

## THE PATH FORWARD

“



I believe that transit expansion is the biggest decision currently facing Gwinnett, as important to the future of the county as the past decisions about water, sewer and roads have been to the county.”

— Charlotte Nash, Gwinnett Board of Commissioners chair



A MARTA train pulls into one of the transit system's stations. A heavy rail extension from Doraville to the Jimmy Carter Boulevard corridor is part of the plans for what will happen if Gwinnett voters approve the county joining MARTA. (Photos: MARTA)

# Gwinnett's 'inflection point' on MARTA is fast approaching

BY CURT YEOMANS

curt.yeomans@gwinnettdaily.com

One way or another, March 19, 2019, might be a standout among the key dates in Gwinnett County history.

With voters set to visit the polls that day to decide whether the county should institute a 1 percent sales tax to join MARTA, the metro Atlanta transit system that is either loved or hated depending on who is asked, a lot is riding on whatever decision shakes out.

Georgia's second most populous county, which has more than 900,000 residents, could either become a member of the regional transit system, or its leaders could be sent back to the drawing board to start over from scratch.

That fact is not lost on county officials such as Board of Commissioners Chairwoman Charlotte Nash.

"I believe that transit expansion is the biggest decision currently facing Gwinnett, as important to the future of the county as the past decisions about water, sewer and roads have been to the county," Nash said.

The months of debating whether Gwinnett should join MARTA and of informational meetings held in community centers and libraries will begin coming to a head Monday when early voting for the referendum begins.

For the first week of early voting, voters will only be able to cast ballots at the Gwinnett County Voter Registrations and Elections Office located at 455 Grayson Highway, Suite 200 in Lawrenceville. Starting March 4, seven satellite polling locations will open around the county as well.



### MORE INSIDE

Some officials see transit as key to economic development in Gwinnett ..... 4C  
GJAC expansions aiming to relieve backup of cases at county's judicial center ..... 6C

Top left, a MARTA bus picks up passengers in Atlanta. Above, a MARTA train travels along one of the transit system's rail lines. Left, a MARTA train pulls into one of the transit system's stations.

But what is at stake in this election?

If the referendum passes, Gwinnett County and MARTA will be in a contract together until at least 2057.

MARTA would carry out the Connect Gwinnett Transit Development Plan, which is split up into short-, middle- and long-term phases of implementation.

It calls for a heavy rail line extension from Doraville to at least the Jimmy Carter Boulevard corridor; bus rapid transit lines; rapid bus service;

expanded local, express and paratransit service; eventual bus service from Snellville to the Indian Creek MARTA station in DeKalb County; and flex service throughout several parts of the county.

"The improvements proposed by Gwinnett represent the largest expansion of transit in the metro Atlanta region in many years and will make the regional transit system more useful to the entire region, but especially to Gwinnett," Nash said.

Gwinnett Chamber President

Dan Kaufman called Gwinnett's previous failed MARTA referendums in 1971 and 1990 "a missed opportunity." The chamber's Board of Directors has voted to endorse passage of the referendum, and Kaufman said the upcoming vote "really is an inflection point" for the county.

"Assuming the referendum passes, it will be sort of the next iteration of transformation for Gwinnett, both in terms of its connectivity to the region, but

See MARTA, Page 7C

### EARLY VOTING INFORMATION

Early voting for Gwinnett's MARTA referendum will run from Feb. 25 to March 15. County officials have set up the early voting schedule so voters will be able to cast ballots daily from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Sundays until March 15.

The Gwinnett County Voter Registrations and Elections office will be open for voting throughout the entire early voting period. It is located at 455 Grayson Highway, Suite 200 in Lawrenceville.

From March 4 to 15, the following satellite early voting locations will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Sundays:

- **Bogan Park Community Recreation Center:** 2723 North Bogan Road, Buford
- **Lenora Park Gym:** 4515 Lenora Church Road, Snellville
- **Dacula Park Activity Building:** 2735 Old Auburn Road, Dacula
- **Lucky Shoals Park Community Recreation Center:** 4651 Britt Road, Norcross
- **George Pierce Park Community Recreation Center:** 55 Buford Highway, Suwanee
- **Mountain Park Activity Building:** 1063 Rockbridge Road, Stone Mountain
- **Shorty Howell Park Community Recreation Center:** 2750 Pleasant Hill Road, Duluth

Anyone who plans to vote March 19 but is unsure of his or her assigned polling location can visit [www.mvp.sos.ga.gov](http://www.mvp.sos.ga.gov) or call the elections office at 678-226-7210.

