

**Dawson County Board of Commissioners  
Planning Workshop & Retreat - Wednesday, March 29, 2023  
Amicalola Falls State Park & Lodge  
418 Amicalola Falls Road, Dawsonville, Georgia 30534  
8:30 a.m.**

**Minutes**

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*Facilitated by: Hardin Watkins, CVIQG*



**Carl Vinson  
Institute of Government  
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA**

- **Welcome**

At 9 a.m., Interim County Manager Vickie Neikirk welcomed all to the Planning Workshop & Retreat. She introduced the event's facilitator, Hardin Watkins, Public Service Faculty, University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government.

Chairman Billy Thurmond provided an overview and officially opened the meeting. All five commissioners – Chairman Billy Thurmond, District 1 Commissioner Seth Stowers, District 2 Commissioner Chris Gaines, District 3 Commissioner Alexa Bruce and District 4 Commissioner Emory Dooley – were present.

- **Ice Breaker & Introductions**
  - **Who's Here?**
  - **Who are we as individuals? As a group of county leaders?**
  - **This or That...**

In addition to the commissioners, the following were present and introduced themselves: Interim County Manager Vickie Neikirk, Human Resources Director Kristi Finley, Planning & Development Director Sharon Farrell, Public Works Director Robert Drewry, Emergency Services Director Troy Leist and County Clerk Kristen Cloud. Mr. Watkins led the group through some introductory icebreaker exercises as a method for the new group to come together as a functioning team and better understand each other.

- **Opening Comments from Commission Chair & Commissioners**
  - **What do you hope to accomplish today?**
  - **One word that represents your perspective on your role in Dawson County**
  - **One word that comes to mind when you think of Dawson County**
  - **What is your vision for Dawson County?**

Chairman Thurmond said he would like to set goals and objectives for both the board and staff so everyone will have a road map to where we want to go.

Commissioner Gaines said he would like to gain a better understanding of the various perspectives at the table and to find common ground to work as a team to achieve goals.

Commissioner Bruce echoed Chairman Thurmond and Commissioner Gaines.

Commissioner Dooley said he would like to find a way to best move forward considering the unique position of the community. Commissioner Bruce said growing pains will continue, but it would be ideal for the board and staff to stay on the same page in moving forward.

Commissioner Stowers mentioned unity, understanding each other as a whole, and having a sense of the path forward. He hoped to gain clarity regarding what direction we are going.

Director Leist said, from a department head standpoint, clarity on the difference between a want and a need (internally) is needed. He requested perspective from commissioners. Chairman Thurmond and Commissioner Bruce elaborated from a BOC standpoint.

Commissioner Gaines said it is important for staff to differentiate between what is, in fact, a want vs. a need. He said “being clear with us” is important.

Commissioner Dooley emphasized the importance of having long-term goals and a plan (a five-year plan, etc.); a proactive vs. a reactive approach.

Director Drewry mentioned challenges for the board, specifically as it relates to the 400 Corridor vs. “everybody else.” Conversation followed.

Other items that members of the group expressed hope for accomplishing include: establishing unity as a group, understanding the path forward to help maintain our community feel along with sustainable growth, understanding each other as a whole by learning about perspectives, developing an understanding of each department and mutual expectations, beginning a path for a “service culture” and raising the bar for employees.

Each attendee was asked to share a word that represents their perspective on their role in Dawson County: servant-leader, problem-solver, commitment, stabilizer, responsibility, challenging, connection, serve, protect, ringleader, leadership.

Each attendee was asked to share a word that comes to mind when they think of Dawson County: home (3 times), exciting, changing, unique, family, down-to-earth, local, transitioning, America.

Vision for Dawson County: better (make things better than I found them), sustainability (how to keep ahead of growth – controlled), healthy growth with continued mindset of community (truly look at “quality of life” slogan and what it means), keep Dawson County beautiful (lakes, rivers, farmland), sustainability as we progress (keep economics in mind, farms can continue if they want to), balance (financial, growth, character – people define

quality of life differently - perspective/vision), balance between property rights and growth, board and staff to work together as a team (proper interaction between staff and elected – find ways to allow appropriate conversation, communication, build and develop trust), provide best service possible (service-first mindset, part of organizational culture).

Culture as an organization should be centered around service, according to Commissioner Gaines, and it starts with leadership.

- **Nurturing a New Team to High Performance**
- **Disruptive Forces Facing Local Government Today**
- **Tuckman’s Model – Forming**
- **New Commissioners, new ideas, new goals**
- **Roles & Responsibilities – “You’ve just joined a team”**
- **Role of staff – need more or less of – exercise**
- **Staff is looking for clarity regarding decisions**
- **County Manager role – what is needed?**

Mr. Watkins reviewed Bruce Tuckman’s Stages of Group Development – Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, (Adjourning). This research helps a newly formed team see and recognize the various stages of team development and the steps (not always linear) that a team goes through from its beginning through conclusion of its mission.

In a discussion on roles and responsibilities of members of the Dawson County leadership team, Mr. Watkins reminded the group of the content of the newly elected county commissioner training regarding roles and the different skill sets needed for campaigning as compared to governing. This portion of the retreat led to a facilitated conversation about what elected officials would like to see more or less of from staff and what staff wants to see more or less of from elected officials. Staff is seeking clarity so they can serve effectively and efficiently.

