

Deal's State of the State address: 'Orchards of Opportunity'

Lt. Governor Cagle, Speaker Ralston, President Pro Tem Miller, Speaker Pro Tem Jones, members of the General Assembly, constitutional officers, members of the judiciary, members of the consular corps, my fellow Georgians:

This marks the eighth and final time that I come before you to report on the state of our state. In preparing to do so, I thought back on all the challenges we have faced over the better part of this past decade and all the successes we have achieved together. I considered the plans we have set into motion that will carry us well into the next decade and beyond.

I looked back on where we started in 2011, when only 111 of the 236 legislators here today were serving in this General Assembly, and was very pleased to see just how far we have come. And now, as we embark on a year of transition and set our gaze to what the future will hold, I am reminded of a parable of sorts passed down from the times of ancient Israel – one that each new generation and many different civilizations have adopted over the centuries.

As the story goes, there was once an older man who went out one day and planted a tree in his yard. A neighbor passing by saw what he was doing, stopped, shook his head, began to laugh, and said, "Old man, you are a fool. What good will it do you to plant a tree now that you are so old? You will not live long enough to be able to sit under the shade of that tree or enjoy its fruit."

The old man rose from his knees, looked at his neighbor and replied, "I am not planting this tree for me. I am planting it for those who come after me. Some day, they will come here during the heat of the day and be cooled by the shade of this tree. When I was a small child, I could eat fruit because those who came before me had planted trees. Am I not required to do the same for the next generation?"

Over the past seven years, we have endeavored to plant whole orchards of opportunity, some of which will not bear their largest fruits until those who come after us are sitting where you sit now. We have done so not only to bring Georgia out of the Great Recession and make our people prosperous once again, but also to ensure that our children and grandchildren will live in a thriving, safe and resilient state that they can be proud to call home... A place where hard work can lead to fulfillment of a life's dream.

Seven years ago, Georgia's unemployment rate stood at 10.4 percent. Since then, we have created roughly 675,000 new, private sector jobs and our unemployment rate is at its lowest level in over 10 years at just 4.3 percent. And on top of it all, we have been named the No. 1 state in which to do business for the fifth consecutive year.

Just this past fiscal year alone, the Georgia Department of Economic Development's Global Commerce team helped to generate \$6.33 billion in investment.

That outstanding growth is a result of 377 expansions and locations that cover every region of the state. Many people think that economic development projects are only happening in the Metro Atlanta region, but in fact, 80 percent of fiscal year 2017 locations took place outside the Metro Atlanta region. Our dedication is to the whole state, and the results of our top-ranked Department of Economic Development bear that out.

We have with us today all three of the commissioners who have led that agency during my time as your governor: Chris Cummiskey, Chris Carr and Pat Wilson. Will you gentlemen please stand and allow us to thank you for the exceptional work you have done over these past seven years?

As we consider the achievements of their respective dedicated teams, we should also take note of a tree we “re-planted” – you might say – which has taken deep root in recent years and borne greater and greater harvests with each passing year. I am referring to the film production industry.

Just ten years ago, this industry generated \$241 million in economic impact for the state. This past fiscal year alone, it generated \$9.5 billion in economic impact. That’s quite impressive growth for this tree of opportunity.

So great have our gains been that in 2016, Georgia was named the No. 1 filming location for the most successful movies.

Our growing Georgia Film Academy and list of studios in the state will also ensure that this year’s production industry impact will break even more records. In just two years, roughly 1,900 students have utilized Film Academy courses and a further 625 students are currently enrolled for this semester. So effective is this program, which now spans 13 University and Technical College System partners, that it has quickly become known as the “gold standard” in film and television production workforce training. In fact, when other states and countries around the world seek out guidance on building their own film production workforce, the Motion Picture Association of America now directs them to the Georgia Film Academy.

That same association tells us that the film industry is responsible for more than 92,000 jobs in the state. These are high-quality jobs, with an average salary of nearly \$84,000 - 75 percent higher than the average salary in the nation.

More than 200 new companies have located in the state to support this blossoming industry. These businesses and the infrastructure they build are what create permanent jobs for costume and set designers, electricians, camera operators, actors and other skilled industry professionals.

We seek to make Georgia a leader in all industries, however, which is why we have invested so much into our K-12 education system, because we know that the students of today are the workforce of tomorrow. As the man in our parable remarked, “When I was a small child, I could eat fruit because those who came before me had planted trees. Am I not required to do the same for the next generation?”

For however long we are granted the privilege of serving our fellow Georgians, we must strive to do the same. And so I would like to highlight the orchards of opportunity we have planted together that have the most far-reaching impact on our state – those that affect Georgia’s youngest citizens directly.

