

2024 State of the County Address
Where Opportunity Thrives — Chairwoman Nicole Love Hendrickson
As prepared for delivery on March 7, 2024

Good morning, Gwinnett County!

I always love this occasion because it gives us an opportunity to pause and reflect on everything we have accomplished together.

It also allows me a moment to reflect on my journey here in Gwinnett.

In 2008, I moved to Gwinnett right on the brink of the Great Recession, armed with a passion for empowering communities through outreach and civic participation.

My heart was grounded in service, and I knew I wanted to do more and was in the right place to do it.

Gwinnett has always been a place for opportunity.

And three years ago, voters granted me the opportunity to become Chairwoman of a community that leads with excellence, compassion, and an unparalleled commitment to diversity.

Today... My greatest responsibility is to ensure that Gwinnett remains a community where potential and promise come together.

For the more than one million people who call Gwinnett home, we must keep the doorway to opportunity open for all.

So much of what we have achieved together would not have been possible without many of the people here today.

I'd like to thank Nick and our 5-Star Chamber of Commerce, Michael and the Council for Quality Growth, Pastor VanderWal, and the entire staff here at 12Stone.

Thank you for your partnership and for making this event possible every year.

I'd also like to recognize my partners in public service on the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners...Commissioners Carden, Ku, Watkins, and Holtkamp. You all play an essential part in the growth and success of our county, and I am thankful for your teamwork.

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to our nearly five thousand County employees under the leadership of our County Administrator, Glenn Stephens.

Your dedication, hard work, and commitment have been the driving force behind our success.

To my family, whose unwavering love and support make it possible for me to be your Chairwoman.

I could not do any of these things without your unconditional love and encouragement.

And finally, I want to acknowledge all of you — the people of Gwinnett.

Whether you were born here or moved here, whether you work for a business, or you've built your business here, thank you for making Gwinnett a community of which we can all be proud.

Three years ago, I made a bold proclamation of intent.

I made a promise to every resident of our county: Under my leadership, we would be a Gwinnett for all.

A vision rooted in the belief that real and lasting prosperity must be built by all and shared by all.

All around our county, you can see the extraordinary progress, smart growth, and economic opportunity we have built together.

By almost every measure... residents' safety, financial strength, and quality of life — the state of our county is strong.

Gwinnett is safe.

Because of this Board's intentional investments in intervention programs and strategies, overall, violent crime was lower in 2023 than reported in the previous year.

With enhanced training and the expansion of our Behavioral Health Unit, we have focused on de-escalating crisis calls and addressing mental health, resulting in a 98 percent jail diversion rate.

Gwinnett is financially strong.

We have balanced our budget year after year with sufficient financial reserves, made historic investments in our infrastructure, and maintained Triple-A bond ratings from all three major credit rating agencies.

I should point out that out of more than 3,000 counties in the U.S. Only 51 have achieved this credit rating.

Last year, we allocated a historic \$759 million in SPLOST revenue toward projects that will improve quality of life while reducing the tax burden on residential property owners.

These intentional investments have made Gwinnett a desirable destination for families, small businesses, and companies.

We're creating jobs... more than 1,400 last year alone, expanding transit options and ensuring that residents and businesses have the resources they need to succeed.

Our partners at the Atlanta Regional Commission project that our arts and entertainment industry will grow significantly over the next 25 years.

That's why we're intentional in making Gwinnett's downtown the place to be.

With the expansion and renovation of the Gas South District, including the Westin Hotel, we'll attract residents and visitors to sporting events, concerts, performing arts, conventions, and more.

Gwinnett is indeed a benchmark community.

And our residents have put their trust in us. You expect us to deliver and win for you, and you can rest assured that your leaders are maintaining a stable and responsible government.

And we've delivered.

We ensured the strength of our fundamentals and never wavered in our commitment to outstanding service delivery.

All across Gwinnett, we are opening doors to quality living, prosperity, and equity for everyone.

Ensuring that everyone feels the opportunity within reach, regardless of their background or circumstances.

And as Gwinnett continues to grow... As one of our state's most dynamic and diverse populations... One thing remains constant:

We are a county where people and businesses can live authentically and grow purposely.

We are a community where opportunity thrives.

For the people and businesses who have put their faith in Gwinnett and believe in the promise it has always offered... Our job is to make it just a bit easier to redeem that promise.

Answering how we can progress is a constant commitment to listening, learning, collaborating, and taking action... With caution when called for and with boldness when needed.

This collaboration and spirit of social solidarity allowed us to get through a global pandemic, support our communities during recovery, and make investments in our future to ensure that we are creating opportunity every single day.

We're building the Gwinnett of tomorrow by prioritizing people.

This is reflected in our 2045 Unified Plan... the blueprint for our future.

