

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

Fall/November 2022

Councilmember Chris J. Suggs · Post Office Box 3355, Kinston, NC 28502

CHRIS J.
Suggs
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Kinston City Council



THANK YOU, KINSTON!

It has officially been one year since my election to the Kinston City Council! Thank you so much to the citizens of Kinston who chose me to serve in this capacity.

I am so proud of what we were able to accomplish in our campaign for this seat last year, and over the last 11 months since taking office. From filling potholes to supporting job creation and new housing, this has been a productive year and I'm grateful that I've been able to make an impact. I love calling Kinston home, and I'm excited to be making this a city that we can be proud of!

NEW PETCO LOCATION NOW OPEN IN KINSTON

This month, I (and my dog, Royce) had the honor of joining Petco and the Kinston-Lenoir Chamber of Commerce at their ribbon-cutting for Petco's newest location.

This new location, branded as a "Neighborhood Farm & Pet Supply" will be a one-stop shops for health and wellness solutions for pets and farm animals such as horses, cows, pigs, sheep, goats and more. It is located at 1150 Hill Farm Road, near Wal-mart.



22 ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2022

In celebration of me finishing my first year as a City Councilmember, as well as the fact that at 22-years-old I am the *youngest* elected official in our entire state, I've decided to pinpoint 22 projects that we've been able to accomplish in the year 2022. These initiatives range from improving the inner-workings of our local government, to projects that will have long-lasting impacts on our community for years to come.

LET'S GET STARTED...

1. Dedicated a historic marker to honor the Adkin High School Walkout. In 1951, over 700 students at Adkin High School staged a walkout in protest of inferior school conditions in comparison to Grainger High School across town. This historic marker is located on the corner of Washington Avenue and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard.

2. Opened a daily vaccination & testing site at Holloway Recreation Center at the height of the Omicron wave, and hired a COVID-19 coordinator. We utilized a Community Development Block Grant to increase access to COVID-19 vaccinations and testing to help protect our community, and I created a COVID-19 coordinator position to manage these programs. Governor Roy Cooper visited our vaccination & testing site and also applauded Kinston Teens for their COVID-19 response efforts in partnership with the State of North Carolina.

3. Implemented an economic development utility incentive program to make Kinston more attractive for industries to start operations here and utilize our electric system. This incentive will make our electric utility more competitive with Duke Energy and help attract new large industrial businesses to utilize the City of Kinston for electric power.

4. Led the creation and adoption of the Emma Webb Master Plan, helping it to receive \$1 million in funding for park renovations. Through a partnership between Kinston Teens, Kinston-Lenoir Parks & Recreation, and the American Flood Coalition, I helped lead the creation of a comprehensive plan for seven-acre Emma Webb Park. The City Council formally adopted this plan in February and by August we secured \$1 million dollars in funding for the renovations.

5. Developed proposals for the City Council to fund projects that address housing, community development, and food insecurity in East Kinston. I developed and presented these proposals to the City Council in May of this year as the City deliberated how to spend the \$6.3 million in American Rescue Plan funds.

6. Completed renovations at historic Holloway Pool. Utilizing Community Development Block Grant funds, we embarked and finalized more than \$200,000 in renovations at Holloway Pool—making this pool more handicap accessible as well as adding other enhancements such as striping, in-pool stairs, and new entry/exit points.

7. Provided free at-home COVID rapid tests at City Hall and parks & recreation facilities. I secured more than 5,000 rapid antigen tests that were distributed to City employees as well as made available to the public at City Hall and our recreation facilities.

8. Began recruiting developers to rehab the Glen Raven Mills property on the Neuse River. The City acquired this property from the McConnell family several years ago and is exploring the possibility of a major development at that location—potentially to include retail, residential, entertainment, and more.

9. Implemented pay raises for all of the City's employees. In February, we unanimously approved a pay scale change for all of our full-time employees to help with recruitment and retention across all our departments. In June, we implemented a pay increase for our part-time employees that went into effect in our FY2023 (July) budget.

10. Added three streets in East Kinston to the 2022 road improvements project. Initially, not a single street east of Queen Street and south of Vernon —>

22 ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2022

Avenue was included in this year's road improvements plan. After bringing it up with our Public Services department, we were able to identify three streets in East Kinston that could be resurfaced. These streets were completed in October.

