

Joint Meeting City of Forsyth/Monroe County Board of Commissioners

Minutes of April 21, 2026.

Called Meeting

5:00 P.M.

Present:

Board of Commissioners

Alan Gibbs, Chairman

John Ambrose, Vice-Chairman

Lamarcus Davis, District 1

Eddie Rowland, District 2

Al Turner, District 4

Forsyth City Council

Greg Goolsby-Mayor

Josh Hill-Post 1 Councilmember

Walter Goodson-Post 2 Councilmember-entered meeting at 5:13 p.m.

Lois Allen-Post 3 Councilmember-entered 5:22 p.m.

Glynn Holmes-Post 4 Councilmember

Charles Wilder Jr.-Post 5 Councilmember

Michael Dodd-Post 6 Councilmember

Monroe County Staff:

Lorri Byrd, County Manager

Janet Abbott, County Clerk

Richard Dumas, Public Information Officer

Kim Stokes, Public Works Director

Kelsey Fortner-Community Development Director

Ray White-Maintenance Director

Angie Sorrow-Finance Director

Boyd Elrod-IT Director

Matt Jackson-EMS Director

City of Forsyth Staff

Craig Mims-City Manager

Shayla Furlow-City Clerk

Mike Batchelor-Public Utilities Director

Dean Nelson-Community Development Director

Kevin Bunn-Fire Chief

Board of Commissioners

Welcome

Chairman Gibbs welcomed everyone in attendance.

Prayer

Chairman Gibbs led the invocation.

Pledge

Chairman Gibbs led the pledge.

Roll Call

County Clerk Janet Abbott called roll.

City of Forsyth

Roll Call

Shayla Furlow called roll.

Call to Order

Chairman Gibbs called the meeting to order at 5:00 P.M.

New Business

Monroe County Agenda Approval

Laura Mathis with the Middle Georgia Regional Commission, Moderator, presented a change to the agenda for approval:

- Move forestry topic up after the agenda

Georgia Forestry / Mass Timber Presentation

Presenter: Mike Harrell (Georgia Forestry Association Senior Outreach Forester; President, O Family Property)

Key Points:

- Forestry industry status
 - Georgia is the #1 state in the nation for forestry:
 - #1 in annual harvest volume and tree planting
 - #1 exporter of forest products
 - Forest products are the #1 industry in Georgia.
 - Recent closures of three paper mills in Georgia removed roughly 8,000 truckloads of wood per week from state roads, but Georgia remains the national leader.
- Forest and environmental facts
 - Majority of forest land is privately owned, much by families.
 - Forests protect water quality via voluntary Best Management Practices (BMPs), with an estimated 96% acceptance rate.
 - Georgia forests offset roughly 23% of the state's fossil-fuel carbon emissions.
 - Current forests are growing ~50% more than is harvested annually, underscoring long-term sustainability.
- Mass timber overview
 - Mass timber products (e.g., cross-laminated timber, glue-laminated timber, dowel-laminated timber, nail-laminated timber) are large, engineered wood panels ("like huge dominoes") used for structural construction.

- Benefits:
 - Can reduce embodied carbon by up to 60% vs. concrete/steel.
 - Stores carbon in the built environment.
 - Speeds construction reduces on-site labor and traffic.
 - Supports local economies and forest landowners, helping keep “forests in forests.”
- Examples:
 - Ponce City Market and associated projects in Atlanta.
 - Georgia Tech buildings.
 - Data centers and public facilities (e.g., Georgia Forestry Commission’s new county office in Bleckley County) increasingly using mass timber.
- Fire performance: Thick mass timber chars on the outside and insulates the core, performing comparably to steel and concrete under fire standards; permitted under IBC 2021 (Type IV-A/B/C up to 18 stories).

Offers / Follow-up:

- Harrell offered to share his slide deck and provide further resources, including contacts, possible grant funding to help with architectural design, and lists of contractors experienced with mass timber construction.

Water Issues, Capacity, and Long-Term Supply

Context:

- Water was identified as a major strategic issue for both Monroe County and the City of Forsyth.