### MARTA IN GWINNETT BY THE NUMBERS

**1** percent sales tax implemented to pay for Gwinnett's participation in MARTA if the referendum passes

**7.5** billions in "year of expenditure" dollars that county officials believe would be raised over a 30-year period by a sales tax if the referendum passes

**152.1** dollars, in millions, estimated to be collected in 2019 if the referendum passes

# progress 2019

## Revel part of trend toward mixed-use communities

By **CURT YEOMANS**  
 curt.yeomans  
 @gwinnettdaily.com

Although images of the plans for the Revel mixed-use development at the Infinite Energy Center have been gradually emerging over the months, the future of what the center itself will look like is starting to come into focus.

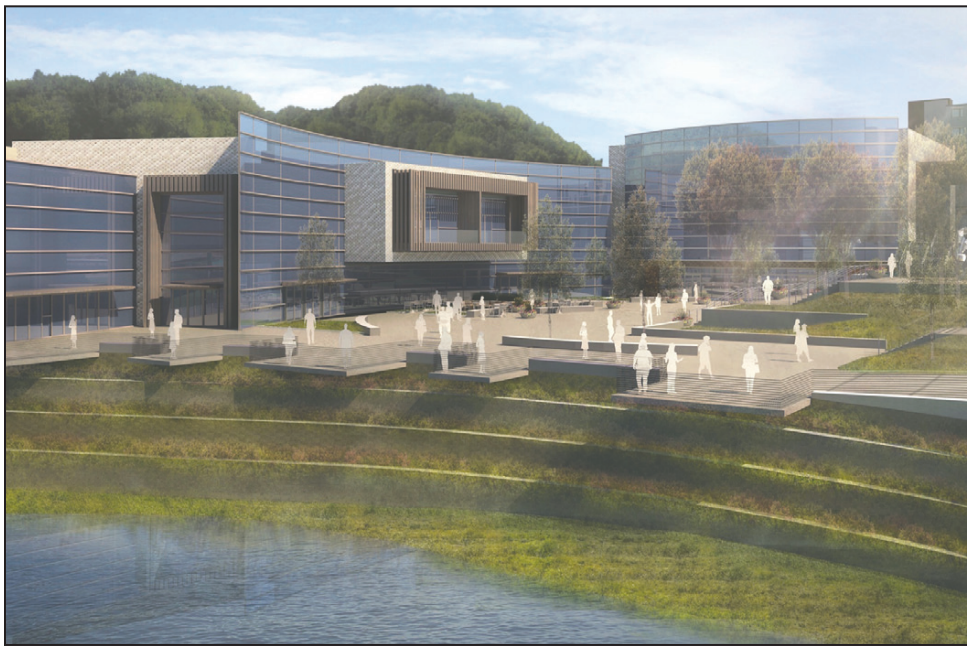
A 50,000-square-foot expansion of convention center space. A junior ballroom on the bottom level of a new entrance to the Infinite Energy Forum. A food hall next to the grand ballroom. An indoor bridge connecting the forum with the Infinite Energy Arena. The addition of several new meeting rooms. A revamping of the Infinite Energy Theater's course.

These are all items that are included in the plans county officials currently have for the expansion and renovation of the Infinite Energy Center.

"What we're doing with the entire center there, having gone to a lot of training events and conferences and such, I think this just brings it up to a top class above anything I've been to," Commissioner Jace Brooks said.

The center's expansion and renovation project is part of a major overhaul of the Infinite Energy Center campus that will be taking place over the next few years.

The first step in that overhaul is already underway with a parking deck that is already under construction across from the forum. It is expected to open this fall. Work on the expansion and renovation



This rendering shows what the exterior of the Infinite Energy Forum will look like once a major expansion and renovation project is finished at the convention and event center. The existing grand ballroom wing and lake can be seen to the left and front of the rendering, respectively. (Photo: Gwinnett County)

of the center is expected to follow in phases.

"A critical goal of everyone involved is to keep the facility open while this expansion is going on because there's a lot of revenue at stake and a lot of functions that have been booked," said Charles Hull, a principal at the Smallwood, Reynolds, Stewart, Stewart and Associates Inc. architectural firm that is working on the center's design.

The Revel development is expected to break ground later this year and open in summer 2021. Once it opens, it is expected to bring a 24-hour level of activity to the Infinite Energy Center area between the various parts of Revel.

It will include retail spaces such as a food hall, restaurants, shops, a movie theater, a grocery market and a fitness center as well

as 200,000 square feet of loft office space above retail shops, three office towers that each have 200,000 square feet of space and 900 residential units.

Revel is being developed by North American Properties, which also developed Avalon in Alpharetta.