11. Met with and toured our Police, Finance, MIS, and Human Resources departments, learning about their functions and how they contribute to our community. I started these tours and meetings on my first day after being sworn-in back in December 2021, and have continued working with and learning from our departments.

12. Stopped a punitive juvenile curfew from getting implemented. Mayor Don Hardy introduced a strict curfew between the hours of 9PM and 6AM. I raised a concern that this curfew would do more harm than good for the youth of our community, and that the majority of shootings this year occurred before 9PM.

13. Initiated the city manager search and hired a permanent city manager. After months of delay, I amended our January meeting agenda to include moving forward with the recruitment of a permanent city manager. We conducted a national search with more than 50 candidates and selected Rhonda Barwick as the city's permanent manager. Barwick, a Kinston native, has held various positions in city operations in a career spanning over 28 years.

14. Spoke at NC Black Elected Municipal Officials Conference. This conference, held annually, brings together Black mayors and councilmembers from across North Carolina to discuss best practices in local governments and topics of interest such as public safety, affordable housing, and economic development. I served as a keynote speaker for the conference's luncheon in Beaufort.

15. Participated in numerous community beautification projects with local organizations and city departments. From supporting beautification projects downtown and on Queen Street, to working with city departments to clean up around the Holloway neighborhood, this has been a busy year keeping Kinston clean and vibrant!

16. Invested \$2,020,506 in infrastructure replacement on Vernon Avenue, paving the way for NCDOT to move forward with resurfacing the road. The NC Department of Transportation plans to have Vernon Avenue repaved in 2025, but if the City completes our infrastructure work sooner they will work to move up their resurfacing schedule.

17. Introduced and passed a policy to make it easier for citizens to acquire real estate from the City through the upset bid process. The City owns several hundred vacant and underutilized properties, many of which are in East Kinston. This policy streamlines the upset bid process for our citizens and mandates that a list is published of what properties are available for bid.

18. Supported the development of more than 540 units of new middle-market housing. The City has worked on agreements with four different developers for new single-family homes. We anticipate nearly a million dollars in new annual revenue from these projects.

19. Allocated \$675,000 for enhancements at Historic Grainger Stadium, including a new state-of-the-art scoreboard. This significant investment will enhance the game-day experience for the Down East Wood Ducks and fans near and far, while also showing our strong commitment to keeping baseball in Kinston.

20. Amended our Unified Development Ordinance to allow for tattoo parlors downtown. Historically, tattoo parlors had not operated within the city limits. With this new change, we issued a special use permit for House of Ink Tattoo Studio to open at 111 North Queen Street.

21. Became a facilitator for Rochelle Middle School's leadership program. Launched by Principal Terry Wooten, this program engages community leaders and Rochelle's students in monthly sessions on leadership and character development. I facilitate lessons with a class of 7th graders each month.

22. Launched a 'city council office hours series' across the city for citizens to meet with me and find solutions to their problems. The first was held on November 17 at the Lenoir County Council on Aging. Various members of the City's staff will be invited and may be available to answer questions from citizens.

POLICY UPDATES

CITY COUNCIL PASSES POLICY TO PROMOTE THE SALE OF VACANT CITY-OWNED PROPERTIES

Last month, I introduced a policy aimed at promoting the sale of vacant city-owned properties and streamlining the city's property bidding process. The policy was on the agenda for the City Council to discuss during our October 18 meeting, and after careful consideration we unanimously voted to approve it.

The City of Kinston currently owns several hundred vacant and underutilized properties throughout our community that have been a strain on city resources to keep clean and maintained. I'm excited to have been able to introduce this policy that will make it easier for interested citizens to identify what properties are owned by the City of Kinston and define clear procedures and requirements for those citizens to submit bids to purchase them.

The policy directs the city's staff to develop a list of city-owned properties that are of no use to the city government and present that list to the council each December. Once the council approves, that list will be advertised on the city's website and social media— and available to view at Kinston's city hall.



Most of the properties owned by the city are located in East Kinston, a historically Black community that is home to the most economically distressed census tract in the entire state, according to a 2014 report by UNC-Chapel Hill. This neighborhood has been devastated by hurricanes and catastrophic flooding, causing the city to acquire a significant number of properties through flood buyout programs. Properties subject to flood buyout restrictions will not be available for purchase under this policy, however, they will be maintained by the city while they develop long-term plans for those flood-impacted areas.