This new plan shifts our focus from buildings-first to people-first to better accommodate our lifestyle and the built environment to create high quality people-centered development.

This approach is fiscally and ecologically more sustainable than promoting continued urban sprawl.

It allows us to draw on the concept of the daily community where residents can access work, goods, and services within a 15-minute trip of their home.

Auto-dependent, single-use commercial and office districts are becoming obsolete.

Our distressed and disinvested neighborhoods provide opportunities for a renewed focus on quality redevelopment.

We have an obligation to Gwinnett's growth. We must embrace it. Shape it. And recognize that it requires us to act.

We are showing the world that our growth is not a moment... but a movement.

Our new Human Services Strategic Plan outlines a roadmap that ensures we address service gaps in basic human needs... like housing, quality healthcare, youth and literacy, and mental health.

And to support this effort, we've established the County's first Human Services Advisory Board.

This Board will ensure we deploy a more holistic and equitable approach to service delivery and coordination in high-priority areas like food insecurity.

How a community treats its most vulnerable is a true measure of its compassion.

Here in Gwinnett and across the country, food insecurity doesn't just affect the homeless or unemployed.

We have residents in our community who work two or three jobs but still struggle to put food on the table...

We see it often at our food distribution events.

A box of food can make a world of difference to those who are struggling to balance a myriad of financial obligations like rent, transportation, childcare, and other costs.

And while some may call these initiatives a handout, we call them a hand-up.

Gwinnett is a great place for business...yes...But it must also be a great place for people.

We can and will marry commerce with compassion.

Putting people first is not just a policy priority but a moral imperative.

John F. Kennedy once said a rising tide lifts all boats.

Our community and economic empowerment agenda has always centered on giving people the tools they need to build strong communities on all fronts.

Since our OneStop 4 HELP launched in 2022, we have served more than 44,000 residents and veterans with access to coordinated services.

And this year, we're doubling down on these efforts by expanding and enhancing our existing OneStop services.

We're making once-in-a-generation investments in our future.

Last year, we allocated \$25 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to expand OneStop operations in southern Gwinnett.

By the end of summer, we'll be cutting the ribbon to officially open the OneStop Centerville. This 42,000-square-foot multi-level facility will provide access to Head Start, mental, behavioral, and public health programs.

While too many communities across America grapple with the erosion that comes with the division of the haves and the have-nots, we are committed to bringing Gwinnett together so that every person and every community is empowered to contribute and share in the prosperity our county has to offer.

Together, we will move Gwinnett forward.

That is how we will ensure that we are the community where opportunity thrives.

And what better way to do that than to cut down the time we spend in traffic... Away from the people and places that help us thrive?

Over the next 25 years, our county's population will grow by more than half a million people. The time for planning and preparing for transit expansion is now.

The Board anticipates calling for a referendum that would give Gwinnett residents the opportunity to vote on the issue of the future of mobility this November.

A Transit SPLOST, if approved by voters, would allocate a 1 percent sales tax to be levied for 30 years to fund and expand our transit system.

We know previous efforts to pass transit expansion have failed, but we're Gwinnett... of course we're not just going to give up.

We rolled up our sleeves, reconvened, and developed a plan that better speaks to the needs of our evolving county.

Take a moment and imagine a transit system that takes the tax funding burden off of homeowners.

Imagine dedicated routes to take residents directly to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

Imagine our workforce being connected to our growing business community without needing a car.

The people of Gwinnett have already voiced their support to be in the future business.

Ridership on our new microtransit service was tenfold our expectations during launch week, with nearly 8,000 Ride Gwinnett app downloads since launch... and hopefully more today.

The expansion of local routes has allowed us to make Ride Gwinnett accessible to more than 50 percent of our residents and serve every corner of our county.

If you need more convincing, I'll share a story my dear friend Mayor Bender of Snellville told me:

She received a "thank you" note from a senior who is visually impaired and has been dependent on family and friends to do basic things like running errands or going to the doctor.

But thanks to microtransit, she was able to go out to lunch on her own for the first time in years.

This — is the power of mobility.

Because of its urgency, we're not waiting for a referendum to fund vital infrastructure and transit projects.

We're making generational investments in our roads, bridges, and sidewalks today. Connecting people and communities and creating economic mobility.

Because we know that better access to transit gives people more opportunities to be employed in well-paying jobs.

And behind those jobs is a full refrigerator, a paid mortgage, and a child who can dream of college.

While we enjoy cutting ribbons of opportunity, our goal is also to advance projects... and start new ones...that will keep our county on the right course for decades to come.

If this were the end of the list of things we have achieved, one might say this is a good list.

But I have never rested in comfort or complacency.

While we have achieved much together, I know we have more work to do to become a place where opportunity is abundant and within reach for every person and business who call Gwinnett home.

Because we understand that Gwinnett is at its best when it is a place for everyone...where what's achieved is achieved together.

