

Athens Rotary Club Speech

January 23, 2002

I always look forward to this opportunity each year to come to you with a report on the University of Georgia. I see many of you throughout the year, and that interaction, that one on one relationship, is symbolic, I believe, of the relationship between UGA and its community.

And like all relationships, our "town-gown" relationship has its ups and downs, its ebbs and flows, its good and bad, its comforts and its tensions. More often than not, our relationship is a positive one, with common goals and open and frequent communication. Occasionally, something falls through the cracks, or a phone call is missed, or an action or statement is misunderstood.

I'd like to talk with you today about the full spectrum of the relationship between the University of Georgia and Athens-Clarke County. As most of you know, the celebration of the bicentennial of the founding of Athens was completed late last year. A year-long series of events culminated in a re-enactment of the "Ride of Five", an event which included the rather startling appearance of yours truly in knee britches and a three-cornered hat, playing the role of UGA President Josiah Meigs.

The significance, however, should not be lost in the ceremony. At the moment that Athens was being founded, the University of Georgia was teaching its first classes. From that day, we have been linked to each other.

Joy Brown, a radio psychologist, frequently takes calls from men and women who have grown frustrated with some aspect of their mates' behavior or personality. In cases where the dissatisfaction seems almost trivial not cases of abuse or adultery, but instances of disorganization or sloppiness or simple irritation about daily life she points out that what attracts us to spouses in the beginning can often become an irritant over time. In other words, a careful and organized young woman might be attracted to a free-spirited and adventurous young man, only to find out over the course of years that she's become fed up with the

very behavior that appealed to her as the romance began.

I think it's safe to say that UGA and Athens sometimes find ourselves in that very situation. There is so much to attract us to each other, but there are also minor factors that tend to divide us.

Some of you may have seen a recent story about Athens' being named last summer one of America's best college towns. I couldn't agree more; in fact, the fall issue of Georgia magazine proclaimed that very thing in a cover story. We realize that the allure of Athens as a center of musical performance, as an eclectic and exciting retail environment, and, yes, as home to a bar or two is one of the attractions for many of the students who choose to study here.

I think that, to be fair, we must also recognize that the vitality and energy of downtown Athens is, in part, due to the vitality and energy of one of America's best public universities, located just across Broad Street. The mix of faculty, students and staff pumps not only a lot of dollars into the local economy and I'll give you some exact figures in a few minutes but feeds the character of the downtown we all enjoy.

As neighbors, we watch each other closely; we take note of changes small and large. I believe that the commissioners and Mayor Eldridge have improved the aesthetics of downtown Athens tremendously with the hardscaping that is underway. The sidewalks and crosswalks are attractive and enhance the experience of being downtown greatly. While there was some concern about the removal of trees, I applaud the commitment to replace the existing trees with suitable substitutes.

If I may, I believe equally that our purchase of three Broad Street properties below Lumpkin Street has had the same beneficial effect on downtown. If I were to show you a photograph of those properties last year and one as they appear today, I believe you would agree. They will also provide much-needed studio space for the kinds of students who make Athens what it is art students and design students, those students who see things in a different light and challenge us to see what they see.

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There has been much discussion in the newspaper about the impact of taking those properties off the tax rolls, and that is a subject worthy of discussion. But if that is the only aspect of this project that is discussed, then, with all due respect, we are talking about the trees and maybe even one limb of one tree and missing the forest.

Those three properties paid a total of \$16,731.39 in property taxes in the year before we purchased them through the Real Estate Foundation. And while that money may be missed, I daresay that the quality of life improvements we've made not to mention the \$2 million we expended to renovate them, some of which surely ended up in the local economy are more valuable than the property tax check.

What puzzled me about the narrow discussion of individual property tax bills was the absence of any public discussion of the loss of sales tax revenue to the county when Lowe's left the Atlanta Highway for Oconee County and when Wal-Mart leaves in a few months, again for Oconee County.

Some of you will remember that I stood here two years ago and spoke very frankly about statements I had heard about an "anti-business" climate in Athens. We were in the midst of a very public debate about a location for a new Wal-Mart in Athens-Clarke County, with a range of people expressing very genuine positions on both sides of that issue. I took a little criticism for those remarks, and noted with a grin that some local officials have begun to say the very same things in the past year.

I'm not here to be pro-Wal-Mart or pro-business or pro-anything except the University of Georgia. I am here to say, however, that if our public discussion about county tax revenues focuses on \$16,000 in lost property taxes rather than the hundreds of thousands of dollars of lost and probably irreplaceable sales tax dollars in Clarke County, we're having the wrong discussion.