We have increased education spending by \$3.6 billion dollars over the last seven years, which includes my final budget proposal, making the total education expenditure during my time as governor roughly \$14 billion. No other administration in Georgia history has planted so many trees of knowledge.

One such tree we planted this past year is the Sandra Dunagan Deal Center for Early Language and Literacy at the Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville. It is a training and research center that focuses on children from birth to third grade – perhaps the most critical period of any child’s development and education. It is during this window of opportunity that we can best lay down a strong, enduring foundation for all other aspects of a student’s academic career. If we fail to reach Georgia’s youngest minds during that time, if we fail to get them reading on grade level by the end of third grade, they are much more likely to fall behind, both in the classroom and the life that awaits them beyond.

So I want to take this opportunity to recognize and thank one of the greatest standard-bearers of this issue of childhood literacy that Georgia has ever been blessed to have. She is a loving mother of four and a grandmother of six who spent much of her life in the classroom as one of our state's many dedicated educators. When our parents grew older and endured poor health, she invited them into our home, where they lived for many years. She looked after them and provided for every one of their needs. Her kindness is genuine and powerful. To those in her company, it is infectious; and it has touched countless hearts over the years, especially mine over the past 51 years that I have been blessed to call her my wife.

The English author Godfrey Winn wrote, "No man succeeds without a good woman beside him. Wife or mother. If it is both, he is twice blessed indeed." I am one of those individuals who has been twice blessed indeed to have such a magnificent partner, friend, wife, and mother stand beside me all these years. What joys I have been privileged to have in this life and this profession are thanks in no small part to her generosity and effort.

Her passion has always been and continues to be improving the lives of children. When she became the First Lady of our state, her efforts to improve child welfare and educational opportunities did not stop, they only grew and took on new forms. I can tell you that she has visited all 159 counties, some of them multiple times, and all 181 school districts. In total, she has made 834 school visits, to date, and has no plans of slowing down.

But the real importance of those numbers can only be understood if you have the pleasure of seeing her in the classroom. She doesn't just visit a school for a handshake with the principal and a photo. She reads to the children. She listens to them intently. She hugs them the way only mothers and grandmothers seem to know how to do, so that they know they are loved.

In fact, those children usually send her letters thanking her for visiting. Those little tokens of appreciation are often written in crayon, and we receive whole bundles of them regularly. In one such package was a letter from a student in an early grade who wrote to Sandra and said, "thank you for visiting my school and thank you for running the State of Georgia."

My wife made certain that I saw that letter. She said she wanted me to know of that student's appreciation for her real job.

Will you join me in recognizing this woman who is a First Lady in every respect of the word?

When I took office in 2011, there were many dilemmas facing this state. And so before we even began to plant new orchards of opportunity in the fertile ground of Georgia, we went about the business of saving those trees which were in danger of being felled by the economic downturn. One of the most critical was our HOPE Scholarship and Grant programs, which were on the cusp of bankruptcy. This legacy of a man who impacted Georgia perhaps more than anyone else in the latter portion of the 20th century – Governor Zell Miller – was one of the most generous merit-based scholarship programs in the country when it was created. It continues to be so today because of the reforms we put into place seven years ago.

Because we did the difficult but necessary work of saving that tree of opportunity, many more students will sit under its shade in the years to come and benefit from its fruit of higher education, whether in the form of a certificate, associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree.

Our public colleges and universities have been, and will continue to be, a source of pride. In fact, according to the 2018 U.S. News & World Report public school rankings, Georgia is currently one of only three states to have more than one higher education institution in the top 20.

Our state will depend on the continued production of quality graduates from these types of institutions if we want to preserve our educated, trained and sustained workforce. In order for us to achieve that goal, we must have workers who possess the requisite knowledge and skills for the jobs of today and the future. Some of those jobs will require a college degree. Others will require certifications and more specialized degrees from a technical school. We need both our University and Technical College Systems to remain competitive, and I am happy to report that both have adjusted their degree and training programs to meet the needs of our state's diverse economic climate.

With us today is the new Commissioner of our Technical College System, Matt Arthur, who also helped to lead the University of Georgia Bulldogs to their 1980 national championship as an offensive lineman. Matt, in recognition of your leadership in the arena and the field of education, will you please stand and be recognized?

While we continue to support and expand the opportunities within our university system, I have also been pleased that in recent years, we have added certificate and degree programs within our Technical College System that provide a solution for the problems we faced coming out of the Great Recession. At the height of our unemployment rate, I asked the employers of our state: "can you find proper candidates here in Georgia for the open positions in your company?" Their answer was often a very loud "no."

