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ACTIVITIES IN COBB COUNTY, GEORGIA***

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INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY COLEMAN

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CONDUCTED BY JAY LUTZ and STEPHEN BRIGGS

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Interview with Anthony Coleman
Conducted by Jay Lutz and Stephen Briggs
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JL: Let me start off by saying congratulations, councilman, about your victory. No run-off in this election, a clear victory. Councilman Coleman is the longest serving African American councilman in Marietta, representing Ward 5. He is also the first African American Mayor Pro Tem. Thank you for sitting and doing the interview with us.

AC: Thank you. I'm honored that you guys took time out of your busy schedule to meet with me today and just delighted that you all came by city hall to sit down and talk to me. Thank you.

JL: Let's start out with a little bit about your background. Can you tell us when you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

AC: I'm a long time native of Marietta, born and raised here in the city of Marietta. My grandfather whose name was Amos Kilgore was a prominent businessman back in the '50s and certainly was involved in the community to a great degree.

JL: You are a proud product of the Marietta school system.

AC: Most definitely. Proud of our school system and proud to be a part of the Marietta School system.

JL: Which schools did you attend?

AC: Well, I attended Marietta and I attended North Cobb also.

JL: Great. So tell me, how did you get involved with politics?

AC: Good question. Being involved as an associate minister at my church, which was Pleasant Grove Baptist Church right off of Whitlock Avenue, Pastor Benjamin Lockhart, who licensed and ordained me in the early '90s, actually mentored me and gave me a lot of spiritual guidance to help me achieve my full potential and arrive at what my goals and objectives were.

JL: How did you decide on becoming a reverend?

AC: You know, it was a personal conviction with me, God was dealing with me and you hear stories of individuals talking about God but I just felt that there was a strong conviction that God was calling me to do a great work for Him. But going back to your question, how did I end up in politics. It was basically through the encouragement of people in the

community asking me to consider running for public office. As I stated earlier I had no intentions of seeking public office, although I've always been involved in the community as a community activist and working for the good of the community. Mrs. Betty Gober and Ms. Jo-anne Thomas approached me and asked me to consider running for office. At that time, I told them I really had no desire or interest but they pretty much stayed after me and they were persistent and I promised them that I would think about it and pray about it. After doing that, I did respond and I told them that I would run to serve the people of Ward 5 and try to make a difference in our community. That's how that started.

JL: Being a member of the clergy and being a politician seemed like the perfect combination to really get out and serve people. How do you combine the two?

AC: They really intertwine with one another. Being a local clergyman, you're talking about preaching the gospel and serving the community. I define that as being a true public servant as far as being a minister and being a city councilman. A politician can be self-serving sometimes but a public servant is someone who is out to serve the people and to bow to the people, but not the people bowing to the politician. That's how I classify myself as a public servant. I have to serve the people. That's the reason I named my community newsletter "Community Connection." You've got to make that connection with the community and how do you do that? You do that through community involvement, you do that through town hall meetings, you do that through community meetings, going to local churches and finding out what the issues are that are important to the community and staying connected to the community; and how do you stay connected, you're consistent with it.

JL: You won your first election in 2001. What were some of the issues in Ward 5 at those times that you felt that you wanted to combat?

AC: I think code enforcement, crime, and housing were major issues. I said, what a way to set a precedent and to come in and have the city revise its ordinance with code enforcements and let's start in Ward 5. Charity begins at home. Let's go into Ward 5 and see how we can make absentee landlords and homeowners comply with our code ordinance. In that first year, I hit the ground running, meeting with staff and the city manager, to make some changes in our code enforcement and to be proactive. They hadn't seen a proactive city councilman in a long time out in the community and out in the trenches riding around, so that really put staff on edge because I guess they figured okay, if the elected official is out here riding and he sees it before I see it, he wants to know what's the problem. So my stance in code enforcement came to be more proactive. They were not as laid back, waiting on citizens to call them on issues; they were out proactively looking for violations.

JL: One of the local papers, I want to say it was *Marietta Daily Journal* but it might have been some other newspaper, with your recent victory they did an article about your election of 2001 which was over James Dodd and they said one of the major issues of that time that you won on was I think Lyman Homes?

AC: Yes, Lyman Homes about the barricades being blocked?

