

Officials sworn in as commissioners reflect on 2016 and look toward new year

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

County Commissioners reflected on 2016 and the challenges ahead as county officials were sworn in on Monday, Dec. 5.

Commissioners who won re-election this year — Dave Plyler, Richard Linville and Gloria Whisenhunt — once again took the oath of office.

Lynne Johnson, the new register of deeds, and Timothy Disher, a new soil and water supervisor, were also sworn-in. The commissioners unanimously re-elected Plyler as their chair and Don Martin as their vice-chair.

Plyler used the meeting to reflect on the past year. He considered the county bonds, which voters ratified in November, a major accomplishment. The three bonds supply \$350 million in capital funds for Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School, \$65 million for Forsyth Technical Community College, and \$15 million for county parks.

"This is an eight-year

strategy to invest in our greatest assets that I believe will serve all our citizens into the future," said Plyler.

Plyler also said the county has worked to promote job growth. The county has begun developing a new Idols Road business park near Tanglewood Park, which already has companies that want to locate there. He said that the county's incentives have created jobs by attracting furniture manufacturer Beaufum to relocate to Forsyth and Corning Optical Communications, which makes fiber optic cables, to expand.

Plyler said the ban on unsupervised teetering is the most progressive thing the county has done for dogs. The ordinance, which was long debated by commissioners and passed with a split vote, will take a year to go into effect.

He also said the new Stepping Up program will have a positive impact on those in the Law Enforcement Detention Center. The pilot program,



Photo by Todd Luck

Register of Deeds Lynne Johnson is sworn in by Clerk of Court Susan Frye as her husband, Tommy, holds the Bible.

which will serve female inmates, uses case management and intervention to reduce recidivism among the mentally ill and substance abusers in jail.

Looking to 2017, the county will be re-opening the Central Library, which has been closed for renovations since October 2014. Ground will also be broken

on a new library in Kernersville. Plyler expects the reappraisal of property values to show that home values have risen in Forsyth County.

The biggest piece of unfinished business for the commissioners is the renovation or replacement of the aging Hall of Justice courthouse. The project is

estimated to cost between \$112 million and \$145 million and is sorely needed, according to many lawyers and judges who use the building regularly. Originally it was presented as a possible bond referendum, but many feared voters wouldn't support it on the ballot. Commissioners instead decided to take it

up separately in September, using limited obligation bonds that wouldn't require voter approval, but never got past a presentation on possible options for the project.

Some commissioners have expressed concerns that the county would have to take on too much debt for the project.

During the commissioners' individual remarks, Walter Marshall said that he also felt environmental concerns and increasing the requirements for minority contractors on county projects should also be a priority.

Commissioner Everette Witherspoon said that infant mortality dropping to the lowest rate in county history is something else they can take pride in this year. Witherspoon said he'd like to see early and middle college at Winston-Salem State University for high school students, and would like to see local businesses fund pre-k education for children in Forsyth County.



New South Ward City Council Member John Larson is sworn in by Judge Lisa Meneff as outgoing Council Member Molly Leight holds the Bible during the Dec. 5 City Council meeting.



Photos by Todd Luck
Molly Leight is now retired from the City Council after a decade of representing the South Ward.

City Council says farewell to Molly Leight as John Larson takes the oath of office

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After a decade representing the South Ward, Molly Leight held the Bible for her successor, John Larson, as he took the oath to become the newest member of the Winston-Salem City Council on Monday, Dec. 5.

Larson, who is retiring as vice president of restoration at Old Salem, was asked by Leight to run for the South Ward seat when she decided not to seek re-election. Larson faced Carolyn Highsmith in the Democratic primary and narrowly lost by six votes. He challenged the election, due to the wrong ballots being given to voters, and the State BOE had the South Ward primary held again in June, which he decisively won.

He also defeated his Republican opponent in the general election to finally claim the seat he took for the first time on Monday.

"It's an honor for me to be here sitting in Molly Leight's seat," said Larson. "I'll try to fill it."

Larson said the City Council works best when it works together. He said that Leight's election in 2005 turned the council from a "form of contention to a collaborative series of colleagues."

"She created a new respect for the office and for the council, as well as for herself, through quiet

competence and through her cheerful disposition both on the board and off the board," said Larson.

Leight defeated conservative City Council Member Vernon Robinson, whose vitriolic style and views made him a source of conflict. The members of the council echoed Larson's comments that Leight had been a good colleague during her tenure.

Derwin Montgomery said he learned from Leight when to ask the right questions. Jeff MacIntosh praised her passion and integrity.

"I thank you for being the type of lady who loves everybody," said Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke, "who appreciates and understands diversity and respecting the culture of all people."

Leight is a Winston-Salem native, who grew up in Izmir, Turkey, where she resided through high school. After that she returned to Winston-Salem to attend Salem College and ultimately earned a master's degree from Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She had retired from being a research assistant when members of the City Council encouraged her to run.

Leight said that she's tried to keep inappropriate business development out of South Ward neighborhoods, especially those around Peters Creek

Parkway. She said she's proud of ordinances she's passed that have helped improve the quality of life in the city, like one that requires developers to keep a percentage of mature trees on land they use.

Leight has served on many boards over the years and currently chairs the Gateway YWCA board. She's a master gardener and a frequent traveler with the N.C. Zoological Society on African safaris and other exotic trips.

Leight hopes she can maintain her friendships with council members. She said she plans to let them know how they're doing in the monthly public comment sessions during council meetings.

"It's not goodbye, it's so long," said Leight.

The rest of the incumbents on the City Council and Mayor Allen Joines also took their oaths during the meeting. The council re-elected Burke as mayor pro tempore. They also approved committee appointments. Larson will serve on the public safety and public works committees. Joines said the city will address numerous challenges in the new year, including poverty. In 2014, more than 24 percent of city residents lived in poverty. The mayor's Poverty Thought Force is finalizing its suggestions on how to significantly decrease local poverty.

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