

2026 State of the County Address
Rooted in Gwinnett – Chairwoman Nicole Love Hendrickson
As prepared for delivery on March 6, 2026

Good morning, Gwinnett! What you just saw is the story of this community.

It was more than a look back at history. It was proof that this county did not grow by chance — it grew by choice and discipline, by leaders who planted trees knowing others would one day sit in the shade.

From rural beginnings to becoming the nation's 50th largest county, Gwinnett's growth has always been intentional. And today, we lead from a position of strength.

That final frame — the park, the laughter, the quiet rhythm of family —represents something deeper. It represents stability, responsibility, and the confidence that the ground beneath our feet is solid.

That kind of confidence doesn't happen overnight. It is built, decade by decade, through disciplined planning, bold infrastructure investment, and steady fiscal leadership. And it's strategically positioned for what comes next.

In a time when communities across the country are navigating uncertainty, Gwinnett stands on solid ground. Because of those choices, the State of our County is strong.

And that strength runs deep. Rooted in resilience. Rooted in growth. Rooted in Gwinnett.

Strong roots allow bold growth. Economic vitality doesn't happen by chance. It requires discipline and foresight.

Our AAA bond rating is a decades-long promise of fiscal responsibility. It signals to families and businesses alike that Gwinnett is a secure place to invest, to build, and to dream.

In an era of volatility, Gwinnett offers something rare: predictability. Predictable governance. Predictable fiscal discipline. Predictable partnership. That stability lowers risk, accelerates investment, and gives us the confidence to plan not just for the next quarter, but for the next generation.

We are not simply growing. We are building the most stable and strategically positioned county government in the Southeast.

Our reputation continues to attract businesses. Partnership Gwinnett supported projects last year resulting in more than 1,100 new jobs and \$395 million in capital investment.

But recruitment alone is not enough. Businesses stay where government is responsive, infrastructure is modern, and the workforce is prepared. In Gwinnett, we move with intention and at the speed of opportunity.

That is the Gwinnett difference. And we take maintaining our strong reputation seriously.

This year, we exercised fiscal discipline across our budget without eliminating a single core service. In partnership with my Citizen Budget Review Team, my fellow Commissioners, and county leadership, we worked through difficult decisions with a shared commitment to sound governance and service.

We challenged every department to find efficiencies, reduce duplication, and prioritize impact. That means public safety remains strong, infrastructure projects remain on schedule, and the services families rely on remain fully intact.

Discipline in strong times ensures we can respond in challenging times. It preserves our flexibility. It protects our capacity to invest where need is greatest.

But even with all of our strength, we cannot ignore this truth: not every child in Gwinnett starts from the same place.

Regional data shows economic mobility is declining and that where a child grows up still shapes how far they can rise. In parts of our county, children born into low-income households are earning less as adults than their parents did.

That should give us pause. Because every parent, no matter their income, wants the same thing: for their child to go further, to live better, and to stand taller than they did. If that promise weakens, so does opportunity itself.

As Chairwoman and as a mother, I cannot accept a future where opportunity depends on zip code. In my county, I refuse to believe that a child's destiny should be limited by where they grow up. I believe progress must be possible for every child and every family in every neighborhood.

Upward mobility doesn't happen on its own. It's shaped by housing stability, strong schools, safe neighborhoods, and real pathways to opportunity. Those are local decisions, and that's why disciplined stewardship matters.

And we know there's still need in our community. Last fall, during the longest federal government shutdown in history, we stepped forward to fill the gap in federal food assistance, partnering with six local co-ops to distribute more than 100,000 pounds of food in just two months.

Since 2020, we've helped deliver over 3 million pounds of food to families in need.

That kind of responsiveness reflects the work of more than 6,000 Gwinnett County employees who show up every day committed to excellence. They innovate. They adapt. They serve. If we're building the most stable county government in the Southeast, it's because of them.

For the first time in our county's history, Gwinnett is advancing a clear strategy to expand access to County contracting opportunities for small businesses. We're calling it the Procurement Readiness and Opportunity Plan, or the PRO Plan.

This initiative creates stronger pathways for small businesses with 100 or fewer employees and \$10 million or less in annual receipts to prepare for, compete for, and grow through county contracting opportunities.

We're also making these opportunities easier to access and strengthening support through the Gwinnett Entrepreneur Center. This is not about lowering standards. It's about broadening opportunity while maintaining fairness and strong accountability for our public resources. Because when small businesses grow, jobs grow, communities grow, and our economy becomes more resilient.

We're also ensuring our residents are prepared for the jobs of tomorrow. Our future competitiveness depends on whether we can produce the next generation of healthcare professionals, engineers, skilled trades, and entrepreneurs right here at home.

Through our workforce needs assessment, we're aligning education, training, and industry so that opportunity doesn't bypass our residents—it begins with them.

And we're cultivating the physical spaces where opportunity can take root. Nowhere is our forward vision clearer than Gwinnett Place Mall.

This site holds memories for generations: first dates, shopping for prom dresses, and family outings.

Now, we're reclaiming it, transforming it into a mixed-use destination with housing, retail, and greenspace. We're creating a place where new families will bring home their first child, where aspiring entrepreneurs will open the doors to their dream businesses, and where neighbors will gather for picnics on the lawn. Not erasing memory, but building upon it.

That's what growth looks like when it's rooted in our promise to help residents thrive.

And over at the western gateway to Gwinnett, our 106-acre property along Jimmy Carter Boulevard and I-85 is prime for revitalization. With exceptional connectivity to metro Atlanta and the region, this site is one of the most significant redevelopment opportunities in our region.

I'm proud to announce that starting today, we'll be requesting proposals to redevelop the property. We anticipate that this transformative project will attract new businesses and talent, creating a vibrant destination that reflects Gwinnett County's diversity and economic vitality.