JL: Yes, could you talk a little bit about that?

AC: We had some drug issues within the Lyman Homes public housing projects. At that time, Mr. [James] Dodd was on the council and there had been some discussion with the housing authority, being that they owned the property and needed to combat drug activity in the community. I think some politics played out between the housing authority and the city council as to what would be the best solution to combating some of these drug issues. At that time there were some suggestions and recommendations made about blocking a public street to combat drug trafficking. I adamantly opposed that. I said that's a public safety issue; blocking a public street is not a solution to a drug problem. That's what the Marietta Police Department is there to do and I don't think blocking the street is going to stop drug trafficking because the majority of the people who are selling drugs are on their feet basically. At that time, I was a little bit disappointed in James that he would vote and support that. I think at that time the community was a little bit disenchanted that he voted to do that. They came out with statistics to try to say that it had decreased crime in the area. You know and I know that you can make numbers say anything, but if it did, why is it that the activity is still going on? My solution to it I think it was more of a proactive approach; you need the community, you need the church, and you need the police department, collectively and proactively addressing that issue. I think that would be the best approach that I would have taken rather than blocking a public street.

JL: What were some other issues? Do you remember anything in particular about your first term?

AC: Cleaning up the neighborhood.

JL: And going into your second term?

AC: Going into my second term, when I beat the guy from the post office, jobs were a major issue. I have had tremendous success every year with the career expo and helping to provide new jobs. People have actually gotten jobs. My job fair was totally different from your average job fair. I came in with a plan to let the employers know from the beginning on the front end as far as them giving back to the community, this is a free career expo and it's to benefit the community and that we're not charging you anything to participate. The only thing that we ask is that you hire the best-qualified applicant. At the end of the career expo, after you all calculate, I need to know how many people got jobs, actually got jobs so I can track that data every year, and that's what we've done along with the city's personnel department and Cobb Works.

JL: With your re-election earlier this month, what were some of the issues that you felt very strongly about, that you could present to the public and say look this is evidence of why I should be re-elected?

AC: Pretty much I didn't detour from my platform; I figure it's working, it don't need fixing, it hadn't been broken, and you need to stay with what's working.

JL: One of the things with the interviews that I've done with other individuals is that they've talked about your open door policy. That anyone can come in and speak to you. Can you talk to me a little bit about that?

AC: My open door policy with citizens and employees is that I'm just a very hands-on person and I want people to feel that they can come and talk to me about any issue at any level at all times. If I'm in the office and I'm working or I'm here and I have the time to see somebody, anybody may come up and they don't have an appointment. If I have time to see you, and they have a few moments, I'm going to see them right then.

JL: One of the other councilmen who people mentioned as having a very open door policy was former Councilman Hugh Grogan. Can you talk to me, did he influence you at all or did you know Mr. Grogan?

AC: Yes, I knew Mr. Grogan from the community. As I remember him, you would always see him out being proactive with the community. I remember at times seeing him walking from city hall. He always had that briefcase in his hands and he was always out addressing issues that affected the community, that's what I remember about him mostly.

JL: Mr. Grogan was a one-term councilman. You're going into your third term. Do you think that there was anything—how is your tenure as councilman different from his, do you think?

AC: From the perspective of how long I've served? Hm.

JL: Do you think it was just a different time?

AC: Yes, different time. What he did back then in the '70s was good during that era but we are living in the twenty-first century now, new visions. We are looking to the future; great and exciting things are happening in the city of Marietta, becoming more diverse, and the opportunity to break that trend of just having one African American city councilman serving the city of Marietta. You look at the demographics; if someone's out there encouraging someone to seek public office that they think would be good in that position or whatever, that can happen; you know, they can break that mindset basically.

JL: Mr. Grogan was the main figure in *Grogan v. Hunter*, which redistricted the entire city of Marietta. Can you tell me how that case has affected your tenure or your ability to become a councilman?

AC: It was very important. I probably wouldn't be sitting here today as city councilman if it hadn't been for Hugh Grogan and others who were a part of that lawsuit that brought about a change in Ward 5 today basically, to have fair representation, especially during that era and that time.

JL: Sure. One more question about Mr. Grogan for you. If there was one word that you could use to describe him which word would you choose and why would you choose it?

