

2020 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 12, 2020

Thank you, Michael, for that kind introduction. And thanks to each of you for being here today.

As you know, this is the tenth and final State of the County that I'll share with you. But today is not the time for goodbye.

Today is about taking stock of where we are as a county... and imagining what the future will demand of Gwinnett's leadership.

To my mind, imagining the future boils down to asking one question.
Will Gwinnett County continue to be extraordinary?

“Extraordinary” is a bold term... but it may actually be too mild for Gwinnett. Gwinnett is unique... literally! Among the more than 3,000 counties in the US, there's only one Gwinnett.

In 1970, Gwinnett had fewer than 75,000 residents. Fifty years later, we're closing in on 1 million and moving toward the title of largest county in the State.

By 2050, over 10% of Georgians will be Gwinnett residents.

Our county has flourished in a way that has caused people and businesses across America and around the globe to say, “Gwinnett is where we want to be.”

There are few communities anywhere with such a magnetic quality of life, and we're rightly proud of that.

As the luncheon was starting, you were asked to answer two questions:
What makes Gwinnett extraordinary?
And what is the biggest challenge facing Gwinnett?

Let's take a look now at your combined responses to the first question. (*Word Cloud appears on screen*)

This is interesting - the responses show a breadth of attributes and qualities that make Gwinnett a desirable place to call home. That says to me that we have a lot of strengths to leverage in building for the future.

Which brings me back to the main question for today – will we continue to be extraordinary going forward?

My answer is a resounding “Yes... If.” Yes, because the conditions are in place for us to prosper even as we evolve. We have the essential ingredients...talent, experience, knowledge, resources, and energy.

But there's also an If – If we can summon the type of vision and courage that made Gwinnett extraordinary in the first place.

Gwinnett's success over the last half century did not just happen. It happened primarily because leaders took the long view. Business leaders. Government leaders. Civic leaders in all walks of life.

They made bold decisions and took risks. Where they saw opportunity, they seized it. At times, they seemed to be over-reaching. But time and again, their vision and courage paid off.

They managed not only to “bend the trend,” as I call it, but to totally lift the trajectory of an entire community.

Gwinnett became known for bringing dreams to life in the right way. If something wasn't first rate, it wasn't going to cut it in this county.

Over time, the Gwinnett Standard came into being. We expected the extraordinary. And we got it.

As I think about what lies ahead, I see specific areas where we must sustain and raise our expectations, so that Gwinnett continues to thrive.

Before I share my thoughts, though, let's take a look at what you think are the biggest challenges facing Gwinnett.

(Word Cloud appears on screen)

Here, we see more concentration of responses.

That's not surprising to me, since the most prominent answers shown here reflect the contacts I get every day.

After serving Gwinnett for nearly four decades - my list of “most critical challenges” is both similar and somewhat different.

Let's start with the one most likely to keep me awake at night - water.

Since our water system works well, it might be surprising that water is my top concern. But it is.

Don't get me wrong! We've done a tremendous job with water infrastructure and operations. But this very fact can make us a bit complacent about the underlying urgency of our water situation.

Water usually drops out of mind unless there's a problem, like drought.

But, believe me, there is urgency.

Keeping the taps flowing as our population grows by half a million...and as our needs are balanced with all other water users...will be an ongoing challenge of the first order that requires vision and courage.

For inspiration, we can look to the example that was set by Gwinnett's farsighted leaders in the past who invested in building a countywide water system when we had less than one tenth of today's population.

This story of anticipating the future was repeated later when Gwinnett made investments in world-class wastewater treatment.

Today our county operates with one of the highest treatment standards in the world.

From the F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center, we return millions of gallons of clean water each day back to Lake Lanier.

These return flows are critical to the long-term water supply plan for metro Atlanta, and we'll keep pushing to get credit for them in the water allocation process.

Today, as we consider water needs 50 years ahead, we're not only planning for water and sewer system improvements, we're also investing in the Water Tower at Gwinnett.

Here, advanced research will be conducted to assure that our water and wastewater technologies are state of the art.

In addition, the facility will serve as a training center, a think tank for water policy, and an incubator for businesses focused on innovation in the water industry.

We'll break ground for this facility later this year, but I challenge Gwinnett's leaders to ensure that it reaches its full potential.

By this, I mean that it should bend the trend for excellence in managing and conserving water resources here in Gwinnett and beyond – even while the County grapples with growing water and wastewater needs.