Prior to joining the city council, I worked with the city to develop a vacant lot adoption program to help with this issue. That program allowed nonprofit organizations to beautify city-owned properties for two years. This new policy is different as it encourages the outright acquisition of these properties and will grow the city's tax base.

It's important that our council seeks ways to increase revenue without raising tax rates for our citizens, and I believe this policy is one way that we can do that. Putting these properties back in the hands of private citizens, businesses, and organizations will increase the tax base for the city and encourage community development and economic growth for our neighborhoods.

TATTOO PARLOR COMING TO KINSTON

During an October council meeting, we received a request to amend our Unified Development Ordinance to allow for tattoo parlors to operate downtown. As it stood, these businesses were not allowed to operate in our 27-block downtown area nor have we had a tattoo parlor operate at all in the city limits for years. After careful consideration, we approved this request and subsequently approved a Special Use Permit for Brandon Corey to operate a tattoo parlor at 111 North Queen Street.

Kinston is positioning itself as an arts & cultural destination in Eastern North Carolina, and tattooing is one of many artistic forms of cultural expression. I'm excited that House of Ink Tattoo Studio will be coming to downtown Kinston, and that we at the City Council are helping to open the door for new businesses to take root in our community.

WORKING WITH CITY STAFF



HURRICANE IAN

Our small but mighty stormwater team was as hard at work clearing the stormwater drains, curbs and street gutters throughout our community ahead of Hurricane Ian in September.

Ian's impact on our area included heavy rain with the potential for localized flash flooding. The strategic efforts of our stormwater team and Public Services crews helped mitigate the storm's effects and prevent severe flooding of our roadways and waterways. If you see this team around town, please be sure to tell them "thank you!"

COLLABORATION ACROSS DEPARTMENTS

On September 29, members of our City staff participated in a community enrichment project in partnership with Hope Restorations & Wells Fargo. I enjoy being as hands-on as possible and was honored to join our city staff in these projects.

Our Police and Parks & Recreation departments cleaned streets, sidewalks and storm drains surrounding Holloway Center and Rochelle Middle School; while our Fire Department worked with the American Red Cross to install free smoke alarms for residents in the Herbert Drive & McCaskill Drive neighborhood. Our Public Services staff were in the area sweeping the streets and picking up any litter & debris that the teams collected.

Thank you Hope Restorations & Wells Fargo for your community partnership with the City of Kinston and hosting this event at Holloway Recreation Center!



NEW PLANNING DIRECTOR HIRED

On November 15, Kinston City Manager Rhonda Barwick announced that Elizabeth Blount has been offered and accepted the position as Planning Director for the City of Kinston. The position had been vacant since June 2021. Blount, a Kinston native, has worked with the City of Greenville in planning and zoning for the last decade. She holds a degree in Industrial Engineering from North Carolina State University and a NC Zoning Official Certification from the UNC School of Government. She is scheduled to start on November 28.

DID YOU KNOW?

NEW HOUSING COMING TO KINSTON

Did you know that we have hundreds of new housing options coming to our community?

The last major neighborhood development in Kinston was before 2000 (ironically, the year I was born). In the one year I've been on City Council, we've worked on **FOUR** different neighborhood development projects totaling more than 500 new single-family homes in our community. Plus, we continue to receive interest from developers in building even more!

These projects will benefit the City of Kinston, North Carolina from the increase in tax revenue from these new properties, as well as revenues from water & sewer utilities. These new housing developments are helpful in recruiting and retaining employees at our major companies like MasterBrand Cabinets and flyExclusive, both of which have announced significant expansions this year.



I'm excited that we've finally gotten the ball rolling on new middle-market housing for our community! As we continue to explore solutions to the housing crisis, I'm also focused on us developing more affordable & energy efficient housing for young professionals and lower-income families. We must ensure that our community is ready and open to growth, while not leaving our existing residents behind.

USTA CHAMPIONSHIP HELD IN KINSTON



Did you know that the City of Kinston hosted the Tri-Level State Championship for the US Tennis Association this year?