AC: I guess the word I would choose for Mr. Grogan is he was a people-person, that's how I would describe him. That's very important because to serve in this position you've got to be a people person.

JL: Let me go back to. . . .

AC: I'm enjoying this; I'm enjoying this, yes.

JL: Your time as councilman now. Tell me about when you first became involved with the NAACP?

AC: When did I get involved with the NAACP? It was back in the '80s, late '80s. I served on the executive board for them. I was a board member of the Cobb NAACP, served on the religious affairs committee.

JL: Do you remember some of the functions of those committees?

AC: Oh yes. We were out in the community informing the residents of some of the issues that affected us in the community and that we needed to meet with elected officials on the county level, city level, to address some of our concerns.

JL: Who were some of the people at the NAACP that you felt were very influential?

AC: As you know, Mr. Grogan was involved with the NAACP and Mr. Freeman, who was my mentor, was the president of the Cobb NAACP. He worked closely with those that were some of the very, very influential people.

JL: Oscar Freeman. What were some of the things that you remember about him and his tenure?

AC: I love him dearly and I miss him and sometimes just tears of joy—he was my campaign manager. Mr. Freeman, he was an extraordinary man, smart, good listener, from the capacity of the president of the NAACP. He was more of a consensus builder, a peacemaker, he knew how to go about getting things done behind the scenes without being confrontational, and that's one of the things that I liked about him. I said that he had that charisma about him. If we needed to send a loud message to make people straighten up we would go that way but if we could go the position from getting it done behind the scenes it was very, very effective.

JL: It sounds like you and he share quite a bit of characteristics.

AC: Oh yes. We were very close. He played football with my father . . . and in the first election he told me, he said, he left me a message on my phone and told me he loved me and that he was proud to be a part of my life and I told him I said, “Sonny, I love you too and I’m proud that you’re a part of my life and a part of my success and accomplishments and giving me good Godly, Christian advice.” He always told me to stay focused, keep the Lord and put the Lord first in my life like I’ve always done and to stay on track. As you know, he passed last year and I’m close to his wife and his kids and his sisters; we talk all the time. He and I traveled quite a bit together, going out of town; he went on trips with me and just two men spending time talking in fellowship and talking about life, talking about the Lord and that we’re not going to be here forever and to make sure that we have our life in order with the Lord before we leave this earth.

JL: And the two of you will definitely leave a mark.

AC: He gave me the nickname “CC” and I said, “What’s CC mean?” He said, Councilman Coleman. Nobody knows that nickname but me and you, “CC.” So he even had his wife calling me that, CC, Councilman Coleman. He told me when you leave, leave a legacy.

JL: Absolutely. Going into your third term, what are some of the things you’d like to do?

AC: I definitely want to stay on track with some of the things that I’ve implemented with redevelopment, improving the quality of life for citizens throughout the entire city of Marietta. I think employment opportunities will always be in the forefront as it is on the national level right now but President Obama is trying to get this economy stimulated and going back and thinking out side the box. I think that’s always going to be at the forefront is helping people get jobs where they can provide for their families and be successful and go on in their lives basically. There’s a lot more to be done in Marietta. I think a lot has been done but there’s still a lot more to be done basically and I’m glad to be a part of this city council and mayor to work in a collective and united effort to move the city forward in the right direction in the twenty-first century. It’s great, it’s phenomenal, it’s a good time to be in office; a lot of good thing are happening in the city of Marietta. As I look back and I look out through the community and my ward, some of the affordable housing that’s been built through Cobb Housing, Inc. and some of the developments that had been halted due to the economy, still looking for some great development to happen in Ward 5. A lot of good things have happened on my watch and a lot of money has been invested in Ward 5 and I’m proud of that through hard work and effort.

JL: One of the things that I want to ask you about, the election of this November, voter turn out was low. How do we correct that?

AC: Education, working with our local churches, business people, Cobb NAACP and SCLC. We’ve got to do that proactively, I think we’ve got to get more young people involved, innovated, excited and people that want to work.

JL: Would you be in favor of any type of new techniques for voting, like say an online voting which might increase voter turn out; any new techniques that would work?