Current problems and technical issues:

- Water quality complaints tied to:
 - Sediment accumulation in the reservoir, requiring dredging.
 - Settlement and accumulation in aging water lines, which can be shaken loose by nearby construction activity and equipment vibration.

- Primary source is the reservoir, but distribution system age and condition also contribute.

Capacity and supply relationships:

- The City noted it currently has excess capacity, but:
 - The County buys most or all water from Macon Water Authority, particularly on the south side.
 - Previous relationships with Butts County have changed (Monroe County now purchases from Forsyth rather than Butts for some areas).
- Questions were raised about:
 - Whether Forsyth can increase treatment capacity (e.g., second treatment plant).
 - Whether city water would be used to supply large users like a potential data center on Smith Road, and how that affects county taps (e.g., Bunn Road).

Discussion themes:

- Need to revisit previous joint water planning efforts (e.g., past work on north/south taps that allowed water to move across the county).
- Desire to:
 - Share city's excess capacity where feasible.
 - Clarify who supplies what where, for both existing and future customers, especially industrial users and data centers.
 - Explore a long-term independent water source for Monroe County/Forsyth (e.g., new or multi-jurisdictional reservoir; Lake Juliette was mentioned as an example of a missed opportunity).

Consensus / Outcomes:

- General agreement that:
 - The current meeting will not resolve capacity and sourcing questions.
 - A joint working group / commission (city + county) should be established to:
 - Re-kick-start prior regional water planning discussions.

- Analyze capacity, infrastructure condition, reservoir dredging, and future demand (including data centers).
- Explore options for new or shared reservoirs and long-term water independence.
- Outside technical experts (engineering, finance, EPD/State, etc.) will likely be needed.

Service Delivery Strategy (SDS)

Presenter: Regional Commission staff (Laura Mathis and Greg Boike)

Legal and timeline context:

- Monroe County and the City of Forsyth currently have a certified Service Delivery Strategy (original 1999; update in 2007; minor amendment 2008; current SDS verified in 2019).
- A state law change in 2024:
 - Decoupled the SDS update from the Comprehensive Plan update, but both must still be current.
 - Directed the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) to create formal regulations for SDS.
- Next full SDS update (not just amendments) must be completed and verified by DCA by December 2028 (effectively submitted by late November 2028).

New requirements/highlights:

- Full redocumentation of:
 - Who provides each service, where, and how it is funded.
 - Service area maps must meet new parcel-based, standardized mapping requirements.
 - All referenced intergovernmental agreements must be produced (not just stated to exist); some may be decades old and will need to be located or redrafted.
 - New forms addressing land use conflict resolution at city/county boundary areas.

- Signed certifications on no double taxation, adherence to agreements, etc.
- Culloden:
 - Must be invited into SDS discussions.
 - Is not a required signatory, and thus not subject to sanctions if Forsyth and Monroe County fall out of compliance.

Sanctions and risks:

- Recent legislative changes tightened courts' ability to delay or waive sanctions for non-compliance.
- Losing SDS compliance can trigger withholding of state funds for non-emergency purposes and threaten Qualified Local Government status.

Discussion and direction:

- Participants acknowledged:
 - Water and sewer are typically the most complex and contentious services in SDS.
 - It would be unrealistic to start formal SDS work only in April 2028 and finish by November 2028.
- Recommended approach:
 - Begin pre-work well before 2028, including:
 - Assembling a joint staff leadership team to inventory current services, service areas, funding, and agreements.
 - Clarifying which services to include in SDS (law does not prescribe a fixed list; some communities go very broad, others narrower).
 - Formal triggers:
 - By law, the County must formally initiate SDS between April–July 2028; if not, the city can initiate.
 - Strong emphasis on collaborative approach to:
 - Reduce need for costly mediation/legal disputes.
 - Maintain local control and flexibility.

Comprehensive Plan

Timing and process:

- Existing comprehensive plans (County + Forsyth + Culloden) are valid through October 2027.
- Work on the next plan should start around October 2026 to finish by October 2027.
- All three jurisdictions share:
 - Same deadlines,
 - Same requirements, and
 - Will go through the process in parallel.

