Municipal Summit Minutes
Tuesday, March 22, 2022
9 a.m.

Officials from five Fayette County and three Coweta County municipalities met Tuesday, March 22, 2022, for a summit organized by Peachtree City Mayor Kim Learnard. Attendees included from Brooks: Town Clerk Lorey Spohr, Mayor Dan Langford, and Town Manager Maurice Ungaro; from Sharpsburg: Mayor Blue Cole, Town Clerk Floyd Jones, and Council Member Tom Teagle; from Peachtree City: Learnard, Council Members Gretchen Caola and Frank Destadio, and City Manager Jon Rorie; from Senoia: Council Member Tracy Brady, Mayor Dub Pearman, City Manager Harold Simmons; from Newnan: Mayor Keith Brady and City Manager Cleatus Phillips; from Fayetteville: Council Member Joe Clark and Assistant City Manager Alan Jones; from Woolsey: Mayor Gary Laggis; from Tyrone: Mayor Eric Dial; Council Member Melissa Hill, and Town Manager Brandon Perkins. Peachtree City City Clerk Yasmin Julio was also present.

Learnard began by welcoming everyone. She said she believed this sharing of ideas and experiences would be beneficial. It was intentionally limited to municipalities--no county officials. She thanked Julio and Executive Assistant Stacey Collins for making the arrangements. At this summit, Learnard continued, Phillips would talk about recovery from the EF4 tornado that devastated Newnan almost one year ago, and Jones would present information on Fayetteville's new City Hall and City Center complex.

Learnard thanked sponsors Georgia Power and Partners II Pizza. Georgia Power Area Manager Sister Ward said Georgia Power was always available to partner with local municipalities, not just on things that were obvious, such as power outages. Georgia Power had access to a large database that could provide information, and she urged them to contact her if they needed anything.

<u>Newnan Tornado Response</u>
Learnard introduced Phillips, recalling that the tornado hit Newnan March 25, 2021, damaging 1,726 homes. She introduced Phillips and said Mayor Brady was expected shortly and could add to the presentation.

Phillips said Newnan, like many cities, prided itself on preparation. About three years ago, they did a tabletop exercise with their Public Safety and Public Works officials and others with the topic of how they should respond if an EF5 tornado struck the city. They never thought a storm of that size would occur.

On the day of the tornado, they knew severe storms had been predicted, so they gassed up the trucks; they made sure the equipment was ready; they sent people home to get some sleep in anticipation of having to get up and go to work in the night. They scattered equipment throughout the city in case some of the streets were blocked with debris. He said he went to bed around 8:30 p.m., and at 11:30, his kids came in and told him there was a tornado warning. Phillips showed a photo of the radar screen that captured the massive storm bearing down on Newnan. He said he picked up the assistant city manager and headed towards downtown. As they neared the heart of the storm, they realized they could not get close to that area.

This EF4 storm packed winds of 170 mph and traveled almost 40 miles, cutting a path about a mile wide through Newnan. He said he got through to the Public Works director who told him they needed help, adding that once Phillips got there, he would see what he meant. Phillips said there had been only seven EF4 tornadoes to ever hit Georgia. There was just no way to completely prepare.

He showed photos of what they found once the sun came up, noting there was only one fatality, and it was not directly related to the storm. A citizen who was responding to damage at his daughter's house had a heart attack. Phillips said they believed he could have been saved, but emergency crews could not get through due to blocked roads. There were 11 tornado sirens around the city, but those sirens were to warn people who were outdoors. They could not be heard inside a house. What saved people were warnings on their cell phones. He showed a photo of Newnan High School and said they were just now making plans to demo the buildings. Grades 10 through 12 were able to have classes on campus in trailers, but ninth grade was at another location.