"The vision we have here has a lot of similarities to Avalon, but a lot of differences too," North American partner and senior vice president of commercial development John Kelley said. "The big difference is we did not have a facility bringing a million people through with 1,000 events a year at Avalon to build around as an anchor.

"That's what attracted us to this opportunity."

But the Infinite Energy Center is not the only place where big developments have or will be taking place.



Sugar Hill recently opened its E Center, which includes the Eagle Theatre and some office and retail spaces. Rushing Trading Company coffee shop opened last month in the center while Crazy Doughs Pizza bar opened this past week on a limited schedule. City Tavern has tentatively scheduled an April 1 opening in the center.

Meanwhile, construction has begun on the separate Broadstone mixed-use development across the street.

Construction is also underway on Lawrenceville's SouthLawn mixed-use de-

**REVEL BY THE NUMBERS**

<b>750,000</b> square feet of office space in Revel	<b>400,000</b> square feet of curated retail space in Revel
<b>50,000</b> square feet of new convention space being added to the Infinite Energy Forum	<b>35,000</b> square feet in the fitness center in Revel
<b>25,000</b> square feet of food hall in Revel	<b>900</b> residences in Revel
<b>340</b> rooms in the Westin hotel	<b>12</b> auditoriums in the movie theater at Revel

velopment with restaurants, office space and residential units. The Lawrenceville Housing Authority project, which includes new housing units for families who are struggling financially, is expected to open within a year.

Lawrenceville also recently unveiled plans for a downtown Hilton Tapestry hotel and 380-space parking deck at the corner of East Crogan Street and South Chestnut Street. The hotel is not expected to open until 2021.

Duluth is also planning a downtown hotel and parking deck, although it is partnering with Courtyard by Marriott for its hotel. It is expected to open in May 2020.

Peachtree Corners is in the process of welcoming restaurants to its newly opened Town Center mixed-use development. A Cinebistro is expected to

open in the development next month and several more restaurants and other retail shops are slated to be coming in the next few months.

Norcross recently broke ground on The Brunswick residential project with 194 units. It will be located at the corner of Holcomb Bridge Road and Buford Highway.

Lilburn approved townhomes on Rockbridge Road while Grayson approved brownstones on Britt Street this past week.

Meanwhile, the first phase of the Solis mixed-use development in Suwanee has already opened while construction continues on other parts of it.

And county commissioners approved The Exchange at Gwinnett, which is a mixed-use development at the Buford Drive and Interstate 85 interchange, in November.

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# progress 2019

## School system continues building to battle growth

BY ISABEL HUGHES  
isabel.hughes  
@gwinnettdaily.com

Gwinnett County is well on its way to reaching 1 million residents, officially crossing the 900,000 mark last year, the Atlanta Regional Commission said in August.

While singles, couples and families without school-aged children make up the majority of the population — the ARC's annual Regional Snapshots population estimates report showed 910,700 people call Gwinnett home — students comprise about 20 percent of the county's residents, meaning as the county's population grows, the schools are becoming more and more crowded.

Paul Duke STEM High School in Norcross is seen in an aerial shot of Gwinnett County Public Schools' newest school. The district continues to deal with growth by building new schools. (Special Photo)



As of the last official Gwinnett County Public Schools enrollment count, which was done in October, the district had 179,758 students, according to Sloan Roach, GCPS spokeswoman.

But that number changes slightly throughout the year,

she said. "As of (Tuesday), we were above the 180,000 mark, with 180,879," Roach said. "Our enrollment does fluctuate during the year, and our next official count is in March."

To combat the annual increase in student popula-

tion — three years ago, in Feb. 2016, the Daily Post reported GCPS had about 176,000 students enrolled — the district has opened at least one new school each year for the past five years, with 2017 as the exception.

Moving forward, that new-school-per-year trend is set to continue, at least in the immediate future; Meadowcreek cluster's newest school, McClure Health Science High School, is set to open in August of this year.

According to GCPS' Feb. 14 facilities report, the school is 86 percent complete, with roofing, mechanical, electrical and plumbing engineering and brick and finishes currently in progress.

In total, the school's capacity will be 1,500, and it will have 80 instructional units, mirroring the numbers of the county's most recently opened, 140th school, the Paul Duke STEM High School, which welcomed its first students in August.

GCPS has other schools in the works, too, which are again geared toward dealing with Gwinnett's rapid growth.