I mentioned the Real Estate Foundation a moment ago, and I'd like to talk about that a little more. We created the Real Estate Foundation to allow us to respond to

campus facility needs outside the somewhat onerous state construction approval process. The foundation has already built a parking deck in about one-third the time it took to build our last deck. It is providing our portion of the funding for the Coverdell Center, a biomedical and health research facility on South Campus that is also to be funded by the state and federal governments. We will soon begin construction on the first residence halls in 30 years and a research village off College Station Road.

In addition to supporting our missions of teaching, research and service, these projects have direct and dramatic economic development impacts on this community. We will undertake, in the next 18-24 months, approximately \$100 million in construction. I don't want this to sound like a high school economics class, but much of that money goes directly into the local economy in the form of equipment and material purchases and wages.

In fact, conservative estimates tell us that the University of Georgia has a \$2.5 billion economic impact on the Athens-Clarke County region from our state budget alone. That state budget, by the way, is only about 41 percent of our total \$1.1 billion budget. We are the largest employer by far. Our Selig Center calculates that the direct economic impact of UGA on the community is almost \$1 billion, and that does not take into effect any rollover factor. Just last month, newspaper articles described the positive economic impact of having a seventh home football game next year.

The presence of the University of Georgia here makes Athens virtually recession-proof.

I am not asking that you stand by and let us do what we will. I value the close relationships I have with members of the local government; we need to hear from each other. In the months before the 1996 Olympics, members of the UGA administration and members of the local government began meeting regularly and informally over breakfast each month to discuss issues of common concern and common benefit. By all accounts, this community and the University were very successful hosts for the 1996 Olympics.

That spirit of cooperation continues today with the same sort of informal meetings, and

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the same sort of cooperation to achieve common goals. The College Station Gateway project was a mutual effort. Our College of Education has formed a partnership with the Clarke County School Board, and I want to commend Superintendent Lewis Holloway for his bold leadership in that area. We entered into a lease agreement whereby Athens-Clarke County will use UGA property for a College Station firehouse; that lease costs the county \$1 per year. We are committed to the Oconee River Greenspace Corridor and are at this very moment converting D.W. Brooks Drive into a swath of greenspace as part of that commitment.

We are working together to install bike lanes. We've worked together on the Baldwin Street improvements and the Baxter Street project. We are collaborating on an emergency response plan that will capitalize on the strengths of both parties. And in the arts, the Athena Grand Opera Company is a partnership between our College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Music and the Classic Center Authority.

The list goes on. We are constantly working together for common goals and the mutual good. I have talked at length with Doc Eldridge about downtown, and share many of the concerns about the mix of retail versus entertainment. It is the mix that gives downtown its flavor; the balance is critically important. Even the Atlanta Journal-Constitution has picked up on the story, with recent articles and even an editorial urging action to prevent the decline of what is a great college town.

I am pleased that the mayor is establishing a task force of all the stakeholders to look at downtown and its future, and I pledge the full participation of the University of Georgia. We must cherish and maintain all that makes downtown a great environment.

And there are great examples out there. Nashville, home to Vanderbilt, is doing a good job of finding and maintaining that balance. Charlottesville, home to UVa, is doing the same. I'd be open to a tour of a few of the places that have gotten it right so that we might learn from them.

Finally, this area is on the cusp of a growth explosion along the 316 corridor. We must have our policies and procedures in place to maintain all that we value while reaping the best of an economic boom, or else we will never catch up. For all of government's good intentions, it cannot move as fast as the marketplace. We've got to think about zoning and traffic patterns and rail service and utilities and infrastructure.

We've got to make some tough choices about what we want and what we don't want, and we've got to understand and accept the ramifications of our choices. As many of us have told our children over the years, you can't have it both ways. We can't chase away business and then bemoan the lack of revenue to provide the array of government services we've come to expect. We can't delay tough land use planning and then complain about how the land is being used. We can't, I'm afraid, simply hope for the best the best results take planning, commitment and discipline.

I delivered my fifth State of the University address last week, and one of the themes of that speech was the teamwork required to face the challenges of our common future. I believe fully that that theme applies to the relationship between the University of Georgia and its community. The challenges are our challenges; the opportunities are our opportunities.

For 200 years, we've stood side by side. I'm fond of saying that the iron fence along Broad Street is the point at which Athens and UGA embrace. And those who stand with their arms around each other's shoulders face the opportunities and challenges of the future together.

Thank you.