Of course, he continued, search and recovery was their first priority, and the tabletop exercise had prepared them well. They split the city into zones, and Police, Fire and other officials went to each one and spray-painted symbols to indicate if they were clear or if there were issues. The road networks were not passable in many cases—blocked by live utility lines, trees, debris. The Public Works Department drove backhoes down the roads to clear a path. Grading contractors did the same thing. It destroyed the streets, but it was the only way to get them clear.

A top priority was having the Mayor declare a state of emergency. That opened up a lot of resources and relaxed some ordinances. One thing they did not talk much about publicly was the devastation of the public utility system. They lost the main power source to the water plant, and the backup source was damaged, as well. They had about 36 hours of water supply. They had to focus on getting power back at the water plant, and that accounted for what seemed to be a lag in responding to other power outages. Phillips said they did not publicize this because it would have just frightened people.

The next day, they began to address the damage. They knew they had to assess the structures and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had guidelines for that. Phillips said they did not have the manpower to do this and carry on with day-to-day operations, so they hired a permit and inspection company to handle the routine tasks, freeing up the Newnan staff for storm recovery. Phillips said he wanted his inspectors assessing the storm damage, offering customer service and a friendly face.

Newnan had been through four federally declared disasters, but nothing on this scale, and Phillips said they were kind of at a loss about how to proceed. That Saturday morning they found a firm that offered disaster recovery assistance and were able to contract with them that day thanks to the powers granted by the state of emergency. That firm monitored the debris hauls, which was a requirement in order to get money from FEMA.

In the city limits, 130 structures were deemed uninhabitable, Phillips related, and 18 of those buildings still had no progress towards recovery. There were 214 structures that had areas where people could not go, and 72 of those showed no activity. There were 652 structures re-roofed in Newnan. There were 400 cubic yards of debris produced, which included 164 stop signs, 289 street signs, and 14,000 feet of concrete damage. There were 167 streetlights damaged and 246 utility poles, along with 129 transformers. They received mutual aid from 17 different systems, most from the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia (MEAG), of which Newnan was a member. Phillips commended Georgia Power, which was not a MEAG member, for its assistance. All power was restored in three days.

Newnan prided itself on its trees, but the tree canopy was gone. He showed a 'before' and 'after' GIS map of the tree canopy. They had to set up a new composting facility to handle the debris. He showed a photo of the debris pile at the composting yard to illustrate the magnitude of the cleanup operation. They were able to sell some of the debris to companies that could use it.

It was a big mistake, Phillips noted, to have not had a pre-event contract in place. He said all cities should have one. They had to put emergency contracts into place for building evaluation, tree removal, and monitoring of the haul-off of debris. FEMA did not like emergency contracts, so they had to jump through a lot of hoops to get those emergency contracts ratified by FEMA in order to get the 75% reimbursement. Again, he urged the other leaders to get a pre-event contract and said he would send them their request for proposal (RFP) if they wanted. The pre-event contract would only cost them if they had to use it, and he said if they only took away one thing from this meeting, getting a pre-event contract should be it.

He mentioned again how they had to tweak some ordinances and gave the example of how they allowed recreational vehicles and campers to park on city lots because there was not enough housing. They did everything they could to assist the citizens. They had to create a special organization to coordinate massive number of volunteers.

They were approved for public assistance from FEMA, which would pay local governments 75% of the funds paid out for storm recovery. However, FEMA did deny requests from individual citizens. They brought in a team to help them through the public assistance process, but were still in the middle of it, Phillips remarked.

There was a long-term recovery group for volunteers, with its own director, housed inside the Coweta County Community Foundation. The City and the County split the salary. Plant Newnan was the Mayor's brainchild. It was a private organization with the purpose of rebuilding the community's tree canopy.

Phillips said they had submitted a reimbursement request to FEMA for over $7.5 million. Once FEMA approved payment, it was funneled through GEMA, which cut the check. The only checks Phillips had so far received were one for $287,000 for initial response and a $5,000 check for their insurance deductible. They had not completed all the work, such as curb and gutter repair, so they could not submit a request to FEMA yet. All in all, it would total about $12 million that they would expect FEMA to reimburse. Phillips emphasized the importance of having a fund balance, saying they would have been in even more dire straits without that money to fall back on.