Structure and options:

- Historically, Monroe County, Forsyth, and Culloden have used a joint comprehensive plan:
 - One document with separate sections and work programs for each jurisdiction.
 - Joint process → more opportunities to address shared issues (growth, infrastructure, land use transitions).
- Some officials recalled prior plans as “separate”; Regional Commission clarified they have historically been joint, but with distinct county/city components.
- The group discussed:
 - Pros of joint planning (shared vision, better coordination, easier to align land use and infrastructure).
 - Concerns about time and complexity if all issues are addressed jointly.
 - Desire for respect for each jurisdiction’s decisions within its boundaries.

Required elements:

- Vision and goals, needs and opportunities.
- Broadband element (continuation of current requirement).

- Land use element (anticipated to be the most time-intensive, especially around city/county boundaries and transportation corridors).
- Transportation element, which must be consistent with the MPO's Metropolitan Transportation Plan, since part of Monroe County lies in the Macon urbanized area.

Potential optional elements:

- Topics such as housing, economic development, natural resources, downtowns, corridors, interstates, and others—many already addressed in the current plan.
- If previously included optional topics are not included in the new plan, that must be stated as an intentional choice.

Key discussion points:

- Growth management:
 - Multiple speakers stressed that growth (and avoidance of “becoming Henry County”) is the single most important long-term issue.
 - Emphasis on:
 - Thoughtful placement of high-density housing (primarily within or near Forsyth, not scattered into rural county areas).
 - Utilizing redevelopment opportunities along the interstate and in older neighborhoods.
- Land use work underway:
 - County has begun preliminary land use planning, with focus on:
 - Preserving a more rural character outside the city.
 - Leveraging 27 miles of interstate frontage for appropriate commercial/industrial uses, especially to help fund public safety.
 - Need for stronger coordination with Forsyth's plans to ensure consistency and reduce legal risk.
- Transportation & schools:
 - Transportation is tightly linked to land use.

- School traffic is a major contributor to congestion. Including the Board of Education in parts of the comprehensive planning process was recommended.

Who will write the plan:

- Regional Commission can serve as scribe and plan author at no charge, or the jurisdictions may hire a private consultant (at local cost).
- Early decision needed on:
 - Use of Regional Commission vs. consultant.
 - Joint vs. separate plan documents (while still meeting state requirements and coordinating timelines).
 - Membership of steering committees for each jurisdiction.

Transportation and Proposed Highway 41 Bypass

Problem identified:

- Significant truck traffic and speeding on Highway 41 through downtown Forsyth, causing congestion and safety concerns.
- Downtown access and traffic flow are already strained and expected to worsen with growth.

GDOT's position:

- The Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) will not meaningfully consider bypass options until:
 - The City of Forsyth and Monroe County jointly request the project.
 - There is demonstrated local consensus and a willingness to participate (including potential local funding for initial engineering).

Bypass concepts:

- Discussion centered on the 41/Collier Road/Highway 42 area near I-75:
 - Existing Collier Road alignment roughly paralleling the railroad and tying to 42 under the interstate.
 - Concept options:

1. Upgrade and straighten existing Collier Road to support truck traffic, improve the 41/Collier intersection, and better connect to 42.
 2. New grade-separated crossing of I-75, extending Collier Road across the interstate and tying directly into Highway 42.
- Preliminary cost estimates suggest a grade-separated option could be on the order of \$20–25 million in current dollars and would be a long-term project.

Traffic and speed data (7-day study on 41 north of Forsyth):

- Total vehicles: 51,340 over seven days (7,334 per day).
- Trucks: 18,000 total (2,543 per day), 35% of traffic.
- Speeding:
 - 26,700 speed violations (52% of vehicles).
 - Highest recorded speeds around 80–81 mph.
- The data supports the conclusion that:
 - Truck volumes are high.
 - Over half of vehicles are speeding through the corridor.