AC: I would be open to ideas and consider looking at options that might encourage people to vote more. That was one of the things that appalled me—that even looking at cities throughout the entire country and different demographics in wards, why is it that people don't take a lot of interest in local politics or municipalities and really get out and vote. You have 3,600 registered voters in Ward 5 and you've got less than 500 people voting; that is not good. The highest voting districts are probably Ward 2, Ward 4 and Ward 3, you know, and I think Ward 5 comes in probably behind them because I think Ward 1 and 7 come way behind. That's Philip Goldstein and Annette Lewis; Jim King [Ward 6] is in the Allgood area. It's getting those numbers up because I think that the most people voting in Ward 5, you have to go back to the 1977 election, it was between Hugh Grogan and Frank Meaders and was way over 1,000 voters back then.

JL: Yes, it was very high.

AC: It was very high!

JL: Yes, I believe it was closing in on 70 percent.

AC: Seventy percent, yes, because I looked at those numbers and looking at that history, at that time Mr. Grogan had some dedicated people that were foot soldiers. They got out and helped him campaign and do a lot of the legwork to motivate and to mobilize the community to get people out to vote that normally otherwise wouldn't have voted if he did not take a proactive approach to it.

JL: That was right after the case [*Grogan v. Hunter*] was decided. I guess everybody got excited about the redistricting and got out there and voted. I know Stephen has questions about African American businesses in Ward 5; could you just talk a little bit about that?

AC: Well, we've got Mr. Winston Strickland down at Strick's Grill who's been there a long time selling fried chicken and collard greens and potato salad and cornbread down in the community. He's a long time businessman in the community and always out to try to help and serve the community and make a difference and kind of give back to the community. You have Darryl at Darryl's Barbershop. Darryl's a young man and has been quite successful in the community on giving back to the community and so forth. As a matter of fact, I think next month in January, during the MLK celebration, he has a community block party down there where he does hamburgers, hot dogs, fish and just come together after the MLK parade that they have every year. Then you've got Mr. Shelton of Hanley Shelton Funeral Home, Mr. Shelton has always given back to the community and making a difference in the community and helping people in the community.

SB: Yes, actually we tried to interview Mr. Strickland but his mother passed just recently.

- AC: Exactly, I gave him a call on his phone and gave him my condolences.
- SB: Yes, we were sorry to hear that. We went to the Grill and it was great. I have a couple of broad questions, you know as I am a history student at Kennesaw State. Why do you think African Americans chose Cobb County to move into and set up businesses and such? There's been a large influx over the last few decades and what's your insight on that; why do you believe African Americans chose this area?
- AC: Well, if we go back through the history, probably when I was much younger, there were African American businesses down on Lawrence Street. There were barbershops and so forth, so history shows us as we go back that downtown Marietta down Lawrence Street you had African American businesses. As we go into the twenty-first century, as you indicated, I think many individuals came to Cobb County to start new businesses because I think this is an area they want to be in.
- SB: A lot of those businesses that you're talking about around Lawrence Street, they were relocated during R-69?
- AC: Exactly.
- SB: Okay.
- AC: Oh yes, because Turner Chapel was on the Square when I was a little boy back then. It was segregated back then. I grew up during segregation when you were not allowed to go in the front door of the Strand Theater so I lived during that era. It was in the side door that we went in. There was a little window that they gave us our popcorn out of, about the size of that frame there. I could see former Senator Chuck Clay; they were in the line where you go in the front doors at the Strand Theater. At the time, blacks went in the side door and whites went in the front door. When we came down from the balcony, we went to a little window to pay for our candy bars and popcorn and all that stuff. They handed it to you out of a little window and we would go to the window and they would give us our popcorn and we would give them our money, and we would go back upstairs and sit in the balcony.
- SB: Can you tell us a little bit more about that timeframe and segregation in Marietta? What do you remember about that time?
- AC: I don't recall any violence or anything like that as a young man, I just knew that I didn't understand why I couldn't go in McLellan's and couldn't go to the counter and sit down and have a hamburger and French fries. I was young and I questioned my mother about that and she said, "We can't go over there." I asked why and she said, "We're not allowed to go over there."
- JL: Do you remember, besides the Strand, any other businesses that were segregated?
- AC: There were quite a few. I can't think of any one business right off the top of my head.

