

Mayor: Town stable, preparing for future

By DAVID LEONE

WAKE FOREST — Every year for close to a decade, Mayor Vivian Jones has given an address on the state of the town. If there's one unifying message in all those speeches, it is that Wake Forest hasn't stopped growing, and is doing well when so many places aren't.

That was true even during the recession, which though it involved some belt tightening and hiring freezes, Wake Forest remained in an enviable position among communities across the state.

During the ninth annual State of the Town address Monday at the Wake Forest Renaissance Centre, Mayor Jones focused on how the town is responding to the unfettered growth that has kept the town's coffers full in thick and thin times.

"Did you know Wake County grows by 64 people every day? That means that by Friday, the county will have grown by the number of people sitting in this room," she said to the crowd of more than 200 people. "Governing Magazine said in July that one half of the new businesses started in the nation since 2010 were created in just 20 counties out of over 3,000 counties nationwide. Wake County is one of those 20. ... We are using a variety of tools to manage this growth including several excellent plans we have in place."

How has the town handled that growth? It's adding parks and recreation facilities at a break-neck pace. Joyner Park's second phase of development is in the planning stages — when complete the park will have a new community center for youth basketball and volleyball, as well as a walking track, pickle ball and arts and crafts programming spaces.

The town even has a dedicated recreation staff member now just for programming for special needs kids and their families.

A place for theater

The event was sponsored by the Wake Forest Rotary Club. In addition to many of the town staff present, there were prominent members of the business and faith communities, as well as several county and state representatives. After music by the Heritage High Jazz Ensemble, a



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Mayor Vivian Jones is optimistic about Wake Forest's future. Town staff are attempting to prepare for the technological needs of businesses and residents, while ensuring a good quality of life for the townspeople, she said.

welcome by emcee Lisa Jacobs and invocation by the Rev. Donald Warren, pastor at Wake Forest Methodist Church, attendees shared a dinner of chicken, potatoes, vegetables and salad, catered by Papa Jack's. After a short message by Rotary President Subir Mukherjee, the mayor took the podium to begin her address.

Jones touted the success of the building she was speaking from — the Renaissance Centre — as a cultural arts offering. "[Centre manager] Cathy Gouge and her staff have built partnerships with the United Arts Council, Raleigh Little Theater, N.C. Symphony, Forest Moon Theater, Wake Forest ARTS and many other groups in order to provide programming to meet the needs of all ages," she said. "The center is being used more and more for a variety of events and activities. In 2016, there were over 20,000 visitors to over 120 events at the Centre. That is up from 3,500 visitors just three years ago."

One thing they're doing different this year is economic development. The town folded the duties of economic development in house after paying the Wake forest Area Chamber of Commerce approximately \$100,000 annually for the function. The town hired Jason Cannon as economic development director.

He's currently overhauling the economic development website and marketing materials and has produced a video showing off the town's tech industries (and its more multi-cultural citizenry) as part of that recruitment packaging.

When Sig Hutchinson, chairman of the Wake County Board of Commissioners, arrived at the State of the Town dinner (he was one of several dignitaries present), he asked if the mayor had a Twitter hashtag, so he could Tweet from the event. It's perhaps as much of a sign of the times as anything and the town is trying to keep up with the Jertsons and be as tech friendly as possible.

The mayor talked about the potentiality of the town becoming a "smart city," electronically, which means taking advantage of new, better ways to communicate with the residents, and business world. How that will happen, isn't clear now, but towns must be prepared to seize the initiative when it comes around, she's said previously.

The town now has a technology advisory board (TAB), which has been pushing for fiber-optic networking, if possible even in a public-private way. That board has a blog folks can follow called TAB Bytes (wakeforestnc.gov/tab-bytes.aspx), which addresses cyber security, STEM school tech initiatives and other subjects.

"They are adding great value to our community; as, in fact, all our advisory boards do," Jones said.



The Heritage High Jazz Band played standards and other tunes during Monday's event. From left are (front) saxophonists Akeem Booker, Kara Snow and David Thomas, and (back) Alex Norris on bass and band director Clint McCaskill filling in on drums.

Something to SING about

Jones, as always, praised not only the volunteers who serve on the town's multiple advisory boards (for greenways, historic preservation, planning and cultural resources, among others), but also the many people who volunteer in the community, though clubs, churches and other organizations. One she called special attention to is the Senior Information Networking Group (SING).

SING is a new group dedicated to be a comprehensive resource for senior-focused groups. They are now the leading organization in the state for training business personnel to better deal with seniors with dementia, for instance.

The mayor touched on a good many other topics, enhancing the quality of life overall, keeping the town fiscally responsible when borrowing, and she praised individual events, such as the Friday Night on White concerts which have brought thousands of new faces downtown.

"These concerts drew an average of around 9,000 people to our downtown for six Friday nights. When I moved here 35 years ago, we had only half that number of people living here total!" she exclaimed. "That is what we want these events to do, bring new people downtown to learn about our wonderful shops and restaurants. We want the events to create a destination attitude about our town."

Pointing to a *Wake Weekly* feature called *This Week in History*, Jones noted that 40 years ago when burying a time capsule, a resident, when asked what she'd like included, said, "The things I'd like to see preserved are the feelings people have for each other."

"I believe in Wake Forest we have preserved the feelings that people have for each other," Mayor Jones summed up. "That feeling of community, of small-town friendship. This is a place of quality. I am so happy to live here and so very proud to be your mayor."