Cole asked about the fund balance, and Phillips said Newnan had been criticized for years for having such a large fund balance—104%--which meant they could operate for a whole year without any revenues. About two weeks before the storm hit, the City Council had voted to purchase a large piece of property downtown for $5 million, he remarked.

Destadio recalled that he weathered two hurricanes when he was in the Air Force. He remarked that Phillips said they had trouble getting cell phone signals; had they thought about using radios? Phillips said they used digital radio systems, but there were outages. They relied on a combination of cell phones and radios, but not everyone was issued a radio, including the Mayor. They lost servers, so email was not possible sometimes.

Destadio also mentioned that many injuries on the base occurred when volunteers grabbed a chain saw and tried to help. Phillips said that was true. Brady mentioned all the professional help they received, saying every other city in MEAG showed up, along with Georgia Power.

Regarding the pre-event agreement, Phillips said few cities outside of coastal regions had them. Removing street signs was something Destadio said they did to prepare for storms, but Phillips pointed out that was a luxury they had because there was several days warning before a hurricane hit, unlike a tornado.

Were they able to use the fund balance immediately or only after the emergency had been prepared? Dial inquired. Immediately, Phillips replied. How did the Mayor declaring a state of emergency work? Learnard asked. Brady said it could not be officially signed for a few hours in the aftermath of the storm, so he authorized it by text or a phone call. All cities had a section on emergencies in the code of ordinances, Phillips noted, and it defined certain criteria so the Mayor could implement it. Newnan's had a list of powers, and Phillips said he just checked the boxes of the ones they needed to put into effect. Brady cautioned that they needed to be aware of Federal and State requirements, or there would be a lot of bills that did not get paid.

Cole asked how they coordinated all the volunteer resources? Phillips said the City coordinated offers from other municipalities. They were inundated with offers of help, but they did not accept them all at once; they staggered the scheduling. Brady said people wanted to write significant checks to the City, and he told them, too, to wait until they saw where the needs were.

Brady said every municipality needed a relationship with the Georgia Forestry Commission. Newnan had been a Tree City for many years. The Forestry Commission was instantly on board with helping them. He mentioned that one of the important programs they had was planting a tree with every kindergarten class at their schools. Those programs showed a dedication to urban trees. Tree Atlanta was coming that Saturday, Brady remarked, to plant 112 15-gallon trees in people's yards. This was made possible by a private donation. They did not have Plant Newnan before, Brady noted, but it would be around forever now. It was huge commitment, but you just did not realize how much it changed the landscape to lose that tree canopy.

How as the response from the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) regarding their liability insurance? Teagle asked. It was outstanding, said Phillips. They had 17 claims and only one $5,000 deductible. They used the insurance preferred contractors, and their response was incredible. Work ranged from re-roofing buildings to removing statues that were damaged.

Cole noted that a lot of homeowners were unable to pay their own insurance deductibles and the Coweta County Community Foundation had stepped into help. Phillips said that was another takeaway: review your homeowners policy. So many people found out they had a cash limit value and were under insured.

Fayetteville City Center

After a short break, Learnard introduced Fayetteville's Jones, who explained the Mayor was away at a conference. Jones would be talking about how Fayetteville had built a new City Center, but before beginning, he told the group they had a huge resource in Phillips and Brady. They should draw on their experiences and prepare for emergencies in their own community.

Fayetteville had always emphasized its history, Jones began, but a new administration was elected a few years ago and wanted to adopt a new vision and look to the future while honoring the past. There was a piece of undeveloped property between Grady Avenue and SR 54 that they considered prime for development. While planning for this, Jones related, they visited many cities that had undergone transformations. Some cities created city centers from nothing, while others revamped existing areas. All were focused on creating a downtown gathering place.