So we created a program, known as the HOPE Career Grant, which covers 100 percent of tuition for technical school students who enroll in one of Georgia's strategic industry, high-demand fields. Although this program is only a few years old, it is already bearing exceptional fruit. In fact, of those students who take advantage of this resource, 99.2 percent find employment upon completion of their training and studies.

That is why I was proud to grow that forest of potential by adding five new categories to that incredibly successful program. As of 10 days ago, we now have 17 specific fields that allow our employers to answer "yes" when I ask them whether they can find qualified candidates for open jobs.

Throughout our state, at all 22 TCSG campuses, we have pockets of excellence in terms of economic development. In order to better leverage those tools, I am happy to announce that we will create a new Deputy Commissioner position within our Technical College System. This individual will develop and maintain a unified process with our 22 campuses, the University System, and the Department of Economic Development in terms of how those campuses interact with companies here in Georgia. This will create an organized and seamless effort to assist existing businesses that can benefit from TCSG's training in an ever-changing and evolving marketplace.

I would like to introduce you to the woman who will fill that new Deputy Commissioner role, who happens to be with us in the gallery today. Laura Gammage, would you please stand and allow us to recognize you for the important job you are undertaking?

To further aid those coming into our workforce or those seeking new opportunities, we will also be moving our state's Division of Workforce Development to the Technical College System. In addition, we will be relocating the state's customized recruitment office to TCSG, further consolidating these separate workforce development components into a more cohesive and workable system.

Our Technical College system is a resource whose benefits to the entire state will only increase as the number of students increases. In light of the fact that 30 percent of Georgia's high school students choose not to pursue further education or training opportunities once they graduate, we initiated a broad marketing campaign over this past year that showcases all that a technical college has to offer. It is already producing great results, reaching young adults throughout this state who would not have previously considered a career opportunity at one of our technical colleges.

To build on that success, my proposed budget includes an additional \$1 million for this campaign so that we can strategically market the colleges throughout Georgia.

I want to share with you some of those fruits of our labor today. So please direct your attention to the following videos that feature students telling us about the great opportunities available through TCSG. You will also hear from a young man whose life journey was significantly altered by specialized training offered through TCSG.

Video 1: ["Next"](#)

Video 2: ["Dual"](#)

Video 3: [Interview with Joshua Hutchinson](#)

We're pleased to have Joshua Hutchinson with us today, along with his welding instructor, Scott Eidson. Will you both please stand so that we can recognize your hard work?

Joshua, and others like him around the state, are why I am adding \$1 million in my amended budget proposal to fund two mobile labs that will further enhance our already successful TCSG welding program.

Yet another area where we are planting saplings that will soon cover our entire state is in the field of transportation.

Three years ago, I asked the General Assembly to act boldly and provide a means of transportation funding capable of addressing our aging infrastructure. Because of your brave action and bipartisan support, we were able to make the first meaningful transportation investments in an entire generation through projects sprouting up throughout Georgia.

Thanks to the Transportation Funding Act, we are preparing for future generations and the sustained growth we're seeing throughout the state through our unprecedented 10-year, \$11 billion transportation investment plan.

Speaking of highway infrastructure, the last time I spoke in this chamber was on Sine Die of the last session. So let me take this opportunity to ask that you please refrain from setting any fires on your way out of town this year?

Of the many men and women throughout Georgia we have to thank for our transportation improvements, there is one in particular who deserves our gratitude for making our Department of Transportation the most capable and cutting-edge in the country.

We are fortunate to have that man with us today, so I would like to ask that Commissioner Russell McMurry stand as we give him a round of applause for his contributions.

Over the past seven years, we have partnered together on many great undertakings that now serve as the standard for other states to emulate. One of the proudest has been our overwhelmingly successful and bipartisan criminal justice reforms. This is a tree well-planted, and one that is changing lives for the better every day.

We are also doing what so many thought impossible only a decade ago: offering those who have made mistakes and are willing to work hard to correct them a second chance through our accountability courts. The

roots of this growing system have taken time to grow, having met obstacles in the soil along the way. But they have proven to be some of the most effective components of our overall criminal justice reforms.

Individuals whose lives were once controlled by addictions are now able to reclaim forfeited potential, reconnect with their children, retain employment and contribute as taxpaying citizens, and restore hope for a brighter tomorrow.

If you do not think this makes a difference, I invite you to attend an accountability court graduation. You will find that your money has been well spent.

From the time we first began our criminal justice reforms, the number of state-funded accountability court programs has increased from just 12 to 149. I am happy to report that every one of our 49 judicial circuits now has at least one type of accountability court in operation.

When we consider the savings to all Georgians - in the form of lower public expenditures, lower rates of crime, and lives made whole - our criminal justice reforms, especially our education and reentry initiatives, have been well worth the investment. This tree of reform and redemption has taken root quickly and is growing new branches of reclaimed opportunity every day. It is now greater than any other tree of its kind in the nation, and one that will continue to put Georgia at the pinnacle of this issue.