More than **FIVE HUNDRED** adult tennis players competed on courts at Bill Fay Park, Fairfield Park, Kinston Country Club, Arendell Parrott Academy, Greene Ridge Racquet Club (Snow Hill) and Greene Central High (Snow Hill). The Kinston/Lenoir County Parks & Recreation Department, in collaboration with VisitKinston, planned an amazing weekend of events for the tournament—including a Welcome Reception at the Kinston Country Club and a Players Party at Mother Earth Brewing.

This tournament was held September 23-25 and provided a significant economic boost for our local restaurants, hotels, and tourism industry.

What would YOU like to see here?

Do you have news, updates, or an important topic you would like for me to share in my next Quarterly Newsletter? If so, email those suggestions to chris@chrisjsuggs.com. I welcome all feedback!

NEWS & RESOURCES



GOT A POTHOLE?

The City of Kinston maintains nearly 120 miles of paved streets and roads (and about a mile and a half of dirt roads) within our city limits. If you notice a pothole on your street, it helps if you report it to our Kinston Public Services 24-Hour Customer Service Line so that our Streets team can promptly get it filled. The sooner we receive a report and get it filled, the better we can prevent worsening road conditions.

The Customer Service Line can be reached at (252) 939-3282—this number is also located on your utility bills and the side of your green City of Kinston garbage bins.

DATE SET FOR KINSTON CHRISTMAS PARADE

The Kinston Christmas Parade is scheduled to take place on Saturday, December 3 starting at 4:30PM on the Magic Mile! Queen Street will be the place to be as hundreds of participants make the joyous trek from Grainger Stadium, down Queen Street, and finishing at Caswell Street. I am looking forward to participating in the parade again this year, my second time since getting elected to the City Council.

For more information on the parade or to register a float or entry, contact Downtown Kinston Revitalization online at www.downtownkinston.com or by calling (252) 522-8003.

WHAT CAN I DO TO LOWER MY ELECTRIC BILL?

One way to lower your electric bill is by making your home more energy efficient. Older homes and older appliances can also cause excess energy to be used, resulting in higher than normal utility costs. The City of Kinston provides FREE Energy Audits for our customers to help them find ways to conserve energy.

Our Kinston Public Services team will connect you with a specialist who will come to your home, walk through, and help you identify issues that might be causing extra energy consumption. Then, remedies you make to those issues can help you qualify for up to several hundred dollars in credits toward your utility bill. Call (252) 939-3282 to ask about the Energy Audit or Energy Efficiency Credit programs.

ELECTRICITIES CONFERENCE

In August, I had the pleasure of visiting Cherokee, North Carolina to attend the ElectriCities of NC Annual Conference. Kinston Public Services has been a leader in Public Power and I was grateful for the opportunity to learn ways we can continue improving our local utility infrastructure. Additionally, we received four Public Power Awards of Excellence because of our service delivery and workforce development.

Two highlights of the conference were getting a surprise visit from Governor Roy Cooper, and meeting councilmen Richard Brooks and Johnny Moye of Washington and Winterville. They provided a great deal of wisdom to me as a young elected official, and encouraged me to reach out to them if I ever need any support or mentorship. I'm very grateful for these three leaders as well as the countless others who choose to pour into me and support my growth.



Want to receive more news and updates from me?

Visit www.chrisjsuggs.com to join my mailing list.

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Kinston City Council



KINSTON CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS

City Council Meetings are open to the public! Community members are invited to join us at Kinston City Hall on the first and third Tuesdays of each month, at 5:30PM and 7:00PM respectively. During these meetings, we review and vote on action items that affect the city's budget, operations, zoning regulations, and more. At the start of each meeting, time is allotted for citizens to share ideas, feedback, issues or concerns with the City Council and our City Staff.

For more information on our City Council meetings, visit www.kinstonnc.gov or the City of Kinston's Facebook Page (www.facebook.com/KinstonCityHall).

How do I reach Councilmember Chris Suggs?

To request a meeting, presentation, or other engagement related to my work on the City Council, contact the City Clerk's Office at (252) 939-3115. For questions related to utilities or public services, contact the City's 24/7 Customer Service line at (252) 939-3282.

MY FIRST YEAR — IN PHOTOS