Fayetteville wanted something that would complement the square, not lure people away from it. They bought about 10 acres from the Board of Education and decided to keep the old bus barn and the historic gym. The bus barn now housed Line Creek Brewing Company and a barbecue restaurant.

Jones showed the concept, with the new City Hall at the top of the hill, sloping down to the play park and the events center and other businesses. It had all been very well-received. The Christmas parade went through there, he said, and the City Center and the square were just flooded with people. He showed photos of the completed area and how it looked during construction. Jones noted that they wanted City Hall to look as good from the back as it did from the front because it was visible from both sides.

A townhome development was being constructed to line the back of the property along City Center Parkway. It would have retail on the bottom and residences on top. The were impressed by the Walton development in Woodstock and chose that company for the residential component because they did not build, then sell the property.

Jones said the City of Milton influenced the look of the City Hall, with open concepts. There were issues with sound in an open building, but they did some things to mitigate that. Duluth's development influenced the look of the park. They also learned the concept of 10-10-10 from Duluth. That meant they should have 10 places to eat, 10 places to shop, and 10 things to do after dark. Fayetteville was not there yet, but that was the goal—to make Fayetteville the place to come for something to do, not a place to drive through on the way elsewhere.

They had some private partnerships to get the finishing work done on the gym and the bus barn, and the City gave the tenants long-term leases. He showed before and after photos. There was a plaza shared between those two areas. It was also important to connect to the County Library, and they had done that. He showed where the Walton development would be and what it would look like. It would connect to Grady, and eventually to SR 54 and 85.

Any city looking to do something like this should have lots of public meetings and get ideas from citizens. It constantly came up that people wanted places to go; they wanted nice restaurants; they wanted to enjoy their home. They knew Fayetteville had an older population, and they wanted to serve them, but they also wanted to retain the younger population. He acknowledged there were some people who were against it, but some of those had been converted. A development such as this was a risk, but it could be worth it.

Caola had two questions: how did they fund this? Was it open container in the whole park area? Jones said they established a facilities authority and got bonds. There were provisions for open container in that area. Council member Clark said they established a downtown entertainment district where open containers were allowed. Each beverage got a sticker showing it was purchased there. There had been few problems.

Clark said he wanted to mention the private investment. Other than City Hall and the park, the City had spent no money on this. It was all done through private investors.

There were about 5,000 people there at the Christmas parade, Clark continued, and between 2,000-3,000 every weekend. These were not just people from Fayetteville; they were getting people even from the north side of Atlanta. The Walton project would bring in another 50,000 square feet of retail, he went on. This investment was paying for itself in sales tax. Fayetteville was a welcoming community and this gathering spot just illustrated it, he continued. They had 38 events scheduled this year at the park.

Destadio, recalling that Clark said people came from other areas, commented that Peachtree City had people from other areas coming to use its lakes and parks, and he felt they often caused problems. Clark stated that they had had no problems with visitors, and the city was bringing in the highest excise taxes in this history. Destadio asked how they stopped problems from outsiders? but Clark said they had not had any. They loved for people to come and have fun and spend their money. Keeping people out was not what the future should hold, he stated. Fayetteville was a vibrant city; home values had risen 65% in the past seven years. They wanted to give people opportunities in Fayetteville, not keep people out. Tesla was coming to Fayetteville, Clark remarked.

Destadio said he wished them well. So far, Clark told him, it had been great.

Jones said he wanted to clarify that they did use some Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) money to purchase the park land. The facilities bond was for City Hall. How much as that bond? Caola wondered. It was $24 million, Clark replied.

Perkins asked about the partnerships with the commercial ventures. Were they through the city or the Downtown Development Authority (DDA)? Clark said they had 15-year leases through the DDA. There was no tax increase for the bond, Clark said. It was done through GMA. Revenue had increased so much over the past few years. The city budget used to be about $12 million; now it was $19 million.