Of course, other priorities have urgency as well. Which brings me to the next area of focus – mobility.

It's not surprising to see that issue highlighted on the word cloud.

We've been a transportation corridor for as long as humans have inhabited this area. From Hog Mountain to Standing Peachtree on the Chattahoochee, the ridge tracked by Old Peachtree Road was a natural route for people and goods long before Europeans settled here.

The choice of a route for I-85 through the middle of Gwinnett created a ribbon of prosperity for our county.

And once again, Gwinnett leaders were farsighted in designing a network of cross-cutting corridors that would maximize that potential.

Even with a good road network, though, we struggle with traffic congestion, just as any area with economic growth does.

We're investing heavily in road improvements and technology to maximize efficiency – thanks in large part to the voters' willingness to support SPLOST referenda.

But, roads and private vehicles will take us only so far. Transit options *must* be considered.

After the failure of last year's referendum, we're re-visiting our transit plan.

The Board of Commissioners recently received the report of the Citizens Transit Review Committee.

We very much appreciate the good work done by the committee members and their thoughtful recommendations.

As we work to reach agreement on a revised transit plan, it's still too early to know exactly how we will proceed.

What *is* clear, right now, is that a robust transit system must be part of Gwinnett's future.

A gridlocked Gwinnett without a range of mobility options won't attract those seeking a high quality of life and a productive work environment.

So, my second challenge to Gwinnett leaders is to deliver a transit system that meets the Gwinnett Standard and serves Gwinnett's needs across time...while taking full advantage of technology and targeted road improvements.

This will truly bend the trend for our transportation future!

Continued excellence in public safety is also critical.

Today we have Georgia's second largest full-service police department. Our highly trained and well-equipped officers serve 85% of the County and provide certain specialized services countywide.

In addition, Gwinnett is served by the Sheriff's Office, Gwinnett Corrections, nine municipal departments, and other law enforcement entities like the State Patrol and the school resource officers.

The close coordination that exists among all the agencies is fundamental to law enforcement effectiveness.

Another key component of public safety is our Department of Fire and Emergency Services, which serves essentially the entire county.

With 75% of calls for service involving medical emergencies, we cross train every firefighter to paramedic standards...and we equip every emergency vehicle with advanced life support systems.

Once again, these outstanding organizations reflect past decisions of vision and courage which insisted that Gwinnett must have top-flight public safety services.

We continue to prioritize these services for investment and improvement.

However, we must also recruit and retain the people who can excel now, and then take Gwinnett public safety into the future.

We must have the right number of public safety staff and assure that those serving Gwinnett reflect its many diverse communities.

So, meeting this need is the third challenge I present to Gwinnett's leaders. It will not be easy, since many young people must be convinced that public safety is a desirable career choice.

However, finding ways to engage all communities is critical as we strive to sustain the Gwinnett Standard.

In sports, it's a good strategy to leverage your strengths. The same is true in economic development. And one of the great strengths that we've cultivated for Gwinnett is a broad range of community amenities that create a great lifestyle.

One of these amenities is our system of parks and recreation.

Preserving and expanding this strength helps Gwinnett stand out as *the* extraordinary place to live...to learn...to work...and to play.

Today Gwinnett has more than 10,000 acres of county-owned parkland with hundreds of acres protected as green space...a large active park near almost every high school...more than 100 miles of trails with an aggressive plan to add hundreds more... and robust programs as diverse as Gwinnett's population.

As Gwinnett and its cities expand our trail systems to connect with each other and our parks, I visualize a recreation asset without equal in Georgia.

This prime example of the Gwinnett Standard will literally wind throughout the entire county.

The vision that spawned this wonderful reality originated decades ago with visionary County leaders who saw a need and chose to address it.

Vision and courage in combination – they create extraordinary communities, and Gwinnett is living proof.

In this vein, my fourth challenge to Gwinnett's leaders is to ensure that our wonderful parks and trails are maintained to the Gwinnett Standard and expanded to full potential.

With my fifth priority, I'll sound a word of caution.

Whatever needs exist...whatever improvements are initiated...it's important to ensure sustainability of core services and new efforts alike.

Services and initiatives must be balanced with sound funding plans that focus on major issues first and incorporate hard choices.

For County government, it means applying discipline to ensure its primary responsibilities are funded before tackling other issues, no matter how appealing.

Even a large budget like the County's has limits since most of the dollars must go to cover the costs of basic services.

