My fellow bankers and GBA members, it is my pleasure today to update you on the State of the Georgia Bankers Association.

I was so honored to have this opportunity to serve as your Chairman because I had grown up with and been trained by bankers who also gave their service to this association.

From my first boss as a banker, Frank Jolly, GBA’s chair in 1978, to Joe and Jim Edwards from my hometown of Zebulon, who served our association as chairs in 1988 and 2012, respectively, to my predecessor CEO of First National Bank of Griffin, Lon Knowles, who was a longtime director of the GBA Retirement Services board of directors, which I have the honor of chairing, as well. It is fair to say I was raised up right, to appreciate the value of our association.

You can see my GBA roots run deep, and I’ve had some pretty big shoes to fill.

My loyalty to our association, which has sprung from those roots, was more than validated this past year as I got to not only witness, but to actively participate, as we demonstrated that our tagline of “The Resource that Empowers” is much more than just a phrase.

As I’ve been thinking about how to describe my year as chairman, I think it boils down to being a tale of two very different seasons.

The first half of my term was the season of what I’d call a garden-variety, wonderful time in the life of my bank, my hometown and the industry.

At the bank, we were all focused on basic blocking and tackling – figuring out how to grow loans, cultivating strong deposit relationships and making sure service sparkled. I bet you all were locked in on those things, too.

Across the state, banks were performing well, as evidenced by year-end results that showed strong earnings as well as deposit and employee growth. Georgia was again ranked as the number-one state in which to do business and the economy continued to shine.

We were also welcoming new banks as competitors and colleagues again. By year-end 2019, two new banks had opened and a third has since received approval to open and a fourth new bank is being formed.

There was ongoing merger and acquisition activity, with the biggest headline maker being the completion of the merger between SunTrust and BB&T.

Also, within the industry, overall satisfaction with banking was on the rise with customers, and four Georgia banks were recognized as being among the best banks to work for in the country by a leading trade publication. And during the year, the American Banker newspaper recognized our own Spence Mullis as the nation’s top community banker.

At the GBA, we were seeing tremendous momentum in meeting all of our priorities. Attendance at our events was strong and our advocacy efforts were bearing fruits at all levels.
Things started to change dramatically as we entered the second season of our year in late January and into early March. The worldwide COVID-19 health crisis has exacted a severe toll. It has touched every corner of our state, affected every single Georgian and dramatically changed how we provided banking services.

I could easily spend a lot of time on the things we didn’t get to do as an industry and an association. I won’t dwell on it but I do want to briefly acknowledge a few things we’ve missed out on as a community of bankers through GBA.

We had to cancel several in-person conferences, seminars and peer meetings that are the key connection and education points for so many of our fellow bankers. We missed our annual advocacy trip to Washington D.C. And, I’ll always regret not getting the opportunity to shake hands with the emerging superstars graduating from this year’s Georgia Banking School and GBA Compliance School. And today, we’re obviously meeting by Zoom instead of gathering in a big hotel ball room to celebrate our year.

But I’d really rather focus on what we did accomplish as bankers and as an association. It’s a lot!

First and foremost, I simply could not be any prouder of how the people of our industry stepped up to help their families, neighbors and co-workers during the health crisis.

We were as well prepared as any industry to stand up as a source of strength for our communities, especially in the early days of the Pandemic.

Our banks entered this season with extremely strong capital and liquidity positions, business continuity plans were solid and we all have technology to deliver service through multiple channels. The stage was set for a strong, effective response.

That was evident as banks were ahead of the curve in offering customer support with payment deferrals, loan restructurings, fee waivers and direct outreach.

It was evident as we implemented the pandemic plans we’d created to keep at least some of the gears of the economy going in our role as critical national infrastructure.

It was evident as many of us closed lobbies, figured out how to rotate time in the office to keep each other safe and all the while keep drive throughs and other service channels humming.

And in a real point of pride to me, the creativity and resiliency of bankers has once again been on full display as our banks were called on by the government to implement the Paycheck Protection Program, one of the biggest small business aid programs ever.

Bankers put in long hours and persevered through a chaotic rollout process to get it done. Georgia bankers helped almost 137,000 businesses get $14 billion in critical funding. You saved tens of thousands of jobs, and in some cases preserved businesses that had been a part of our communities for generations.

I know what I’m about to say may elicit a few eye rolls, or be perceived as a bit mushy, and for some of our younger bankers, you might even ask, “Who the heck is he talking about?” But last year as I took the gavel from John Hall, I shared with the group that evening how I looked up to George Bailey, the bedraggled CEO, of the Bailey Brothers Building and Loan, from the movie *It’s a Wonderful Life.*

I spoke of how George was a hero in his community of Bedford Falls and ultimately the “go-to guy” when the community needed help or direction. As those of you who have watched the movie know, it was eventually George who needed help, and the community reciprocated his kindness.
In our collective response to the pandemic, I witnessed firsthand and heard stories from all corners of our state of modern-day George Baileys. We truly made a difference in our communities.

I also want to highlight all we accomplished together as an association in support of our members.

Through GBA, members have received almost daily updates on the latest health, operational, government programs and regulatory actions. We’ve connected and shared best practices. We’ve used new technology to meet when necessary. We’ve had direct access to policymakers and our elected officials through exclusive calls for members.

Operationally, GBA led the way on ensuring we had access to our facilities by being included as critical infrastructure in exceptions to stay at home orders. We provided detailed return-to-work planning and guidance, and helped connect members to quality vendors for personal protection equipment and other services.