An elementary school in the Meadowcreek cluster that will be located on Old Norcross Tucker Road in Tucker is currently in the "to

### GCPS BY THE NUMBERS

<b>179,758</b> students enrolled, as of official October count	<b>131,000</b> miles driven by GCPS bus drivers in 2017 to pick up 130,929 students twice a day
<b>20,417,107</b> student lunches served by the district and 10,206,615 student breakfasts during the 2017-18 school year	<b>3</b> rank nationally of transporters of students behind the New York City Department of Education (147,160) and Fairfax County Public Schools (142,650)
<b>37,766,594</b> cost in dollars to build Paul Duke STEM High School	<b>1,400</b> food service professionals working at 133 different schools
<b>93 million</b> budget, in dollars, of GCPS' nutrition program in 2018	<b>8,167</b> school bus runs per day, with each run averaging 16 miles
<b>28 million</b> square feet of carpet in the school district	<b>95</b> miles of chain link fence at GCPS facilities

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ommended budget for fiscal year 2019, school officials projected enrollment will increase by more than 1,000 students each year for the next five years.

Given that, GCPS Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks said previously that the new high school in the Mill Creek cluster is a project that the district wants to get on the building project list to help alleviate the continuing growth of enrollment each year.

"While it is not urgent today, it's going to get urgent pretty quickly," Wilbanks said late last year. "This allows us to plan and build the high school in a timely fashion."

be determined" phase, and a new high school in the Mill Creek cluster is planned for the future. "We are constantly assessing enrollment numbers," Roach said, "and with (the Meadowcreek school), we want to make sure classrooms we add and the facility is needed." Still, in the district's rec-

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# progress 2019

## Transit has potential to spur new economic development

By **CURT YEOMANS**  
 curt.yeomans  
 @gwinnettdaily.com

As MARTA chief counsel Liz O'Neill showed attendees a slide of big companies that have moved to new locations near MARTA lines during a transit forum in Lawrenceville last weekend, there was one thing that went unspoken.

Two of those companies, WestRock and NCR, had left homes in Gwinnett County in recent years to gain that access to transit. Both were major employers in the county and NCR left for midtown Atlanta while WestRock headed off to Sandy Springs to be near a MARTA rail station.

O'Neill's main point was that transit-oriented development — something that MARTA has been embracing — can be good for communities. The concept is to lure businesses to relocate around a transit hub.

"Each of these corporations noted it was the access to transit that made the locations they chose attractive to them," O'Neill said during the forum, which was hosted by the League of Women Voters of Gwinnett County.

Gwinnett's business leaders have not been shy about their embrace of more transit in Gwinnett, and the potential it could bring for attracting big corporations to the county. The transit agency touts a \$2.6 billion economic impact that it claims it has on the metro area annually.

The Gwinnett Chamber's board of directors has voted to endorse passage of the MARTA



**Above, MARTA riders walk in and out of the transit agency's Lindbergh station in August. Right, a MARTA bus pulls past the transit system's Lindbergh station in Buckhead last August. The Lindbergh station was the site of MARTA's first transit-oriented development. Gwinnett business leaders believe the county could benefit from such developments if it joins MARTA. (Staff Photos: Curt Yeomans)**



referendum. During an interview with the Daily Post in January, Chamber President Dan Kaufman discussed two different possibilities for the Gwinnett's business community.

One was based on an expansion of transit. In the other scenario, he said a rejection of transit expansion would not be the end of the world, but it would

mean relying on Interstate 85 as the main transportation option included in pitches to prospective businesses.

"We've already seen a couple of instances where, because we don't have transportation alternatives, companies have gone to other places," Kaufman said. "That's not going away. Despite all of the

developments going on around here, we're not connected in 21st century ways with the region.

"Now we'll do OK because we've got an interstate highway running through the middle of the county, but we'll be a community of warehouses, not of high tech, advanced manufacturing, IT (and) health care kinds



of organizations."

This isn't the first time that the Gwinnett Chamber has been open to at least looking at MARTA coming to the county.

News reports from 1986 show chamber leaders were pushing for a referendum at that time. A referendum was eventually held in 1990, but the result was a rejection of MARTA by Gwinnett voters at that time.

That hasn't stopped the chamber from continuing to look at the issue, however.

In 2014, the chamber conducted a survey on transit and MARTA with the results being released the following year. The survey showed majority support for joining MARTA but a 50-50 split on paying a tax to fund it.

Kaufman said the chamber has kept an eye on transportation and transit in Gwinnett over the years because of the impact that the organization sees those issues as having on the local economy.

"We are competing every day for companies to move here or expand here and so we understand why companies do what they do and there's just been a couple of times where we were taken out of the competition because of lack of transit options," Kaufman said.

