

Acceptance Speech

Mayor Jim Thornton

2021 Annual Convention

Sunday, August 8, 2021

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Thank you so very much.

I truly appreciate everyone who helped make that video. And I appreciate the kind words. I will certainly do my best to live up to those expectations.

Let me begin by thanking each and every one of you, the members of the Georgia Municipal Association, for entrusting me with the leadership of this great organization.

It is an honor for me to serve you in this role, and I appreciate the opportunity.

There are a few individuals that I would like to specifically thank, and I'll begin by thanking Union City Mayor and GMA President Vince Williams for his leadership this past year.

Vince is an amazing man whose leadership has been a blessing to Union City, to the state, and soon to the nation as he assumes the Presidency of the National League of Cities this fall.

But particularly through the past year, a year that was unlike any other, Vince led GMA through the challenges of Covid.

Vince leads with love and has set a wonderful example for elected officials across the state to follow.

Vince, it wasn't a normal year and it wasn't an easy year, but it was a very productive year for GMA thanks to your outstanding leadership. Thank you.

I'd also like to recognize and thank the GMA presidents with whom I have had a chance to work over the past few years, including former Mayors Dorothy Hubbard from Albany and Phil Best from Dublin, as well as Mayor Linda Blechinger from Auburn.

And I am thrilled to be part of a team that includes Tifton Mayor Julie Smith, Marietta Councilmember Michelle Cooper Kelley, and Perry Mayor Randall Walker.

Julie, Michelle and Randall, I look forward to serving with each of you.

And congratulations to all the new installed GMA Board Members. I look forward to working with you in the years ahead.

All of us know that the work of GMA is done mostly by our staff, under the truly exceptional leadership of our Executive Director Larry Hanson. Larry brings a level of professionalism and competence to his role at GMA that is unmatched, and we all benefit from his leadership.

Of course, GMA has a great staff, and if time allowed, I'd stand here and name all of them because every one of them does an amazing job of serving the organization and thereby serving each of our cities. Will you join me in thanking our GMA staff?

I want to also recognize the City Council of LaGrange. I'd like for them to stand and be recognized.

This is a great group of individuals who love my hometown of LaGrange as much as I do. They are truly dedicated public servants.

They are a fun group to work with, and if you ever get to come to one of our council meetings, you'll find we laugh more than we argue, but we get the job done for our citizens. I am grateful to each of them.

There are several members of the LaGrange city staff here as well. Those of you who are elected officials know that our staff members shoulder the burden of daily operations for our cities. I am appreciative of all our city staff members, and particularly our city manager Meg Kelsey.

We recently recognized Meg for 25 years' service to the city and for serving as our City Manager for the past five years. She's a great blessing to me and all of LaGrange.

When I first made the decision to run for Mayor of LaGrange, we were sitting in the living room at my house. My wife was there along with two of my best friends.

We talked about the why, and the when, and the how much, and we made the decision that yes, I would throw my hat in the ring. Those two friends are here today, Tripp Penn, who is here with his wife Megan, and also Edward Smith.

I appreciate their friendship and their support through the years. Tripp ran my first campaign, but then took a job that prevented him running my second campaign, and so Edward took on that role. Thank you both for being here.

The first time I ever heard of GMA was in the mid-90s. I was in law school at the time, and while I didn't attend the conventions, my mother, Dodie Patterson, did. At the time she was assistant to West Point City Manager Joel Wood, a role she held for several years before going to work for our church in LaGrange.

My mother would attend GMA with the West Point City Council, and she always seemed to come home with a prize. She's one of those lucky individuals who always seems to win something in the drawing or raffle. But her stories of the convention left a very good impression of GMA with me.

I'm glad my mother and other members of my family could be here today. Will they please stand and be recognized?

Finally, I want to say a few words about my wife.

Corinne is truly my best friend; she is my constant companion; she is the love of my life; and as Gladys Knight would sing, she is "the best thing that ever happened to me."

Some of you probably met Corinne before you met me. When I go around the state to meetings, particularly of local city and county officials, I usually find people that know her.

She has been with DCA for 22 years, and before COVID, she was on the road traveling the state. I am convinced that you could blindfold Corinne and take her to the downtown of any of the 537 cities in Georgia, and removing the blindfold, she would know exactly what city she was in, and she would at least know the mayor, city manager or the local chamber president.

For my friends at ACCG, I must confess I'm not great with the names of all the 159 counties, but I think Corinne could name them all and tell you something about each one.

I am her biggest fan, and I am truly blessed that she and I can stand side by side and arm in arm through this journey of life. Thank you, Corinne.

The first time I attended the GMA Annual Convention was in 2008, the year before I ran for city council. I came as Corinne's spouse. She was working during the convention, so I ended up hanging out with LaGrange Council members Bobby Traylor and Nick Woodson.