The GBA Insurance Trust provided Telemedicine, no-cost COVID-19 testing and a new return-to-work wellness resource to foster a healthy workforce. Our GBA Retirement Services team delivered conservative investing, market guidance and special updates for its members to help ensure we are financially healthy.

And the association has been our advocate telling the story of our response to the media, cementing public confidence and amplifying banker success stories through our social media channels.

It’s all been remarkable. Our ability to connect through GBA and marshal resources really shines in times of crisis.

I’ve also been proud of how the association has evolved its educational programs to continue providing training and development. The creative use of video and teleconferencing has been fun to see grow in adoption. However, I know we’re all anxious to get back to spending time together in person with our colleagues.

And, while it seems like a lifetime ago now, before the pandemic GBA was on track for a fantastic year in service to its members. I want to be sure to remind you about some of that across several areas.

We were deeply involved in the State Treasurer’s work to implement the ability of members to work with shared deposit services providers to accept public deposits. GBA played a key role in helping shape the policy by which the state would eventually approve two providers for use.

On the regulatory advocacy front, we were honored the Federal Reserve worked through GBA to convene a diverse group of 13 bankers to meet with Fed Governor Michelle Bowman and Raphael Bostic in July. Those GBA leaders helped inform Gov. Bowman’s work as the first governor filling the spot on the Fed’s Board created for someone with community bank experience.

Our CEO Conference in October was one of the most highly attended and best rated we’ve ever had, with similar results for our Women in Banking, Financial Risk Management and Credit Conferences in late Fall.

And as the calendar turned to 2020, we had tremendous state advocacy momentum. We kicked off the year with the Legislative and Economic Forum that included an address by Governor Kemp.

At the General Assembly, we were two-thirds of the way through a successful session for the industry and the legislators get back underway today and we’ll be there advocating for the industry. And under the leadership of AB&T’s Luke Flatt and the whole BankPAC Board, members made record contributions to our State and Federal political action committees.

To top it all off, I was pleased with how the membership got behind my two personal initiatives for the year.
The first of those initiatives was making sure there were no barriers within our association or industry that limited diversity. To me, it’s been about making sure the full scope of our membership and bankers are involved, whether the measure is by geography, bank size, age, race, or gender. We looked inward at our programming, our volunteers, and our educational opportunities, and did not find any obvious barriers although we know we can do more. Our board and all of our volunteer committees had discussions about gaps and taking steps to get better in this regard, and we’ll continue that intentional focus going forward.

My other personal initiative was answering the call as bankers to be the champion for economic development in our communities, with a particular emphasis on the rural and under-served areas of our state. GBA was called on to be an active participant in the Governor’s Georgians First Commission, and I was honored to serve on the Access to Capital Committee along with bankers like Parrish Clark with Guardian Bank in Valdosta. While working with this task force, we heard anecdotal stories of cases where access to capital could be improved; but for the most part, banks like yours and mine were clearly already part of the solution for small businesses seeking capital.

Legislatively we continued to back the work of the Georgia House and Senate enhancing rural development by supporting bills to expand broadband access and better rural healthcare. And several of our conferences featured economic development panels.

To say it’s been a challenging year is an understatement, for sure. But the Association is in good financial shape, and our members are engaged in every facet of how GBA provides value. There’s strength in each strategic area of focus.

GBA is a Community of banking professionals.

We have 180 member banks, 219 Associate Members and active special sections of Bank lawyers and Bank accountants. More than 300 bankers volunteer on 23 committees and boards, and we offer unique connection points such as our roundtables and peer groups.

GBA is an effective and powerful Advocate for the industry. Our banker participation along with our experienced government relations team is unrivaled.

GBA is the trusted provider of ongoing banker Education, with evolving ways of teaching and sharpening skills.

And GBA is a resource for services and products that help your bank, our employees and their families. Your association delivers on health care as well as the financial wellbeing of your bank and team members.

Let me conclude by saying GBA and the banking industry are poised for a strong long-term future. And I know there’s tremendous opportunity for our leadership, as I think it is fair to say that the more immediate future is a bit cloudy.

We are most likely looking at a protracted period of historically low interest rates that will continue to place pressure on our net interest margins, and make it necessary for us to continue to seek other opportunities for revenue and efficiencies.

Our customers will continue to demand service across all channels – from traditional face-to-face branch interaction, to the speediest of digital platforms which allow them to bank where they want, when they want.

Our hometowns and all those we serve are depending on us to help lead them in recovery from the pandemic and economic aftershocks, and that’s good by me. It’s in our DNA as bankers to work personally every day to prop up the economic vitality of our hometowns.
And, I can’t let this opportunity pass to speak to what I feel as our obligation to be leaders in the ongoing struggle for equality. Banks and bankers have a lot of power to enact changes to ensure equitable treatment of every person, as well as equitable access to financial stability. Let’s all embrace the opportunity we have at this moment in our history on that front.

The association has a role there, too, with ongoing emphasis on diversity and to advocate for public policy that helps us unlock the economic potential available for all Americans.

And, particularly for those of us in smaller banks, in smaller communities, we’ve got to figure out how we can get the best and brightest people back into our communities, and as an added bonus, interested in seeking a fulfilling career in our industry.

So, rather than wring my hands with worry, I choose to roll up my sleeves and embrace the opportunities our current struggles bring. You and I get the chance to shape a brighter future in so many ways, and that’s energizing for me.

I want to close by making sure to be the loudest cheerleader in our meeting today in pointing out that GBA is more important than ever.

GBA IS the resource that will empower us to lead on those opportunities and realize the amazing future I know lies ahead.

Please stay engaged, get more of your team members involved and make full use of everything your investment in membership has to offer.

Thank you for allowing me to serve you during this year!