We would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to thank all those who had a hand in the planting of our criminal justice reform tree. If you have been a member of the Criminal Justice Reform Council, would you please stand and be recognized?

The members of the General Assembly have almost unanimously supported this Council's recommendations over the past six years. This year, we will be asking you to favorably consider more of their recommended reforms, further enhancing our public safety.

A couple of weeks ago, I had the pleasure of addressing Georgia's newest troopers who graduated from the 101st Trooper School – a fitting conclusion to the 80th anniversary of the Georgia State Patrol. These men and women of courage who wear a badge and vest each day in service to their fellow citizens help make our communities safer places to call home. Along with our local police officers, GBI personnel, DNR rangers, corrections and parole officers, and our National Guardsmen, they protect our lives and property.

It is because of their valor and remarkable devotion to duty that we as Georgians can live in a safer state. These everyday heroes are the ones who protect our trees of opportunity and ensure that they can grow unabated for future generations to enjoy.

Will you join me in recognizing that valued service?

This past year, we planted a tree of hope for families that confront mental health issues. My office created a Commission on Children's Mental Health last June, charged with providing recommendations on improving state mental health services for our children.

I can now tell you that the Commission's report has been received and my budget proposal includes \$22.9 million in funding based on their recommendations.

This is neither an obituary nor a farewell address, but it is the last time I will have the opportunity to address all of you in this formal setting. We have much work to do during this session. I will work vigorously with you during this year to continue to polish the apples we are harvesting.

In a little over a year's time, Sandra and I will depart from public life after almost four decades of service to the people of this state. But others in this chamber and beyond will continue to have great opportunities to serve their fellow Georgians.

As you do so, I urge you not to neglect the trees and orchards we have planted over these past seven years. What we do in this historic building, the actions we take in these chambers of service, the choices we make while in positions of elected authority must be for the betterment of all Georgians.

We must adopt the same mindset and gaze as the pecan farmer in South Georgia who plants a tree and knows that its growth is well worth the decades of careful attention it will take to nurture it to its greatest heights... Just as a parent does the same for a child.

That is who we have planted these trees for: our children and grandchildren. They are who we must call to mind with every bill presented, with every vote cast, and with every campaign announcement. Will our actions help or hinder those who come after us?

My administration and I have worked diligently these past seven years to serve our fellow citizens. We have work yet to do in this final year, but soon we will look to you, ladies and gentlemen, to water and tend the orchards of opportunity we have planted together and to continue planting seeds and saplings of potential – not for personal gain, but for those who will in future years come during the heat of the Georgia day and be cooled by the shade of those trees.

And now, in these last moments I have with you today, I want to say how very thankful I am for your partnership over these years. A little more than half of the legislators here today were not in office when I gave my first State of the State address in 2011. Yet whether it was with old partners or new, we have still worked together these past seven years to make Georgia the No. 1 place for business five times over, the leader in so many pressing areas of our time, and the state where so many want to live, learn, and raise their families.

I also want to thank all those in the executive branch who have served so diligently to improve the lives of our fellow citizens and fulfill our constitutional responsibilities. From our agency heads and commissioners on down to our leadership teams, support staff, compassionate caseworkers, officers, and all state workers – thank you for what you do to make our state more prosperous, secure, educated, and free.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my senior staff, both past and present, who have given so much of themselves over these past seven years for the betterment of others. Some have gone on to serve their fellow Georgians in other capacities, while others have remained with me since the very beginning of my term. Some have even been with me for decades...

They have become an extension of my family, and to them I say: Sandra and I will always cherish what you have done for us and what you mean to us.

Finally, I want to speak directly to the people of Georgia. Words alone are incapable of expressing how grateful I am that you have allowed Sandra and me to serve you. It has been the honor of a lifetime to travel every part of this state and to marvel at the character, fortitude and talent of our people. The achievements we have enjoyed are ultimately the result of your hard work and perseverance.

Thank you for putting your trust in us. Thank you for your kindness, your support, your encouragement and your prayers.

Today, I can say with great authority that the State of our State is not just strong, it is exceptional!

I close with the words from my first Inaugural Address in 2011:

“Let us refocus State Government on its core responsibilities and relieve our taxpayers of the burden of unnecessary programs. Let us be frugal and wise. Let us restore the confidence of our citizens in a government that is limited and efficient. Together, let us make Georgia the brightest star in the constellation of these United States.”

As we stand beneath the trees and orchards of opportunity we have planted and look up to the heavens, we see that the light of our star now shines brightest of all, and that light will endure and not fade away...