

Council Member Owen Thomas Gets Involved

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If there's a leadership position available, Owen Thomas is likely to step in. Now, as a local leader for the City of Lumberton, he's utilizing his go-getter mentality to move the community forward.

The theme that runs through Owen Thomas' public life is one of maximum involvement. Starting as early as his days as a college student, Thomas found roles in need of filling and tasks in need of completing and volunteered himself each time. Through that approach, he has continually gained positions of leadership. Something needs to be done, some organization needs to be led—Thomas does it.

Consistent in his background is a go-getter mentality and an unfailing proclivity to take action. It has all led to a council seat in his adopted hometown of Lumberton, where he's facing significant issues with both the firm resolve to pursue critical goals and the flexibility of approach needed to make it happen. Summed up by Thomas in a single line: "I'm the right person for the job."

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Thomas' route to Lumberton began on the other side of the country. Born in California, Thomas did not reach North Carolina until after his middle school years, when his family moved to Morrisville and then later settled in Cary. He made his way to the eastern part of the state in 2006 where he attended UNC Pembroke, receiving both his undergraduate degrees and an MBA from the university.

It's at this stop that Thomas settled into the mantra of involvement that still defines his work today. He double majored in the school of business, played five years on the football team, was the president of his fraternity, and then, while pursuing his MBA, served on student government, observing how policies and procedures had such a large impact on the UNC school system as a whole. "It was that position in student government that really got me started," says Thomas. The experience was amplified through his involvement with the Association of Student Governments, which allowed him to network with and observe many different student government bodies. "I traveled around all the different schools just learned a lot about government. Learning the ins and the outs. And I just kind of took interest in the thought of being able to make an impact through policy."

Upon graduation, his appetite to get involved did not lessen, especially as it pertained to public service. After earning his MBA, Thomas moved to Lumberton in 2015 and started a job in the insurance industry. Naturally, he found leadership again quite quickly, this time through local government. Initially he considered a different venue for public service—the state legislature.

"I wanted to get in involved and have a seat at the table, and I figured that would be at the state level. That was just my plan at the time," Thomas said. He had built a network of mentors and colleagues to rely on, the most notably being Sen. Danny Britt, who won election to the North Carolina legislature in 2016.

Those confidants agreed that Thomas should pursue public service. Only, they felt it would be better directed towards the local level. "Thankfully I had great mentors that pushed me towards local government. They said, 'This is where you can really make a difference. Where you can really impact your community.' They were exactly right. It was definitely the right decision."

Thomas didn't waste time upon receiving the advice. He ran for council seat in 2017, won, and then almost immediately maximized his involvement again by running for the NC League of Municipalities Board of Directors. "My path, from California to Lumberton, it's sometimes so hard to grasp. But it's exactly where I'm supposed to be. The Lord put me in this situation for a reason."

The promise of Thomas' mentors—to make a difference—now consumes most of his efforts. Making a difference is difficult work. In Lumberton that work primarily goes towards the issue of crisis management. Thomas was thrown into this issue headfirst almost immediately. Within his first year on council, Hurricane Florence made landfall on the coast of North Carolina and inundated the eastern portion of the estate with record-setting amounts of rainfall. Lumberton, just two years after suffering devastating flooding due to Hurricane Matthew, found themselves devastated once again. "Our infrastructure was damaged, our roads flooded. Even my house flooded," said Thomas. The National Weather Service classified both of those hurricanes as "1,000-year" events. Then, two years later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, unleashing yet another round of destruction on the community.

Still, Lumberton marches on. It's a spirit that, similar to Thomas', finds a way to keep getting it done.

"It is amazing to me how the community has come together in all of this devastation," Thomas said. As an example, Thomas points to Lumberton's municipal staff, nearly all of whom had little to no training on hurricane recovery, and yet put in many months of overtime to help rebuild the town after Hurricane Matthew—only to have their efforts foiled two years later with Hurricane Florence. And yet, they started right back on hurricane recovery again. "They continue to overcome, continue to be resilient, and continue to be motivated in a better tomorrow. That is something that has resonated in me so much. People could have given up."





Resilience and water infrastructure remain at the top of Thomas' list of priorities, as do a handful of other challenges, among them affordable housing and the ongoing opioid epidemic. Weaved through those trials, however, are a series of burgeoning successes in Lumberton. Towards storm recovery, Thomas reports that the town has neared \$100 million in available funds to rebuild. "We're going to bring Lumberton back," Thomas said. On the economic development front, Lumberton has made significant strides as well. They're in the process of building a multi-million-dollar convention center as part of a downtown revitalization effort that also includes a new park and the relocation of businesses to the city center.

"People are excited about downtown," Thomas said. "That idea is getting stronger and stronger in the past four or five years. That's a big priority for me, and I feel like I've had an impact."



It's certainly within Thomas' character to have become so involved in Lumberton's path forward so quickly after moving there and to make a difference on the issues important to him. The local government experience, though, has evolved Thomas' thinking on how that impact can be made. Where before he was quick to act, he now has a broadened perspective on involvement

"I do more listening than doing," said Thomas. "Yes, I'm a doer, and I do a lot. But by listening—to the staff, to the community, to the people that know what their needs are—I can be an advocate and a voice, and I can help meet those needs. That's been the biggest lesson of local government.

"By listening, I can do more. And I have."