County government cannot be everything to every cause or community need. That's the reason we cultivate community partnerships as we work together to address community issues.

The Triple-AAA bond rating we've held since 1997 provides independent validation of the Gwinnett Standard for long-term planning and financial responsibility.

I challenge our leaders to ensure that Gwinnett remains in the elite group of counties nationwide who hold that rating.

The priorities I've covered so far probably haven't surprised you – they all fit squarely within County government's responsibilities.

However, at the risk of being accused of meddling, the last priority I'll mention is education.

We all know that education is fundamental to Gwinnett's success and sets us apart.

We have great schools that are blessed with strong and farsighted leadership.

However, many of our students face hurdles, and Gwinnett's future depends upon how well we equip children to *over-come* those hurdles.

Thanks to Alvin Wilbanks and others who know so much more than I do about this topic, I have come to believe strongly that early childhood learning, especially literacy, is the main leg up we can give our students and, through them, our entire community.

We must ensure that Gwinnett students leave the third grade “reading to learn” versus still “learning to read.” And the effort must touch children even before they enter kindergarten.

Why is early learning so important? Directly or indirectly, early literacy predicts a host of personal and community outcomes.

Many of the community problems we're working to address are symptoms of inadequate preparation for educational and economic success.

Children who are caught in its trap find it difficult to escape.

Did you know that a child who isn't reading well by the end of the third grade is four or more times likely to leave high school without graduating?

Young people who drop out are more likely to get arrested...or to have a child while still a teenager....or to be unemployed.

This affects not only individuals and families, but the entire community. If Gwinnett of the future is to be a place of extraordinary opportunity...with bright economic prospects...with a climate that supports business formation...with a skilled workforce that delivers for both the public and private sectors...then, we must bend the trend on early childhood learning by assuring that kids get a strong start even before their early years of schooling.

Accomplishing this is my sixth – and final – challenge to Gwinnett's leaders.

The schools and a group of community partners have been working on the development of a Gwinnett Early Learning Strategy that's due to be released soon. Key to the strategy is community awareness, support, and involvement.

Just as decades ago the entire Gwinnett community came together to create a world-class school system, so must we come together now in a relentless effort to improve early childhood readiness to learn. And County government intends to be part of this effort.

For example, within our Parks programs, we'll expand our efforts to reach young children and their parents through a Playing to Learn approach.

We'll use our summer camps and afterschool programs to highlight early childhood learning in coordination with the school system.

We'll educate our employees regarding the early learning initiative and ways they can be involved.

And...we've provided seed money within the 2020 budget for an initiative to allow the Gwinnett County Library System to enhance its focus on literacy.

I am pleased to announce that this initiative will be named in honor of Shirley Carver Miller, former first lady of Georgia and Norcross business woman.

Ms. Miller has been a warrior for literacy for decades, and, I suspect, influenced Gov. Zell Miller's emphasis on education.

In her words, "Not being able to read and do math makes it impossible to function in today's world. I am honored to be associated with the literacy program in Gwinnett County.

Stay tuned for more announcements and information about the Shirley Miller Literacy Initiative.

But, how can you help? A number of concrete ideas are shown on the screen, but these are just a sample to start you thinking.

It's time to tap that powerful force that our community commands when we unite around a goal.

I encourage each of you to roll up your sleeves, and rally your colleagues, your civic clubs, your congregations, and your neighborhood groups to turn ideas into actions for the sake of Gwinnett's future.

Which brings us back to the same spirit that, half a century ago, began to transform Gwinnett.

This spirit caught the imagination of people throughout the county, and it inspired leaders from every walk of life to join together with the courage to pursue a powerful vision of what Gwinnett could become.

No obstacle was allowed to block that vision.

When the county lacked something crucial, like a safe and reliable water supply, we built it.

When Gwinnett felt the strains of gridlock, we improved the transportation system. When the county needed to upgrade vital services – like public safety – we did it.

When Gwinnett yearned for a higher quality of life, we developed world-class amenities like parks and recreation...all the while relying on Gwinnett's sound finances to fund those improvements.

Now, I'll be working hard for the next 10 months on the County's priorities, but I look forward to sitting in the audience with you next year and hearing from a new chairman how the community is uniting to meet our challenges...how the new leadership is carrying forward the Gwinnett Standard.

If all of you expect greatness and Gwinnett leaders continue to lead with vision and courage, then our most extraordinary days are still to come.

I thank you all for your part in making this happen.

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