

Chairman Ray Long's state of the county speech

Feb. 21, 2019

DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel-Decatur Riverside

I want to thank all of you that made the effort to be here this morning. I know it is a little early, but wasn't that a great breakfast? Let's give those that prepared it a round of applause.

I want to thank the Chamber for hosting this event again this year. John, you and your staff do a great job serving the citizens of Decatur and Morgan County. The leadership of you and your staff has a lot to do with the good shape our county is in.

I want to thank the elected officials for coming this morning. (Please stand).

I want to thank Congressman Mo Brooks for being my guest this morning. Congressman Brooks is not only my congressman but he is my friend. Thank you for serving and thanks for being here.

I would like to thank the ROTC for once again participating in this event. I am so proud of each of you and really appreciate your desire to participate in a field of service.

I really appreciate my friend, Pastor Royce Teague, coming to do the invocation this morning. Royce and I go way back. In fact we started a newspaper back in 1990 called the Somerville Review. Today that paper is called the Somerville Newsletter and is operated by the Town of Somerville. Thank you for participating this morning.

I am proud to have 11 of my department heads here this morning.

Thanks to my administrators, Julie Reeves and Jessica Smith for coming this morning. They do a great job keeping all of us commissioners going in the right direction.

I want to thank my commissioners for being here this morning. They work hard for you every day. They take their job serious and put in many long hours that most people don't even know about. I am proud to serve with them.

Next, I want to thank my family for showing up. Didn't Ellie and Chance do a great job with the Pledge?

Those that were here last year may remember that Chance didn't make it. It was his birthday and he wanted to be at school to hear his name called out over the intercom. Well, he is here today. If you don't mind, will you join me in singing Happy Birthday to him? He is 12 years old.

My oldest daughter, Patti Brown and our grandson Tripp are both sick this morning and couldn't make it. Her husband, Mickey, is here as well as my middle daughter Mary Melson. Thank you for coming.

My youngest daughter, Micah, has moved to Florida and couldn't be here today.

This is the 3rd year that my brother Hillard has attended. I never knew that he liked hearing me speak until the past few years. I want to thank you for being here this morning.

I also want to thank my brother-in-law, Gary Borden, for attending this morning.

Also, I am very proud to say that my best friend and biggest supporter is here. She has already heard this speech several times and still wanted to show up. Ladies and gentlemen, let's give a warm welcome to the first lady of Morgan County, Regina Long.

My friends, as I begin this 9th State of the County address I want you to know that Morgan County is strong and in great shape. Our county is doing better now than at any time in recent years. Our economy is strong and our people are working again. Morgan County is once again looked upon as a leader in this state.

As I travel around this state I like to tell people what a great relationship our commission has with our other elected officials. I love to brag about how we all get along. We have something to be proud of here in Morgan County. I think I can honestly say that every elected official in our county, including the mayors and council in the municipalities, have a heart for service and want to make this a better place to live. With that attitude from our elected officials Morgan County can only get better.

We had a good year in 2018. I'm going to run down a few of the things we accomplished.

First, I would like to introduce our new Commission on Aging Director, Sandra Adams. Sandra was recently appointed to run our 8 Senior Centers. She had worked for 20 years in our IT Department. She brings a breath of fresh air to this department. She has already implemented programs to make things easier for our people at the centers. She has made several homebound visits trying to add more seniors to our meal delivery routes. We want to make sure that our seniors are fed and taken care. Sandra has shown she has a heart for our seniors.

Animal Services Director Darren Tucker continues to do a great job at our animal shelter. This past year they had 21 court cases dealing with animal cruelty and non-compliance of the leash law, and has won every case. Darren and his staff have reached out to more charity groups and continue to see large amounts of food donated to the shelter. They have built great relationships with rescue groups and are getting more animals to good homes, which mean they have to euthanize less.

Environmental Services Director Johnny Howell continues to grow the program to where you can bring large items to his shop during the week. This was started last year to replace the need for the annual cleanup days. We still have cleanup days set aside for the east end of the county. They are sorting through the items that are dropped off, taking out anything that can be recycled. This year he hopes to start a yard pickup service for limbs and brush.

Our Park and Recreation staff had a busy year. Director Sean Daily has been running that department since 2014 and has really made a great impact on our parks. This past year they were busy installing new soccer goals for all the county parks. They replaced the old playground at Daikin Garden Pavilion at North Park; installed a sand volleyball court at North Park; installed a new playground at Brindlee Mt. Park; installed new batting cages at West Park, and installed new basketball goals at Huskey Park. They also laser graded and sodded the T-ball field at Huskey Park and all the fields at South Park. They also completed the restroom at South Park. Many more projects are planned for 2019.

In 2018 we hosted several state tournaments last year and hosted 2 ASA Archery Qualifying events at West Park.

We have won, along with the Decatur Morgan County Tourism, the right to host the 2019 U10AAA Dixie Youth State Tournament.

These tournaments have a big economic impact on Morgan County by bringing folks from all over Alabama to our area.

Community Corrections Director Kim Thurston and her staff continue to save us thousands of dollars. They have around 1200 clients that would probably be in jail if it wasn't for her programs. They recently purchased a new analyzer machine so they can do their own drug testing. This new machine can detect up to 60 different drugs.

In May of 2018 Archivist John Allison put together Morgan County's Bicentennial Event. We held the event at the courthouse and invited several historians to set up booths and talk about their areas of interest. We had music and free hotdogs and Pepsi.

For the first time ever, John got the Trail of Tears Association of America to hold their annual meeting here in Decatur. They had a large turnout and were very pleased and indicated they may return in the near future.