Here is a summary of the discussion:

Role of staff:

- Commissioner thoughts – staff and department leaders are the “experts” in their fields, have confidence and trust coming to the board, would like to see relationship between any staff member and BOC improve/does not want an employee to feel inferior, being able to call director directly on less critical issues to expedite service and enhance one-on-one communication with staff, informational vs. directive communication between commissioners and staff (do not cross that line), being seen at different departments and being willing to interact with staff (to help build morale, express appreciation, etc.), inform elected officials how to be appropriately engaged with employees (when opportunities arise), bring potential solutions (creativity is welcomed) with the problems, bring out-of-the-box ideas when designing solutions, frontline employees are critical (employees are on top, extremely valuable), do not pit the public and/or employees against the board or department against department, wants to hear appreciation from employees

regarding sizable fiscal commitments to employees (pay increases, benefits), get to know each other, would appreciate employees to refrain from putting things in a negative way (“Board won’t approve \_\_\_\_\_”) and less faultfinding in conversations.

- Staff thoughts: more communication, progressive workplace and environment (recruitment and retention), help us build a desirable place to work, build a pro-employee culture, wants to see less acceptance for employees in Dawson County to make less money than employees in surrounding counties, importance of feeling valued and appreciated, acknowledging that our staff team works hard, guidance on how to communicate with one elected official differs from communicating with the full board, want to learn how to communicate effectively on upcoming topics/agenda items, openness to hear suggestions that differ from the way we’ve always done things.

#### Open County Manager Position Discussion

- Plan for interviews on April 4, 2023; ACCG survey in progress; Human Resources has provided questions for interviews; “very important that we get the right person,” said Commissioner Gaines; job description discussion/details; contract; vision and how to take on that challenge; need a strong manager; lead from the heart; strong communicator; someone who “walks the halls”; servant leader from top to bottom; trustworthy across the board, understands the departments and what each department does; someone who can say “no.”

#### 1-Hour Lunch Break

Julia Hansen from *Dawson County News* arrived and joined the retreat audience.

- **Vision for Dawson County**
  - **What do you want the community of Dawson County to accomplish in the next 5 years?**
  - **What is the vision of the Commissioners for Dawson County?**
  - **Goal → Agree on 4-6 things to work on in 2023-24.**

Commissioners each shared their top items to accomplish in the next five years:

#### No. 1

- Manage growth
- Show/prove to employees that they are seen as the county’s most important asset
- Improve infrastructure and, in connection, Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST)
- Promote higher-paying technology and medical jobs and, in connection, an industrial park
- Balance growth with improvements to roads, parks, etc., with proactive planning

No. 2

- Preserve resources while still valuing individual property rights
- Keep retail as a viable revenue source
- Employee salary/compensation/benefits package
- As a board, give better and clearer direction to department heads with more proactive approach
- Enhance communication to staff and citizens

No. 3

- Continue service delivery strategy and do it economically
- Drive/create a culture of passion for excellence; “bottom up” employee model
- Keep growth within bounds of citizens’ expectations (comprehensive plan as guide)
- Five-year plan needs input from departments and define where county is going; collaboration with all, including community organizations; strategic plan
- Maintain community atmosphere as county continues to grow (“One Dawson”); employee incentives

Others

- Live, work, play; need higher-end jobs for the “work” aspect
- Keep identity as a community; thriving Dawson County economy with same community values; grow responsibly without losing county identity
- Keep county beautiful, even with growth
- Unification of county and city
- Diversity in residential offerings (higher price-point housing)
- Alternative funding sources outside of property taxes

Staff items:

- Dawson County Government working to be a “county of excellence” and a role model for other governments
- Protecting scenic corridors

*Mr. Watkins worked with the commissioners to identify their top priorities from the lists prepared and described above. Each commissioner was provided four dots to place on one of the items above. The list below identifies the items that received one or more dots from commissioners and establishes the priority items for further discussion, preparation of an action plan, and assignment of person(s) responsible for managing completion of the item.*

- ✓ Improve Infrastructure: Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (T-SPLOST), be proactive, travel safety (4)
- ✓ Maintain a community atmosphere as we grow (One Dawson) (4)
- ✓ Give better, clearer direction to department heads. More proactive approach (3)
- ✓ Show/prove that employees are our most important asset (3)

- ✓ More higher paying, technical jobs (medical, industrial park). Keep job opportunities local. Technology Park (Development Authority as partner) (2)
- ✓ Drive/create a culture/passion for excellence. Bottom up – employees are front line. Give training and tools to deliver and empower. Be a county of excellence and role model for other governments (1)
- ✓ Preserve our resources while still evaluating individual property rights (1)
- ✓ Unification of city/county (1)
- ✓ 5-year strategic plan – define where we are going (1)

“Parking Lot” items that were mentioned through the day for future discussion:

- Want to see long-term goals and needs of the departments (5 years)
- Capital needs, wants to move to proactive vs. reactive approach
- Policy decisions are tough: 400 Corridor vs. remainder of county
- Customer service training
- Video from HR
- Fund balance/one-time bonus for employees?
- Pay compaction issue (compression)
- Leave balances – how to handle?

Commissioners each provided their final thoughts on the day and about moving ahead.

**Adjourn**

*\*An official CVIORG facilitator report, when available, will be included with these minutes.*

APPROVE:

ATTEST:

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Billy Thurmond, Chairman

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Kristen Cloud, County Clerk