- SB: Did you ever see any demonstrations? I know you're a young man still.
- AC: Yes, I was a teenager, about twelve or thirteen.
- SB: You know, sit ins or anything like that, did you ever witness any of that as far as being a young man?
- AC: No. The schools were segregated back then and I went to an all black school before integration came in in 1968 or somewhere around there. I went to Lemon Street Elementary School back then pretty much and lived through that.
- SB: What do you think had the largest effect on integration? Was it the individuals, government, various acts?
- AC: I think Dr. Martin Luther King was the voice back then that God used to bring about change and opportunity. Dr. Martin Luther King. I think people should have realized that God used Dr. King and a lot of doors were opened. I think this particular generation has no knowledge about any of this unless someone like myself has sat down and talked to them and educated them about this. When I share the stories with young people I say, "It ain't always been like this. I remember when blacks were not allowed to go through white neighborhoods. It was scary back then. You wouldn't be caught; you thought you were going to get mauled or hurt." I remember when whites didn't go through black neighborhoods. So I tell people, "It ain't always been like what you see as today. And I was just a young kid and back then people kind of feared for their lives."
- JL: The schools on Lemon Street played a very important role in character building to some of your constituents. Do you hear them tell stories and talk about Lemon Street Elementary and Lemon Street High School?
- AC: Yes, about the Lemon Street football team who had an outstanding football record. I heard a lot of stories about that powerful band that they had, how people would come in droves just to hear Lemon Street band. Kids could hear them playing the drums and the adrenaline and excitement of going to a Lemon Street football game.
- JL: One of the stories that I've heard on a few occasions is about the year after Lemon Street closed down obviously there's no more Lemon Street football team so all the players transfer to Marietta and they win the state championship.
- AC: They became a powerhouse. Sure did. So all that great, outstanding talent it merged together. So you had black and white so you had all that great talent from Marietta High and you had all that great talent from Lemon Street.
- JL: I think that's a great story.

- SB: Of course, it had all those positive effects in general; did you ever feel that African Americans at the time lost a sense of community because that is the trend in some that we've interviewed.
- AC: Yes, they felt a loss of sense of community. Yes, I would concur with them a little bit on that. Not any one thing I can pinpoint right off the top of my head.
- SB: Do you know some associates that went through that?
- AC: Yes because with the merger of integration then, you know, whites and blacks coming together, going to school together, getting to know one another and stuff like that, it was different for us and I'm pretty sure it was different for them.
- JL: How connected would you say the white and the African American community are today?
- AC: Great. I have great support from the entire community. As a matter of fact, a lot of the people in the community are happy with my leadership because I engage everybody so I'm inclusive because we're now more diverse. I know what their issues are, what the quality of life is, and normally I don't hear from them unless they do have issues, which is good. In Marietta, we tend to push good government and to be good stewards of the taxpayer's money and try to make good, wise decisions. This election, for example, people don't normally come out in big droves unless they're dissatisfied and that's what brings about changes if they're dissatisfied, and you didn't see that in this election because you got the majority of council back. We have a former councilman and a new mayor and you have the majority of the same council members back.
- JL: We're celebrating our 175th anniversary this year. Where do you see Marietta in twenty-five years?
- AC: Wow. Twenty-five years from now, I think Marietta is going to be on a whole different level. I think the population numbers are going to really be up there because I think a lot of people want to move in the city of Marietta; it's a great city. I never thought I'd see the downtown Square jumping as much as it is.
- JL: I have to ask, are you in favor or against public transportation coming up into Cobb County?
- AC: I'm for it. I think there's a need for it. As I travel around in different cities and states if we could get people out of their cars and be more pedestrian friendly, I've seen that in a lot of states where a lot of people are walking. I think that would help deal with some of the traffic issues all around the Cobb metropolitan area. Get people walking and exercising more and getting them out of those cars. There are some challenges there. I think it can be done and I think people would take advantage of public transportation. I have taken time out of my busy schedule to ride on CCT and get off at the Art Station just to ride and to see who all is riding back and forth. As a matter of fact, I think I'm

going to ride it down on Mayor's Day in January. I'll be down there in a conference so I'm going to park over at the CCT, get on the bus and ride down to the Hilton and get off at Five Points and go right down there and ride the bus.