Our EMA Director, Eddie Hicks and his staff have been very busy. Each year they have either a drill or practice with the state EMA about potential problems with Browns Ferry. They work with local industries in preparing for any disaster that might happen. They have also been very busy working with the municipalities adopting a new 5 year Hazard Mitigation Plan.

Morgan County's Engineer, Greg Bodley and his staff had a great year. They completed the last of our ATRIP projects. Cedar Creek Church Road bridge was replaced at a cost of around \$750,000. Mr. Bodley has worked to complete 8 ATRIP projects in the past 5 years that cost nearly \$12 million.

His staff inspected 125 bridges. Forty of those bridges are over 50 years old. Eighteen of those bridges require yearly inspections while two of them require an inspection every three months.

Mr. Bodley also worked on getting the caulking and sealing of the courthouse accomplished. The caulking on the courthouse had not been replaced since it was built in the 1970's. We also cleaned and sealed the courthouse to help it last for several more years. If you haven't already, you need to drive by and look at it.

Communications Director Sheryl Marsh continues to do a great job with our newsletter, *The Voice of Morgan County*. We put out 46,000 copies every quarter. She also live-streams our Commission meetings and keeps our Facebook page up to date.

Your Commissioners stayed busy last year. Jeff Clark, District One Commissioner, assisted Trinity with a turn lane to help with the traffic at West Morgan High School. He assisted the City of Decatur with resurfacing Old Moulton Road for the new Austin High School. He assisted Priceville with the extension of Marco Drive. He also assisted the City of Decatur with the parking lot for the Cook's Museum. Six miles of roads were resurfaced in his district.

District Two Commissioner Randy Vest spent nearly \$800,000 in resurfacing roads. He re-striped 12 roads. He completed the site prep for the new Oak Ridge and Neel VFDs. His crew built 2 outdoor practice fields at Danville High School and built an additional parking lot at J.P. Cain Stadium in Hartselle. Randy was elected vice president of the ACCA and will transition to president in two years.

Don Stisher, District Three Commissioner has been busy working with the two towns in his district, Eva and Falkville. Don also helps out the schools in his district. Like the other commissioners, he has resurfaced several roads during the year.

District Four Commissioner, Greg Abercrombie has been busy with road projects throughout the year. One of his biggest projects has been the widening of Union Hill Road. This road from Cotaco to Union Hill now looks as good as any interstate we have in Alabama. Greg plans to widen the other few miles on to Highway 231 within the next year.

This is just a brief rundown of what your commissioners have done in their districts. All of them do a great job and take a lot of pride in their jobs. Their job includes so much more than just building and maintaining roads. They are constantly asked to help on other projects. They do not have a 9 to 5 job, they have a 24/7 job. Let's give them a hand for what they do.

This has been a quick recap of what we did in 2018. I would like to spend a few minutes and tell you what I would like to see happen in 2019.

With Mazda/Toyota coming to Huntsville there will be many companies that will be their suppliers for different parts. We are going to work with Jeremy Nails from the Morgan County EDA and Brooks Kracke of NAIDA to bring some of those companies to Morgan County. We have the land and we have the workers here in Morgan County to make some of those companies want to locate here. These organizations do a great job getting companies to locate in our area. We want them to know that we are ready to help in any way possible.

We are going to work hard to try and get people to live in Morgan County. Our population hasn't grown much in the past 10 years. In February 2018 I formed a group of everyday citizens and challenged them to find out what we could do to make people want to live in Morgan County. I will be meeting with this group soon to receive their report. Last year the University of Alabama did a study that showed by the year 2040 Morgan County would only grow by a few percentage points while everyone around us would outgrow us. Morgan County has a lot to offer but we have got to do a better job of getting the word out. We need to make sure people know what we have to offer.

When I came into office in November of 2010, one of the first meetings I had was with a group that wanted a parking deck in downtown Decatur. The county and the city were spending a lot of money to get the downtown area looking attractive again so businesses would want to come here. Well businesses are here now. Then, we met with the Cook family and they informed us of their plans to build a multi-million dollar museum in downtown and would be bringing around 200,000 visitors a year to Decatur. My first thought was, where will they park? But if you hangout around the courthouse you hear people complaining about having to walk 3 and 4 blocks to buy a tag. It doesn't take long to figure out that we have a parking problem around the courthouse.

Commissioner Clark and I have met with several business leaders about trying to help us come up with a way to build a parking deck and have retail shops or restaurants on the bottom level. We have even discussed having apartments on top of the parking deck. I had a meeting last Friday to discuss constructing a public/private parking deck. The time for talking about doing something about the parking problem around the courthouse and downtown Decatur has went on long enough. If we don't have a solution through a public/private partnership by October of this year, I will put it on our agenda and the Morgan County Commission will build a parking deck to satisfy the needs of our citizens. No citizen should have to walk four blocks to give us money for their property taxes, or to buy a tag for their vehicle. It's time for us to solve the parking problem around the courthouse.

My friends, Morgan County is in good shape. Our goal as leaders should be to make it better. To do this we have got to work together. If something good is going on in Priceville, it's good for everyone in Morgan County. If something good happens in Decatur, it's good for the rest of Morgan County. You see, to be a great county we all need to work together. We need to support each other. As Chairman of the Morgan County Commission, I work with seven mayors and 35 council members. Decatur, Hartselle, Priceville, Trinity, Falkville, Somerville, and Eva are all in Morgan County. In 2019 I hope that each of you in this room today will take the stand that I do: "If it's good for Morgan County it's good for everyone else." If we support each other there is no limit to what we can achieve.

I want to thank each of you for coming this morning. I want to thank the Chamber again for hosting this event. I want you to know that I love serving you as your Chairman. It is an honor and a privilege that I thank you for.

Thank you again, and may GOD continue to Bless Morgan County.