I've heard from small business owners...like Renae Keitt.

She shared that it's difficult to place individuals in positions in Gwinnett due to the lack of transit to workplace centers. Without reliable transit options, job seekers turn down offers and choose sites accessible by public transit or closer to home.

If we want to cultivate a culture of business opportunity and job growth, we must focus on creating the conditions that will allow our residents to participate in the innovation economy of tomorrow.

This year, we're strengthening our workforce by creating initiatives and programs that align business needs with educational offerings and building on the work of Partnership Gwinnett, Gwinnett Technical College, and our office of economic development.

In this current labor market, we don't have a shortage of workers...we have a shortage of workers with the right skills for the high-growth, high-demand job market.

Together, we'll collaborate on upskilling our workforce so companies can find and retain talent right here.

And if we want to be intentional about creating a thriving business climate, then we must continue to address housing affordability.

Right now, we have local businesses whose employees are challenged by the rising cost of housing.

The lack of affordable housing options is hindering their ability to attract and retain talent. For many job seekers, their interest in a company often rests solely on their ability to afford to live in the community where they work.

This is why the board of commissioners took bold steps to update our Unified Development Ordinance.

Initially adopted in 2014, our UDO needed a comprehensive overhaul to create policies and tools that not only allow redevelopment and infill development but that encourage and incentivize it.

Today, we have a modern zoning code that permits a diversity of housing types, including missing middle housing such as duplexes, triplexes, cottage courts, live-work units...and the like.

Thanks to this update, for the first time, Gwinnett will have its first tiny home community.

In partnership with the Gwinnett Housing Corporation and MicroLife Institute, we will be able to address the growing need for affordable housing by offering cottage-style homes to families earning up to 80 percent of the area median income... That's up to \$65,000 for a family of two.

This is the future of Gwinnett.

And if you don't believe that investing in affordable housing provides consistent returns and stable economies, then don't just take my word. Take the data.

Research from the American Planning Association shows that every dollar invested into affordable housing creates two dollars and 30 cents in economic activity.

Through our Affordable Housing Development Fund, we are investing \$18 million of federal funding to support 12 projects that will create more than 750 units of affordable housing.

And...for first-time homebuyers who meet FHA requirements, we are increasing the amount of down payment assistance from \$7,500 to \$10,000, making it easier for families to call Gwinnett home.

We're on our way, but we're not done. We won't stop until everyone is safely housed...because housing is a basic human right.

As a county dedicated to nurturing opportunity, we will continue to work hard to keep these responsibilities not only in our minds but to make sure that they have a handprint on our hearts.

It's encouraging to pause for a moment and think about everything we have done together, the progress you all have been an essential part of.

Every day, I think about the county we are building for my son, for your children, and for the next generation.

Franklin Roosevelt said, "We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future."

In Gwinnett, investing in our youth cannot be just an act of generosity. It must be a strategic decision to shape the future of our county... a deliberate action to ensure that opportunity grows here.

Gwinnett is home to the largest school district in the state. Which means we have the largest youth population.

This year, we're taking proactive steps to equip our youth with the tools they need to become leaders, entrepreneurs, and change-makers.

2024 will be Gwinnett's year for our youth...

As a county that grows opportunity... Every child in every neighborhood should finish a great day at school with a safe, healthy place to spend their afternoon.

Every high school graduate should have the opportunity to achieve their dreams. For many, that will include going to college, but for others, it may be job training, an apprenticeship, or trade school.

Whatever their desire, it is incumbent upon us to help them discover alternative pathways to succeed in today's competitive world.

That is how we'll make ourselves worthy of our progress. It's what we owe our future and those who will inherit it.

We will build a brave and bold new future together today.

Opportunity is at the heart of what makes Gwinnett so special.

It is what has created the diversity we see all across our county today.

The promise of opportunity is what propels entrepreneurs to choose Gwinnett to open their small businesses.

It's what drives companies to relocate here and become industry leaders.

It's what encourages people to move here and raise their families.

And it's what makes all people feel welcome and at home here — regardless of race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

It's why I am proud to call Gwinnett my home.

People always tell me, 'You're everywhere!' And it's true! It's because of the joy it brings me when I show up for you.

We've got plenty to do, but in Gwinnett, we overcome our challenges and create change by extending grace, finding common ground, and working together.

Peter Drucker said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it."

Sometimes, opportunity isn't obvious. It's developed. It's pursued. It's nurtured.

It's the decision we make every single day to keep the doors of opportunity open for everyone.

To ensure the pathways to prosperity remain accessible to all who call Gwinnett home.

We are the place of the future.

We have the courage to see it.

We have done the work to be it.

Our charge today is to push farther...climb higher.

Because the doorway to opportunity is open, and it's up to us to take the first step.

Thank you.

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