Some of you may remember the inseparable duo of Bobby and Nick. You may not know that Bobby and Nick, both of whom served 20 years on the LaGrange City Council and were active with GMA, also knew where all the good food was in Savannah. I ate well during that convention just tagging along with them.

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Since my first election to council and then Mayor, I have been attending GMA and have, like you, seen the blessing of this organization.

GMA exists to serve its member cities and to equip city officials to do the best job we can in our respective roles.

And that leads me to a few comments I want to share this afternoon.

Why do those of us who are local elected officials run for office?

We know it's not for the pay; it's not because the adoring public thinks we can do no wrong and it's not because we get a lot of power or get to have our way.

It's because we love our cities and are passionate about their future. That's why we do what we do.

As is often said, serving as mayor or as a city council member is mostly a thankless job, but it does have an upside.

As we ride around or walk through our cities, we can point to things that are good, and things that are getting better, and projects that are happening, at least in part because of our work.

I find that very rewarding, and I suspect you do, too.

And the theme of this year's conference speaks to how we can accomplish great things for our cities and our neighbors: The Spirit of Cities: Connecting. Collaborating. Caring.

That pretty much sums it up, don't you think?

We connect people with each other and with the institutions and with the resources needed to get the job done.

We collaborate with our community partners and stakeholders and bring them to table.

And we care about the future of our cities and our residents.

That same spirit also inspires GMA and guides the work of our association.

GMA was founded in 1933 by 56 cities, including LaGrange, for the purpose of preserving their home rule authority. And now GMA represents all 537 cities in Georgia. We must never lose sight of the critically important advocacy role that GMA serves at the State and Federal levels through our policy councils.

GMA's advocacy is not only to protect our member cities, but also to provide resources so that our cities can be stronger, more inclusive and more resilient, and so they can thrive like never before.

In addition to our advocacy work, GMA's serves our cities by connecting, collaborating and caring:

- We are working to build more just and inclusive communities, through initiatives like our Equity and Inclusion Commission and the programs it's developing.
- Through our Children and Youth Advisory Council, GMA is engaging our children and youth and finding better ways to support them.
- GMA is developing municipal workforce initiatives, led by our Municipal Workforce Advisory Council, to ensure that our cities are staffed with individuals committed to serving our citizens.
- We are improving public safety, with leadership such as our Excellence in Policing Initiative and thereby strengthening our police departments and connecting them to the people they serve and care for.

In all these ways GMA and its member cities are improving our communities and leading the state.

And while we are a statewide organization implementing programs and initiatives with statewide impact, it's worth remembering that what drives this work is our love and passion for a specific place. The place may be different for each of us, but we all have that place in our mind and heart.

My passion is the place I have called home my entire life, the City of LaGrange. Your passion is grounded in the needs and challenges of your hometown.

It's good to be passionate about your city. In fact, it's necessary. Knowing and loving the place you call home are prerequisites to making a difference in it.

We all know the importance of place. GMA has created programs on placemaking, and many of us have spent significant time and resources growing and transforming our cities into places where people want to live, work and play.

And over the past year, I believe that this concept of "place" has become even more important in our thinking and actions.

The conventional wisdom of the past decade focused on globalism. We read books and heard speakers talk about the interconnectedness of the world. Because of modern technology and the modern economy, it was claimed that the world was becoming flat.

But over time, and particularly over the past 18 months as COVID impacted our communities, we have been reminded that the place we find ourselves in really does matter. Our city, our community, our neighbors...our place...these are the things that shape our lives and are the keys to a prosperous future.

These places and the people in them are what we feel most passionately about, and these places, and the institutions and people in them, in turn care for us.

The trend of globalization will continue, but I also perceive a renewed emphasis on these places we call home.

While this hyper-local focus doesn't need to limit our worldview or imagination, it does inspire us to continue to work to improve and enhance our cities.

And the role of GMA in all of this isn't to impose a collective vision on the state as a whole. Instead, the role of GMA has been, and will remain, to inspire and to equip us to make our cities better than they are today.

Connecting. Collaborating. Caring. That's how together we'll ensure a better future for our cities, and more importantly, our residents.

I look forward to seeing the great things that each of you will accomplish in the place that matters most to you, and I look forward to the role that GMA will play in helping you along that journey.

Thank you again for the opportunity to lead this great organization.

Now, I would like to ask Mayor Williams to join me on the stage.

Mayor Williams, on behalf of the entire GMA membership, I want to thank you for the strong leadership you have provided to our Association this past year as our president. You have been a great advocate and ambassador for Georgia's cities, and certainly all of us owe you a great debt of gratitude.

As a way of expressing our appreciation,

it is my pleasure to present you with this ceremonial gavel.

I will now turn the program back over to you to close us out.