The transit-oriented development aspect of MARTA expansion is one aspect that is attractive for Gwinnett Chamber officials. The concept is something along the lines of what being considered as a possible use for the OFS property that Gwinnett officials recently purchased.

"(Transit-oriented developments) will be a major boom for development here in Gwinnett," Kaufman said.

O'Neill said the initial transit-oriented development was done at the Lindbergh MARTA station next to the transit system's headquarters in Atlanta.

A more recent example that she highlighted during the League of Women Voters of Gwinnett County forum was State Farm's relocation to Sandy Springs. She held it up as an example of how MARTA gets involved in transit oriented development projects with large corporations.

"When State Farm came in and relocated its headquarters to Sandy Springs, they actually approached us because they wanted to have access directly into the Dunwoody (MARTA station) system because they felt so many of the employees would be utilizing transit to get to what's a very congested area," O'Neill said.

In all, there are seven transit-oriented developments that MARTA is currently involved with, according to O'Neill. Those projects are in various stages of progress, she said.

"It's a program that we're excited about," O'Neill said.

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# progress 2019

# Law enforcement growing along with county

BY ISABEL HUGHES  
isabel.hughes  
@gwinnettdaily.com

Gwinnett's rapid growth in population affects all aspects of the county's infrastructure: roads, buildings, schools and businesses, to name a few.

To keep that infrastructure running as it should, and to help manage the population's needs and keep the community safe, the county has reiterated, time and time again, its need for increased law enforcement manpower.

Over the last several years, Gwinnett's law enforcement agencies have continued to add numbers, with this year's county budget requests, and approvals, marking one of the largest personnel increases in recent history.

With the county set to reach 1 million people by 2021 — Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners Chairwoman Charlotte Nash said on Tuesday the county has reached almost 950,000 — that need is set to continue well into the future.

"We know the need for additional public safety personnel is a continuous one," Nash said late last year. "We weren't able to do what we needed to do in those areas during the (Great Recession). It's a good thing to be able to be at the point where we're able to address those needs."

Nash told the Daily Post before Thanksgiving that public safety was a major factor in the proposed budget, a sentiment that was also reflected in the county's approved budget.

The Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office, in particular, made major gains this year with the approval of 41 new positions, compared to the 10



From left, Assistant Chief Jesse Jones, Deputy Chief Brett West, Chief Butch Ayers, Deputy Chief Tom Doran, Assistant Chief Curtis Clemons, Assistant Chief Kevin Moran and Maj. Lara Bardugon break ground on the Gwinnett County Police Department's newest police precinct in September. The county is dealing with population growth by adding new law enforcement officers and building new police infrastructure. (Staff Photo: Isabel Hughes)

total positions the office had received over the previous five budget years, according to Chief Deputy Lou Solis.

Nineteen of the positions will be assigned to the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center to staff the expansion wing that is being built. Another 10 positions will be assigned to the county jail, along with three new sergeant positions. The rest will be used for the fugitive squad.

Solis said there has been a growing demand on the fugitive squad which, among other duties, handles warrants issued by the courts on behalf of county, city, state and federal law enforcement agencies.

The squad has also been dealing with a 100 percent increase in warrants for sex offenders, mostly from people convicted of those crimes who are moving into the county.

"We want to make sure



that the guys are registered," Solis said. "The population is increasing with more people moving in, and we want to make sure that when people move in, the sex offenders register. We have a small team that oversees all of that."

The sheriff's office isn't the only agency to receive an increase; 30 new officer positions were also created in the Gwinnett County Police Department to help the county reach its goal of having a ratio of 1.3 police officers for every 1,000 residents.

Police Chief Butch Ayers

said the county currently has a ratio of about 1 officer for every 1,000 residents.

"It's a good challenge because we have a lot of people to hire," Ayers said previously. "We have been running 50-person academies in 2018. That is our goal in 2019 as well and we need to be able to position the police department to be able to provide services to a growing community."

To make room for those new officers, the department is opening a sixth precinct, which will take up approximately 12,500 square feet of space, and an alternate 911 center, which will cover approximately 6,200 square feet.

