

Roaming Around Reidsville

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In August of 2015, I must admit to feeling a little trepidation. Our new City Manager Preston Mitchell was coming on board, and I wasn't sure what to expect. I had only worked for two previous managers, and one had been a co-worker first. Preston Mitchell was an unknown entity.

Fast forward to January of 2021. Manager Mitchell announced his resignation last month after five-plus years at the helm of Reidsville City Government. And, I can truthfully say, I will miss Preston and the leadership he has brought to our City.

As I prepared to write this column, I wanted to share what Preston and City staff, under his direction, have been able to accomplish over the past five years. I quickly decided I didn't have enough space to write everything, but I felt I could get across what I considered the high points of his tenure here in Reidsville.

Reidsville Councilman James Festerman summed it up well. He talked of getting the call from Preston that he was resigning. "Believe me, I tried to talk him out of it," said Councilman Festerman. "He will be difficult to replace and has played a key role in economic development and staff development. His great work will benefit Reidsville for many years to come."

Preston brought with him a high energy level that was displayed across all areas of City government and its operations, but perhaps, nowhere was this more evident than in economic development. He stressed to his Management Team down to the front-line workers that we all



The Preston Mitchell family, above, at their Reidsville home. At left, outgoing City Manager Preston Mitchell wearing his "Team Reidsville" hat at the beach with daughter, Riley.

are responsible for Reidsville's growth and vitality. Whether you pave streets in Public Works or count pennies in Finance, we are all critical to the City's economic growth and development.

Since Preston has been in Reidsville, we have seen some 1,250 new jobs come as part of new or expanding industries and businesses. Industries like Stericycle, Merchant 1 Manufacturing and Speedline have moved to the City from nearby Greensboro. Unifi, Smith-Carolina, Elevated Environmental and Albaad have expanded their local operations and product lines. Sanritsu Logistics is the newest addition to the Reidsville Industrial Park while Farmina, an Italian pet food company, recently announced plans to build in the park in the near future. Industries like Bovone and Pella have also come to the Reidsville area, among others.

While a lot of people both at the City and County level helped make these economic development announcements a reality, Preston has been an integral part in fostering an environment here in Reidsville dedicated to making things happen, even with COVID-19 in the mix. His "can do" attitude has resonated with the rest of our staff. He actively looked for economic development activities on a daily basis. As one Management Team member stated, Preston didn't just think outside the box, he blew the box away.

Yet it wasn't just about bringing new businesses to Reidsville. It also was about keeping the businesses and industries we have. A big part of that was listening to the needs of our local industries and creating a business climate where the exchange of good ideas was sought. Part of that was the establishment of the Reidsville Industrial Alliance, creating a stronger working relationship with the Reidsville Chamber of Commerce and partnering with a variety of organizations, from the schools to nonprofits like the Reidsville Area Foundation and the Dan River Basin Association. The Manual Machining Program at Reidsville High School, the Mountains-to-the-Sea Trail, funding of Interstate 785 -- all of these are programs and initiatives that have been pushed by the City. Another piece internally was focusing on customer service, making every effort to find ways to assist our local businesses and looking for alternatives when problems arose. While every problem can't be resolved, Preston stressed to staff the need to look for other ways to help if at all possible.

Working on plans for The Depot District, centered around the revitalization of the former Adams Electric building, is a project that we expect will reap benefits for the City and has been the brainchild of Preston and City staff. The Adams Electric building was one of the first buildings that Preston remembered seeing when he first came here to interview for the job. That was when he started envisioning what that area across the railroad tracks one day could be, an eclectic neighborhood mixing residential, commercial and residential growth.