JL: Out in the community.

AC: Out in the community. Talking and touching people. I think the county needs to try to expand the scope of their routes. I think one of the issues was cost and looking at the number of individuals that are taking it because you don't want a route somewhere where you don't have a lot of pick up.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

JL: I'm amazed at how important Lemon Street School is to the community, which is now the Hattie Wilson library—how it is a symbol of learning, education, and it is very important to Ward 5.

AC: Yes, it's significant. As a matter of fact, the city is going to be putting a marker down there; we've already ordered it. We've ordered one for the Zion Baptist Church as a part of our 175th anniversary. Mr. [Louis] Walker and Mrs. [Josetta] Walker were working with me and some other individuals. Mr. Freeman was involved in that and one of my schoolteachers, Ms. Jennie Gresham, in putting this all together for the 175th. I think there's going to be a ribbon cutting and a ceremony down there and that's going to be coming up fairly soon so we'll be getting the historic markers.

JL: That's great.

AC: I'm working with Dr. [Emily] Lembeck now on figuring out ways that we can preserve the old school. That was one of the things, before Mr. Freeman died, was what were some of the ideas bouncing off the committees as to how can this building better serve the community. I asked people to give input and then formulated a committee and we talked about a portion of it being an African American museum, some areas of it being used as a mentoring program, and coming up with some other ideas for seniors, also incorporating the existing library in that basically. So figuring out what the cost factor would be, bringing the county manager on, the housing authority and trying to pull all our partners together to figure out how we can make that a reality.

JL: You know, at KSU, which this class is a part of, is the public history certificate. As part of that program we write exhibits; there's a course on historic preservation where we learn how to save

AC: Preserve.

JL: Yes, because I'm sure this program would love to help and be cooperative in any way. We actually just opened on Tuesday an exhibit about the Tuskegee Airmen and we actually had some of the airmen come up to the museum on Busbee Parkway. Yes, it was great; it was really a great experience.

AC: Wow.

JL: I'm sure the school would love to help.

AC: Work with me on it.

JL: Absolutely.

AC: I would be delighted for us to come up with ways that we can preserve that school because you have many Lemon Street alumni. I'm pretty sure they would be very supportive in contributing and getting a big fund-raising mechanism in place showing we're willing to contribute to this and get banks and stuff involve in it. I mean, that's another goal and objective that I can set, being in office for four more years, so I can work and pull some people together to get it off the ground.

JL: Absolutely.

AC: Keep talking, bring the questions.

SB: As far as from a business aspect, you were talking about funding and getting businesses to move into the area as one of your goals. The area between Sandtown Road and South Marietta Parkway, in an article dated about six months ago, it spoke about that area being run down and dilapidated and needed some clean up; what kind of businesses do you think would be going in there?

AC: Yes, I think that's in two other councilmen's wards, but I think in our vision plan we planned to improve those quarters, probably with some upscale commercial and retail businesses to enhance Marietta, especially adjacent to the Hilton Marietta Conference Center. We want to clean up that blighted area. It's still in the vision plan because Powder Springs Road is heavily traveled. You want to do major improvements in those areas and I'm thinking council is going to take a proactive approach toward doing that even in a bad economy. Good leadership makes things happen, so you have to think outside the box regardless of what the economy is doing. A bad economy can't stop you from making things happen. You've got to keep working at it, keep chipping away at it.

SB: Even though it's outside your ward it represents Marietta.

AC: Yes, because I represent all the citizens. Although I'm elected by a district or ward, if someone calls me from another ward or district I represent the city regardless and if I can address their issues I'm more than happy to. A councilmember is not offended by that because I represent the citizens, all the citizens.

JL: As a final question, tell me, in fifty years from now, what is going to be your legacy?

AC: I would like my legacy to be that I made a positive difference and had an impact on major change in the city of Marietta due to my leadership.

JL: Great. Thank you for sitting today.

AC: Thank you guys for coming out. I know you all have tried to contact me on different occasions and now that I've got the election behind me I can focus on my goals and objectives as I go into 2010. I'm excited about it, working with the council members and the Mayor and to work collectively together for the good of the city. I have me some quiet time to meditate and prepare to hit the ground running after the first of the year. Again, thank you all for coming out.

JL: Thank you.

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