When it's fully staffed, the precinct, which is located on Ozora Road, will have 65 officers who will serve a population of 140,000 residents who live in the Bay Creek area, which encompasses Grayson — one of

### LAW ENFORCEMENT, POLICE INFRASTRUCTURE BY THE NUMBERS

<b>41</b> New Gwinnett County Sheriff's Office positions approved in the 2019 county budget	<b>30</b> New Gwinnett County Police Department positions approved in the 2019 county budget
<b>879</b> Gwinnett County Police Department's authorized sworn officer strength	<b>760</b> Gwinnett County Police Department's current number of officers
<b>5</b> Functioning Gwinnett County Police Department precincts	<b>12 million</b> Cost, in dollars, to build the Gwinnett County Police Department's new Bay Creek Precinct
<b>6,000</b> Annual calls dispatched the Gwinnett County Police Department expects at its new Bay Creek Precinct	<b>4.9 million</b> Cost, in dollars, of Lilburn Police Department's new headquarters and the city's municipal court
<b>10</b> Acres that Lilburn Police Department's new headquarters and the city's municipal court will take up	<b>6</b> Total Gwinnett County Police Department precincts when the Bay Creek Precinct opens

the county's seven cities, out of 16, that does not have its own police department.

"This is one of the fastest-growing parts of Gwinnett County," Nash said at a groundbreaking last year. "We know that we're going to continue to see people be drawn to Gwinnett County and we want to make sure that we have adequate public safety facilities."

Also under construction is the Lilburn Police Department's new headquarters on Lawrenceville Highway, which is being built for

some of the same reasons the Gwinnett County Police Department's is to have a presence in one of the county's busiest areas.

"This is where the action is," Lilburn Mayor Johnny Crist said at a groundbreaking last year. "In downtown Lilburn, we see the lights and hear the sirens, (but) we speed to get out here. It's just a better choice to have our PD here than smuggled downtown ... (Municipal police) make a huge difference in making a community, a community."

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# JAMMED-UP JUSTICE

GJAC expansion aimed at dealing with court system's increasing caseload



This architectural illustration shows the new Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center parking deck from the corner of Nash Street and Constitution Boulevard. The deck will be built as part of the GJAC expansion project. (Special Photo)

By Isabel Hughes

isabel.hughes@gwinnettdaily.com

It's no secret that Gwinnett's roads are congested; even during non-peak hours, the county's thoroughfares are filled with cars, motorcycles, trucks and buses all trying to get to their various locations quickly and safely.

While a MARTA expansion into Gwinnett would, theoretically, help reduce that congestion, the county's roads aren't the only heavily trafficked area: The courts, too, are filled, and the number of cases pushed through the county's judicial system likely isn't decreasing anytime soon.

To help combat the increased foot traffic into the Gwinnett Justice and Administration building, where the courts are located, the county has embarked on a \$75 million expansion project, which is designed to add more space for the court services side of the building.

The expansion is an effort to relieve growing pressure on the judicial system caused by the explosive growth in Gwinnett's population that has occurred since the center opened 30 years ago. Funding for the expansion was approved by voters as part of the 2009 SPLOST referendum.

"This was a long-awaited project," County Administrator Glenn Stephens said at a groundbreaking ceremony in February 2018. "(It) will help resolve pressing needs for our citizens, the public that comes here and is summoned here, our judiciary and our employees of Gwinnett County."

Phase I of the expansion project will build part of the new GJAC parking deck, and, once finished — Gwinnett County Communications Joe Sorenson said it will be soon, and the county should have an exact completion date within the next week — the county will tear down the original parking deck to make room for phase II of the new deck and eventually the new courts wing of the building.

In the courts wing, there will be a larger jury assembly room, a new security entrance, an enclosed walkway connecting it to the existing facility, a multi-defendant courtroom and three standard courtrooms — with room for more courtrooms to be added as needed at a later date — and a new area for bring jail inmates to the court-

## AT A GLANCE

Cases handled by Gwinnett courts, 2016-18:

- 2018: 146,376 cases
- 2017: 138,891 cases
- 2016: 125,168 cases



house for their trial dates.

The new parking deck will have 1,500 parking spaces, which Gwinnett County Superior Court Chief Judge Melodie Snell Conner said will ease the current parking crunch that has, at times, required visitors to park along curbs, in grassy areas and even on brick walkways during peak business times at the GJAC.

"Coming to court ... is one of the most stressful things that can happen in a person's life," Conner said. "To know you have court at 9 a.m. and pull up in a parking lot and circle the parking lot because you can't find a parking space and you know you're going to be late for court ... This happens every day."

It's not just litigants and defendants that have to deal with the current headaches of parking, though, Conner said — jurors also face some of those frustrations.

In 2017 alone, the courts summoned more than 75,000 Gwinnett residents for jury duty, and as judges' caseloads grow with the county's growth, that number is also going to increase.

But it's the lack of space, too, that jurors have to face when they arrive at GJAC that can be an additional headache, Conner said.

"They get here and the (jury assembly) room only holds 300-and-something people," she said. "We summon 400 or 500, and so half of them get to go down to the commissioner's auditorium, and then we take them to the other (side of the) building to go into a courtroom. It's not an ideal picture."