Policy and enforcement options discussed:

- Potential future use of:
 - No-truck routes through certain parts of downtown (with local-delivery exceptions), especially if a bypass is provided.
 - Time-of-day restrictions for large trucks (raised as a question).
- GDOT has, in other communities, abandoned state routes to cities once bypasses are built:
 - That would give the City full control over truck restrictions and signal management.
 - But would also shift maintenance and cost responsibilities to the city.

Concerns and perspectives:

- Some officials worry that:

- Even with a bypass, trucks cannot be fully prevented from using downtown if they have legitimate local deliveries.
- Eminent domain and impacts on existing property owners along any proposed alignment need careful consideration and strong public process.
- Others noted:
 - Truck drivers often choose bypasses voluntarily to avoid congestion and stoplights, especially under hours-of-service limits.
 - Removing heavy truck volumes could improve downtown safety and economic vitality.

Outcome:

- General agreement to:
 - Treat transportation/bypass as a major strategic issue, comparable to water.
 - Consider forming a joint transportation working group to:
 - Refine bypass alternatives,
 - Explore regulatory/enforcement changes, and
 - Engage GDOT in a structured way.

Coordination, Communication, Committees, and Next Steps

Communication history and expectations:

- Multiple speakers noted:
 - A mixed history of good collaboration and periods of tension between city and county.
 - Past joint meetings that produced little follow-through (“dog and pony shows,” “rubber stamping” plans just to satisfy DCA).
- Strong shared desire to:
 - Break that pattern,
 - Ensure real implementation of plans, and
 - Maintain continuous two-way communication:

- Between city and county, and
- Between committee members and their full elected bodies.

Committee / working group structure (four main topic areas):

1. Water (supply, quality, infrastructure, reservoir, long-term source).
2. Transportation / Highway 41 bypass and broader mobility issues.
3. Service Delivery Strategy (SDS).
4. Comprehensive Plan (including land use and growth management).

Proposed approach:

- City and County managers (and relevant staff) will:
 - Meet after this session to design committee structures for each of the four topics.
 - Identify subject-matter experts, staff leads, and elected liaisons.
 - Develop a basic game plan for:
 - Roles and responsibilities,
 - Expected deliverables (e.g., recommendations, draft maps, options), and
 - Initial timelines.
- Elected bodies (City Council and County Commission) will:
 - Formally appoint members to these committees/working groups.
 - Set clear expectations that:
 - Committees report back regularly.
 - Work is coordinated, not duplicative.
 - There is transparency back to all councilmembers and commissioners, not just committee members.

Use of scribes and documentation:

- Greg Boike's role as scribe/note-taker for this meeting was highlighted as helpful.
- There was support for:

- Having a designated scribe at joint meetings going forward.
- Producing and distributing concise written summaries of each session and committee work so all parties stay aligned.

Deadlines and near-term commitments:

- Agreement in principle that:
 - By end of May:
 - The City and County will have identified participants for committees/working groups on:
 - Water
 - Transportation / 41 bypass
 - Service Delivery Strategy
 - Comprehensive Plan
 - A high-level approach for each topic will be documented.
 - Future joint meetings should:
 - Be more working-oriented.
 - Focus on reports and recommendations from these committees and on gathering community input.
 - Avoid being purely informational sessions without follow-through.

Additional related issues:

- Schools and traffic:
 - Recognized that school schedules and parent drop-off/pick-up patterns are major traffic drivers.
 - Suggestions included:
 - Engaging the Board of Education in planning.
 - Exploring better bus utilization to reduce parent vehicles on the road.
- Downtown congestion and land use:

- Acknowledged that concentrating so many governmental and commercial activities near the courthouse square adds to congestion.
- Some suggested, over the long term:
 - Shifting certain facilities out of the immediate downtown core.
 - Encouraging new commercial centers in other parts of the city and county, guided by infrastructure and land use planning.

Adjourn

Commissioner Ambrose motioned to adjourn at 6:41 p.m.

Commissioner Rowland seconded the motion, and the motion carried 5-0.

Respectively Submitted by:

Janet Abbott, County Clerk