to take a deeper look at what we are doing and what more we can do as One Guilford to better support those in need of housing.

Guilford County has set aside \$8M dollars to help boost efforts in these areas. We aim to add 250 new beds for Emergency Sheltering, Permanent Supportive Housing, and Rapid Rehousing through this effort. We are well on our way.

Guilford County has invested more than \$6 million dollars from its ARPA allocation to projects that include CoC Partner funding, the Center for Hope and Healing in High Point, and the proposed acquisition of the Erwin Montessori School in Greensboro. The County just acquired property that previously served as a nursing home on Lee's Chapel Road with a goal of opening a long-term drug and mental health treatment center. The County is also working on a third project to provide housing options for Mothers with Children who are working through addiction recovery and need supportive housing.

At the end of the day, we want to have resources in our community for those who are working toward self-sufficiency. We want to provide long-term service-oriented solutions for those facing addiction, mental illness, or both, which makes maintaining housing difficult. It is my hope that we can remove those barriers and help our residents live their best lives.

Sometimes – all it takes is to be in the right place at the right time – and you can change someone's life dramatically.

One Guilford

We are strengthening our foundations through infrastructure investments; continuing to build up our support systems through innovation and collaboration; and providing connectivity and engagement within our communities.

We are also planning ahead for future challenges.

We must continue to stay focused on our whole person care philosophy. As a community, we recognize that prevention and intervention programs to help individuals become independent are just as vital as job creation.

We want everyone in our community to have the best opportunities possible to achieve success.

We must remain prudent in our financial investment for our schools.

We must continue to collaborate and work toward improving our community for all residents and to work as a whole to move our County forward.

We must continue our efforts to remain business-friendly and build upon our parks, arts, and cultural opportunities.

We have made great strides in the last two years, strides that we all can be proud of. Today, attendees received my new Challenge Coin when they entered the Chambers. I want to challenge every citizen to keep the momentum we have created in the last two years going; to continue to be innovative, to challenge the way things have always been done, and to think outside the box for the good of all of our community; and to continue to push forward as we Build a Stronger Community, together.

Thank you all for joining us in this year's State of the County. Have a great rest of your day.

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