The court system and its judges aren't the only ones seeing increased traffic and caseloads, though; before a criminal



Above, Gwinnett County officials ceremonially break ground on the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center expansion project last year. (Staff Photo: Curt Yeomans) Left, an architectural illustration shows the expansion wing of the Gwinnett County Justice and Administration Center from the perspective of someone standing in its new parking deck. (Special Photo)

case makes it to the courts, the Gwinnett County District Attorney's Office receives it.

In the GJAC expansion, the DA's Office will also have some additional space — District Attorney Danny Porter said there will be a victim's waiting area and a work area for cases currently in trial — though there will be no new office space, something Porter said is "going to be a problem," given new DA's office personnel will inevitably be added in future years.

Already this year, two new positions were approved by county commissioners; in the 2019 budget, Porter asked for \$53,268 to add a victim's advocate position in the special victim's unit, which allows him to complete the unit.

"We're handling about 700 or 800 cases a year in there so you're talking about victims that require significant service. They require significant resources," Porter said previously. "(The victims) are damaged. They're people who

have been crushed. They're not like somebody who had their house broken into. They're a different kind of victim and we need a different kind of victim advocate."

Porter also requested \$89,412 to add an assistant district attorney who will serve as the office's second appellate attorney in this year's budget. That position was also approved and has already been filled, adding to the three assistant district attorneys, three criminal investigators and one legal associate for the special victims unit Porter has hired in recent years.

The appellate attorney is doing just what the title suggests — handling criminal case appeals.

Porter said previously about 96 percent of trial cases that end in convictions are appealed by defendants, and with the number of cases growing, that number is also growing.

"We're seeing about a 4 or 5 percent increase in case

load (annually)," Porter said. "Where the expansion is really needed is the courts, though, because there's been an explosive growth in civil caseload."

Former Commissioner John Heard said last year that though GJAC's expansion has been needed for years — expansion plans were in place a decade ago — the plans were put on hold during the Great Recession, which dampened county revenues.

"Sometimes people forget that building projects aren't as simple as just putting bricks and mortar up," he said previously. "After the dust settles, you have to be able to afford the electric bills, the maintenance bills, the employees to staff it and all of those are ongoing costs, and that is why we had to delay (it)."

"Now after years of judicious stewardship ... of our citizens tax dollars and some careful planning, we can now afford to build, operate and maintain this new parking deck and courtroom addition."

# progress 2019

## MARTA

•From Page 1C

### AT A GLANCE

Here are some key things to know about Gwinnett's contract with MARTA if the March 19 referendum passes:

#### Basic details

- The contract goes through July 1, 2057.
- MARTA will absorb Gwinnett County Transit after an agreement can be worked out with that system's operator, Transdev, to accommodate the transition.
- Gwinnett will get three new seats on the MARTA board, which would grow to 18 seats total, per House Bill 930.
- MARTA will use the Connect Gwinnett Transit Plan as its guideline for providing and expanding transit service in Gwinnett County.
- A separate agreement will be hammered out to deal with cooperation between local public safety agencies and MARTA police.

#### Use of funds

- Money raised in Gwinnett must be used to benefit Gwinnett County.
- Funding generated by the MARTA sales tax will be labeled as county revenues that the state will turn over to Gwinnett. The county will then make monthly payments from that funding to the transit system.
- Gwinnett will pay 29 percent of the funds collected each year to MARTA for the first six years to cover operations and maintenance costs. A "true-up" of funding for those purposes will occur on an annual basis and at the end of the first six years.
- Gwinnett will hold onto any funds that are being set aside for any future capital projects that MARTA will undertake in the county.
- Gwinnett would also pay if it wants something beyond what is seen elsewhere in the MARTA system, such as nicer looking bus stops, extended service hours or more buses.

#### Local control

- Gwinnett leaders must approved fixed asset capital projects, such as transit stations, in Gwinnett County.
- If debt is issued to pay for transit projects in Gwinnett, the county would have to approve it and money to pay off the debt would come from Gwinnett's MARTA sales tax proceeds.
- Gwinnett can retain professional design review and engineering services for major capital projects. Those services can be paid for out of Gwinnett's MARTA sales tax proceeds.
- An advisory committee will be established to review the high-capacity transit program, including heavy rail or bus rapid transit, and make recommendations to Gwinnett commissioners as well as the county's representatives on the MARTA board.

#### Gwinnett-MARTA cooperation

- Gwinnett commissioners will use their eminent domain authority, when needed, to condemn properties for transit project since MARTA does not have that authority.
- MARTA has agreed to let Gwinnett's planning and development staff review transit oriented development projects slated to go on land the transit agency owns even though, under state law as a government authority, it is not required to follow the zoning process.

really in my judgment the economic development that will follow," Kaufman said.