This development was not all they were doing either, Clark explained. There were plans for a dessert and wine bar at the Dorsey-Fife House and an entertainment center behind downtown restaurants. They were constantly revisiting their strategies, but Clark said you could look at Council as the coaches, and City Staff as the quarterbacks. They handed off the ball and gave people the opportunity to do what they do. He said it would take years to get where they were going. He could not give away any details, but they had about $4 billion in projects coming down the tubes.

Cole asked some more about the financial arrangements. Clark said the DDA owned the property. The investors were all local people.

As far as infrastructure, Clark remarked, they were prepared for this. They had just done a huge upgrade to the water treatment facility, upping capacity from 1.5 million gallons a day to 5 million gallons a day. They were prepared and had not had to tax people to death. Sales tax revenues had increased so much that they did not have to rely on property taxes. This year, there might be a small increase in the millage rate to pay for the additional incentives they were having to initiate to hire and retain Public Safety employees.

Laggis asked if they were being successful in attracting younger residents? Clark said they were. Fayetteville earned the Atlanta Regional Commission's (ARC) award this year for the most livable city centers. There were two multi-family projects being built now. At the Walton project, 40% were already leased. The Meridian on the Square project would have 220 units at the corner of Glynn Street and Lanier Avenue. Clark said he imagined those were the last two multi-family projects that would be built in Fayetteville. Younger people did not want to buy a 3,000 or 4,000 square foot house, he said, noting that if you had to put 20% down on a bank loan, you would need $85,000 to buy the average home in Fayetteville. Renting would give younger people the opportunity to live in Fayetteville, save money, and buy a home in the future, if they desired.

That concluded Fayetteville's presentation. Learnard asked the other cities to share their concerns.

Mayors' Comments

Pearson, the Mayor of Senoia, said their biggest concern right now was completing a sewer treatment plant. A mile-long multi-use trail was getting ready to open. They were working on a livable centers initiative study. Parking was the main problem downtown, but that was a good problem to have. Some light industrial developments were coming in. He thanked Learnard for putting this meeting together. He felt all the cities had a lot to share.

Tyrone Mayor Dial also thanked Learnard and said he was glad Coweta cities were included. Tyrone, he noted, was a diverse town of 7,500 people who had told them they wanted to see downtown revitalized, while maintaining a small-town feel. They had an overlay produced through the LCI. They had a new Town Hall and sewer system downtown. In total, they had already invested about $7 million. Now, they were beginning to see private investment and were monitoring it to make sure it was for the kind of projects they wanted.

Affordable housing was the new NIMBY (not in my backyard), Dial remarked. They knew there was a need, but what and where should it be? They had just created a DDA that they were excited about. One of the things that prompted it was the old fire station that was just sitting there. The people who wanted to buy it wanted it for a junk store, but they pulled out of the deal. Of course, when a municipality sold property, it had to go through the bidding process and to the highest bidder, Dial remarked, while a DDA had a little more control.

Up until a few years ago, the whole town was one-acre lots, nothing smaller, the Mayor remarked, and now there had to be something smaller than an acre, otherwise it cost too much money. Now they had an overlay that allowed for lots of less than an acre in some areas. There would be some growing pains, he acknowledged, and a lot of people would get mad.

Perkins said they were working with Fulton County and Fairburn to make sure they had all the sewer capacity they would need to facilitate these changes. Tyrone, right now, did not have a treatment plant.

Dial asked the Coweta Mayors if they were in the Three Rivers Regional Commission? The answer was yes. He said Fayette was in the ARC and that was an incredible source on data that could be used for all kinds of planning purposes. He believed Coweta was in a 23-county group focused on transportation. The ARC had hired a staff member to reach out to local governments and let them know what resources were available. They could assist with Comprehensive Plans and could help obtain grants.