Hand in hand with economic development comes quality of life issues. Preston realized that if we wanted people to come here to work and live, we also needed to give them the component of

“play”. Preston emphasized recreation, working to strengthen the athletics program to getting more playground equipment and a dog park. Improvements at Lake Reidsville have included everything from installation of WiFi, a small zipline and a fishing trail to a sewer improvement project to benefit the campground area. Building on the existing walking trails the City already had to creating a blueways network has been a front burner item for our Recreation and Planning departments for many months now. The City’s emphasis on recreation is reflected by the recent announcement that the Old North State League, a collegiate summer league, is coming to Jaycee Park starting next year.

Preston realized that once people come to Reidsville, they need something to view and do. He sought to revitalize the downtown area, providing such amenities as downtown game boards and creating a historical tour using QR Codes that visitors can watch videos about local landmarks. He supported Reidsville Downtown Corporation’s Project DREAM (Downtown Reidsville Empowering Art Movement) and efforts to beautify the downtown commercial district. Current projects that are in the works include the Patriot Park showcasing historical documents, the Sesquicentennial Celebration and Clock Tower planned for 2023 and The Block mural project honoring the once-vibrant business community on Northeast Market Street, now known as Dr. Martin Luther King Drive. And let us not forget the recent announcement that Brown Entertainment plans to turn the former Rockingham Theatre into a live entertainment venue like they have done at their Liberty Showcase. We truly believe that this will be Rockingham County’s biggest tourism draw. All of this was being done, including an intensive 2020 Census campaign, in the midst of COVID-19.

Preston brought with him the idea to aggressively pursue federal and state grants in a big way. Such grants have helped industries like Unifi to expand and the Lucky City Brewery, which plans to open in 2021, much earlier than many of their counterparts across the State. Other grants have helped rebuild our infrastructure, especially our sewer and water lines and improve both our Water and Wastewater Treatment Plants; and establishing a Neighborhood Revitalization program to assist low-to-moderate residents in rehabbing their homes.

Preston would be the first to say that it takes everyone working together to make these things happen. He has stressed the team concept and is quick to credit the Council and his employees for any success. But for anything, from economic development to showcasing our quality of life amenities, Preston believed that marketing was key. It is not surprising that our marketing firm came up with the “Team Reidsville” mantra. When your City has the most State high school football championships, it is a given that the team concept is a good idea on which to hang your marketing campaign.

We have encouraged newcomers to Reidsville as part of our residential relocation program, “Reside in Reidsville,” and we have focused on “selling Reidsville to Reidsville” through

programs like our “Team Reidsville Training Camp” for local residents, both new and established. Preston knew the importance of telling our story, using more press releases, our City website, social media, videos and advertising to get the word out about the good things on in Reidsville. We have encouraged everyone to become a part of “Team Reidsville”.

Councilman Donald Gorham complimented Preston not only on his professional abilities but also his personal attributes. “Preston has been the complete package,” the Councilman said. “He has been trustworthy, respectful and approachable. He has been a good listener and has had the ability to communicate with the Mayor, City Council, community and staff. In short, he is a man of good character and integrity.”

“I wish the very best for Preston and his family,” said Councilman Festerman. “Our loss will be Mebane’s gain.”

Preston’s last official day in the office will be Monday, January 4, 2021, as he accepts the post as Assistant City Manager in Mebane. The City’s Management Team, led by Interim City Manager Chris Phillips, will be tasked with keeping us going on in a positive direction as the City Council works to secure a new City Manager. Many projects and economic development leads that had been in the works before COVID-19 hit will need to be revisited. Preston will not be there to nudge us to re-establish those contacts and continue working on economic development leads and other projects. No doubt that Preston, known for dropping memorable sayings to staff and within the community, would remind us if he was here not to let anyone “out-Reidsville Reidsville.”

However, I hope Preston’s legacy to us all is that he has shown us what Reidsville can become. We will take what we have learned from him and continue to apply it for the good of the City. We will miss them, but we wish Preston and his lovely family, wife Carleigh and daughters Rileigh and Anna, much success in their future pursuits. We’d like to think that no matter where they go, they will always, deep down, be a part of “Team Reidsville”.