Nash said transit will also play a key role in how Gwinnett addresses anticipated population growth as well as the referendum passes. The county is expected to add somewhere between 400,000 and 600,000 additional residents over the next 20 years and become Georgia's most populous county.

"With 500,000 more people expected to call Gwinnett home in 20 to 25 years and the increase in business traffic that is anticipated, I cannot imagine what traffic will be like then if we fail to expand both transit and roads," she said. "We are going to need all possible options to continue to be a successful community."

#### An expert take on the issue

One local expert on transit issues said the extent to which bringing MARTA to Gwinnett helps the county and the region depends on more than just population growth.

"What's really going to make it successful is the number of riders and to what degree do people feel that they're going to take the train into Atlanta," Georgia State University professor Joseph Hacker said.

The Connect Gwinnett Transit Development Plan, which MARTA would use as its blueprint for serving the county, anticipates that a local sales tax to fund transit would generate \$7.5 billion in "year of expenditure dollars" over a 30-year period.

Add into that an anticipated \$3.1 billion in federal funding, \$842.2 million in expected farebox collections

and an estimated \$521.9 million in state and other funding and county officials expect to bring in more than \$12 billion from various sources over 30 years.

They also forecast costs to run about \$11.9 billion between capital, operations and maintenance over 30 years. That means county officials anticipate bringing in \$112.3 million more than it costs to run transit over that time period.

Regarding the promise of extending heavy rail 4 miles north from Doraville to Nor-

cross, Hacker said he wasn't sure it was the right solution for Gwinnett.

For one, he said buses can provide a more immediate benefit than rail. He also said he sees Gwinnett as being different from the suburbs of other major cities around the country.

"All of my work before (coming) here was in Philadelphia, and there, the suburban train system really is viewed as connecting workers and employment center," he said.

"I just don't have that

sense in Gwinnett County because of the businesses have already moved to Gwinnett County, so it makes more sense for Gwinnett County to pay for buses that operate in the county and provide that level of mobility for seniors, people without cars (and) people under 16. All of those (groups) in other cities are very viable passenger groups."

#### Pro-MARTA group fighting for passage

There are various groups in the community that are

stirring support for the referendum's passage including the chamber of commerce and the Gwinnett Democratic Party, but the main officials pro-MARTA group is Go Gwinnett.

The group formally launched in early January and has appeared at community events, including forums and Nash's State of the County Address on Wednesday. It has also launched a website at GoGwinnett.org to outline its arguments for passage of the referendum.

The group asserts that expanded transit under Connect Gwinnett plan would benefit students, particularly those attending college, who are trying to get to their classes as well as offering workers an alternative to get to work other than driving their cars.

It is also pitching the plan as a way to expand mobility options for senior citizens and disabled residents.

"This transit plan was developed with significant input from Gwinnett citizens and will position us as an innovative transit leader in the region that others will follow," Go Gwinnett representative Paige Havens said during public comment at the Lawrenceville City Council's Feb. 4 meeting.

#### Not everyone favors MARTA

Just as proponents are organizing to build support for passage, opposition groups are also coalescing with Facebook pages, websites such as martafoax.com and a GoFundMe page.

Some opponents expressed frustration that they did not believe all parts of the county would see benefits from joining MARTA. Others, such as Norcross resident Joe Newton, have

expressed concerns over the funding for Gwinnett's involvement in MARTA as well as whether the transit system could fix transportation issues in Gwinnett.

"People just need to realize they are voting on their financial futures," Newton said.

Newton said he doesn't believe enough people ride the Gwinnett County Transit buses that are already in service.

He also criticized the fact that only four miles of rail are guaranteed in the plan, as well as the phrasing of the question that will appear on the ballot, which mentions the transit contract, but doesn't say it is with MARTA and doesn't mention a sales tax increase.

"We're just not being treated fair," Newton said. "This thing is being shoved off on us without even telling people it's a tax on the ballot or that we're doing business with MARTA."

#### A desire to do something now

But Nash said she believes something should be done about transit and transportation in Gwinnett in the near future rather than putting it off to a later date.

"At the very least, failure of this referendum would delay the ability to pursue a substantial expansion of transit options," she said.

"Instead of focusing on implementation and moving forward with improved transit services, we would have to apply time and energy to developing an alternate plan."

"I feel a sense of urgency about transit because I know that many of the improvements have a long lead time while the pressures on our transportation system just keep increasing."

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