Brooks Mayor Langford said his task was to position Brooks for 200 more years. People today, like the first settlers, moved to Brooks to get away from the hustle and bustle of urban areas. Their downtown, he noted, looked better than it ever had. They were updating the sewer system. The main reason Brooks had a government was to control land use. They had recently updated the Comprehensive Plan, and the main comment from residents was to stop the growth. But they could not and did not want to, Langford said, noting that people were buying land and houses there as fast as they went on the market. His job was to keep it desirable.

Laggis of Woolsey said he originally told Learnard he did not have a lot to say and wanted to just listen. Woolsey had a population of about 200, he noted, and he had been the mayor for 33 years. They were the like the little brother, he remarked, not getting a lot of attention, but proud of their siblings and their family. He said Woolsey had challenges, but they knew the other municipalities were ready to help, and they would always help them.

Cole said Sharpsburg had been looking at modernizing over the past several years, starting with staff and procedures. Most of that was complete, so now they were holding a series of work sessions where Council and citizens could talk about the future. That way, they would have the plans in place when the time was right. They did not have a lot of the infrastructure they would need, but that did not mean they could not plan for it. He remarked on Fayetteville's foresight in running the sewer line out to Trilith and said that is what they wanted to do in Sharpsburg—think of where they should run a sewer line to attract development. He and his staff had brought three sewer proposals to Council, but all three of the deals faded away. Still, getting the proposals at all was a positive step. If a group could put together 52 people and raise $9 million for a development, Cole said he could borrow $900,000 for a sewer line.

Cole said he had to repair a lot of relationships when he took office. He wanted Sharpsburg to play to its strengths. They might be small, but they had flexibility. Downtown was not developed, but that provided a blank canvas for whatever they wanted to do with it. It was about finding out what the 316 residents wanted and figuring out how to provide it. Sharpsburg's population might be small, he went on, but there were 20,000 people living in its ZIP code. Those residents would spend their money in Sharpsburg. There was a 600-home development going up just outside town, and those 600 houses could lure commercial development to Sharpsburg.

Learnard said they would wrap things up, but first she wanted to brag that all five cities in Fayette County had reached a local option sales tax (LOST) agreement. Cole asked how they did it? Learnard said the five cities and managers met and asked how they could do this together? Fayetteville's population percentage had increased. The County's portion, they decided would remain at 48.5%, and the cities made an agreement on their own.

Was there pushback from the County to increase their percentage? Cole asked. Not really, said Learnard.

Dial explained that there were a couple of other topics they wanted to focus on, so they all felt it would be best to not squabble about LOST distribution. Everyone's revenue was going up. There was a SPLOST coming up, and they needed to work together to make sure it passed. The County came in strong, and Dial said they cities probably would not be so accommodating the next time around. Dial said it was critical to maintain relationships and not fight over stupid things.

Learnard said there was an effort by the Georgia Association of Chiefs of Police to send supplies to Ukraine. Dial said they had some Kevlar vests to dispose of and were working through details.

Destadio said Janet Moon, Peachtree City's Police Chief, was president of the Association, and they could contact her for more information. They were actively pursuing the donation of vests and helmets.

Ungaro mentioned HB 1009 had made it to the Senate. This bill would allow personal delivery devices, or robots, to access multi-use paths. It sounded innocuous, but they would be treated as pedestrians, weighed 500 pounds, and the remote operators did not have to be licensed. They could only carry one package, so they would be constantly on the paths and trails. He urged them to contact their local legislators to get this killed.

Learnard mentioned that Peachtree City voted a resolution of opposition to HB 1093 and SB 1094, which would take away cities' ability to regulate residential development that was built for the purpose of being leased. She noted Brooks had also passed a resolution against it.

Learnard mentioned that Rorie's last day as City Manager would be April 29. They were looking for an interim and had hired the Mercer Group to conduct a search for a new City Manager.

The summit ended with lunch at 11:45 a.m.

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Martha Barksdale, Recording Secretary **Kim Learnard, Mayor**