

A move to Cary put Robinson on the road to public service – literally

After Jennifer Robinson moved from Washington, D.C., to Cary for a job, she found the landscape around her new neighborhood suddenly shifting. In that moment in 1996, the town had removed a future road from its plans, and an unhappy Robinson became determined to become involved.

She began attending town council meetings and advocating for issues that mattered to residents of her western Cary area, where she saw strong representation lacking.

Three years later, the newly elected Cary mayor asked her to apply for his previously held and now vacant council seat, but she declined, citing her commitments to the data modeling business she had started. She also recalls thinking that as the mother of a 2-year-old and a newborn, she could not spare the time. But her mother-in-law persuaded her to throw her name into the ring.



“They’re not going to pick you, but put your name in, so you’re part of the process,” Robinson recalls her mother-in-law saying. “I said, ‘You’re right. I should be part of the process.’ So, I submitted my resume, and much to my family’s surprise, I was picked.”

Robinson served the two years in an at-large council seat and then challenged the incumbent in the western Cary district seat and won. Since then, she has been elected five times and has served for 21 years, bringing about many initiatives including having that road that started her advocacy paved.

“I drive on it all the time,” she says. “It’s a valuable road in our network, and it would not be there without a citizen campaign to get it back on the thoroughfare map.”



West Regional Library arrived after Robinson lobbied Wake County Public Libraries officials by showing them data that western Cary lacked books and library space per resident. When library officials said she needed to bring money to the table, she persuaded council colleagues to budget a million dollars and asked developers to sell land to Wake County at a discounted price, she says.

Stone Creek Village in Cary became a walkable community with a greenway after she worked with the project’s developer, encouraging him to mitigate an existing stream on the property so that it no longer would flood an adjacent neighborhood.



“It’s remarkable. The developer increased impervious space while fixing the flooding on the creek – that is no longer a flooded waterway for us,” she says. “And we got a greenway out of it.”

On a countywide level, Robinson worked hard to help get the Wake Transit Referendum passed in 2016, though the campaign came at a very difficult point in her life.

Robinson’s father, a big transit fan and environmental advocate, was dying. While sitting at his hospital bedside, she recalls, she was preparing a speech about the referendum and read it to her father.

After he rested awhile, he suddenly opened one eye, looked at her and said, “What are you doing here?”

She still chokes up after she remembers what he said next.

“He said, ‘You need to go out there and get that transit bond passed and don’t be wasting your time in here,’ ” she recalls. “He was a sweet guy with a lot of passion for doing what was right for our community.”

Robinson pushed through many efforts while working full-time, sometimes selling real estate part-time, and parenting her four children who now range in age from 14 to 23. She stays involved in their activities, rising before 5 a.m. on a recent morning to take her daughter to high school swim practice before a day of work.

“I’ve definitely raised four kids at Town Hall, that’s for sure; they know where the candy is hidden,” she says, laughing. “They’ve done their fair share of council meetings, ribbon cuttings and groundbreakings.”

Robinson, who attended public school in Fairfax County, Virginia, earned bachelor’s degrees in English and Studio Arts from the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. A job throughout college allowed her to learn software programming, which she parlayed into work for the federal government before relocating to Cary.

Now director of local government solutions at SAS, Robinson has been the Town of Cary’s representative to the GoTriangle board since 2012, a position she enjoys because she believes that transit is an essential component of a thriving economy.

The biggest transit challenge facing the Triangle, she says, is that land usage historically hasn’t incorporated transit-oriented development, making it difficult to extend transit in a way that is close enough and frequent enough to all people.

“We will just continue battling this going forward, but there are new technologies and new approaches for mobility that I think will be able to help supplement some of the more traditional systems that will enable us to address that first-mile, last-mile issue,” she says.

Given how many people get frustrated just trying to drive their own cars alone, she says she greatly admires how GoTriangle bus operators take on the responsibility of driving huge vehicles with strangers.

“It is definitely a tall task, and I admire the professionalism that they have in delivering and doing their job so well,” she says. “And for all the people who make that happen – the mechanics and the schedulers – everybody plays such a critical role in delivering transit, and it is a testament to the great work that they do that we have such a wonderful transit system.”