Our plans for growth are also rooted in sustainability. We're committed to growing wisely across the 437 square miles of our county.

Projects like Rowen demonstrate that growth and preservation can move forward together. At Rowen, we're blending innovation and economic development with preservation and connectivity.

Historic corridors like Lawrence Road and Old Freeman Mill Road, once among the oldest dirt roads in Georgia, are being transformed into premier walking and biking trails, connecting to our Eastern Regional Greenway.

We're not choosing between progress and preservation; we're designing to support both. And Rowen is no longer just a vision on paper — it's taking physical shape.

The Rowen Foundation is advancing the development of a 10,000-square-foot Convergence Center, the inaugural centerpiece of this 2,000-acre knowledge community. This Center will serve as the front door to innovation, where agricultural, medical, and environmental leaders collaborate, research, and imagine what comes next.

We'll break ground this year, marking Rowen's shift from vision to visible progress. Thanks to the hard work of Mason Ailstock, the strategic groundwork we've laid is generating strong interest, and in the months ahead, you'll see that momentum take shape.

That is what happens when growth is intentional.

Over the next year, you'll see projects break ground, redevelopment move forward, small businesses gain access to opportunity, and infrastructure plans become visible progress. This is not theory — it is execution.

And as we execute in the near term, we remain equally committed to long term stability.

Now, there's a perception that progress in Gwinnett requires the removal of our natural beauty. Historical data shows that as Gwinnett transitioned from rural farmland to suburban development, overall tree canopy declined.

That's part of our history. But over the past two decades, strengthened environmental standards and strategic investments have reversed that trend.

We're now adding canopy. We're protecting buffers and planning for long-term sustainability. Because smart growth is not just about what we build — it's about what we preserve.

We cannot change the last fifty years of growth, but we can shape the next fifty. We're in the business of balanced growth: growth that protects our communities and safeguards our natural assets. And we're continuing that path with ordinance updates and creative programs like our newly launched Front Yard Tree Program, which allows our residents to request native trees at no cost.

Over the next decade, we'll continue investing in quality of life, infrastructure, workforce alignment, and mobility strategically, not reactively.

Strong roots are cultivated. And in moments of challenge, they are tested. Deep roots protect a tree in a storm.

Earlier this year, our community experienced a heartbreaking loss. Officer Pradeep Tamang gave his life in service to Gwinnett. His sacrifice reminds us that safety is not abstract — it is human. It's carried on the shoulders of men and women who step into uncertainty so the rest of us can live in peace.

Please join me in a brief moment of silence to honor his life and service, and to pray for the continued recovery of Master Police Officer David Reed, who was also injured in the attack.

To Chief McClure and our command staff, thank you for leading this department through the storm. And Chief, you said it best: our Police Department will continue to protect this community with courage and resolve. We will not be deterred.

Safety is not only about how we respond in crisis; it's about what we do every day to prevent it. Last year, our Police Department launched Toney's Program, partnering with our juvenile court and mental health professionals to mentor at-risk youth before a misstep becomes a tragedy. We celebrated our first graduates this past fall, proving that when we invest in mentorship and conflict resolution, we're planting the seeds of a safer, more resilient generation.

Safety also means readiness. When Attorney Max Richardson collapsed in the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center last summer, our Sheriff's deputies and Fire and Emergency Services responded immediately. Because of their training, quick action, and coordination, he's here with us today.

In his own words, he recalled: "At some point, my heart stopped beating. They thought I'd died. But these folks continued to work, continued to fight, and they did not give up. And for that, I'll be forever grateful."

That is what excellence looks like.

And safety extends beyond emergency response. Through corridor technology improvements and signal upgrades, we're building smarter streets that protect drivers, pedestrians, cyclists,

and first responders. That means faster response times, safer intersections, and smarter traffic flow.

These are not abstract improvements — they're essential improvements that make life better.

Gwinnett is also the first county in Georgia to launch a Mobility and Access Planning app to help seniors, individuals with disabilities, and those who rely on accessible transportation. With the app, residents can plan accessible routes, avoid obstacles, and travel with greater independence.

Ultimately, safety depends on trust. And that's why we continue to invest in election integrity. Our Voter Registrations and Elections team ensures every ballot is secure and every process is transparent.

This year, we strengthened the very foundation of trust by enhancing training and support for our poll officials, modernizing our Elections Headquarters, and opening our doors wider than ever before.

Because democracy should not operate in the shadows. It should stand in the light, where residents can see, understand, and trust how their voices are counted. And when trust grows, our roots grow deeper. In Gwinnett, safety is not reactive; it is intentional, it is interconnected, and it is firmly rooted.

Deep roots require an understanding of where we began. This year, our nation marks 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence — the beginning of what many have called the Great American Experiment.

For Gwinnett County, that anniversary is more than symbolic. Our namesake, Button Gwinnett, was one of Georgia's three signers of the declaration. His signature helped launch a bold idea that self-governance, liberty, and civic responsibility were worth declaring to the world.

Two and a half centuries later, that experiment continues. And here in Gwinnett, we carry that responsibility forward.

Marcus Garvey once said, "A people without the knowledge of their history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots."

Gwinnett remains firmly rooted because we choose to acknowledge and preserve our story. Gwinnett's story began with courage. From early settlers who believed this land held promise, to generations who fought for inclusion and opportunity, each wave chose to plant their roots here. And today, that story continues.

Families from every corner of the globe now call Gwinnett home. They bring languages, traditions, faiths, businesses, and dreams. They're expanding our history and helping author the next chapter.

Gwinnett has long been a place people choose for stability, for safety, and for opportunity. And when someone plants their roots here, whether their ancestors arrived two centuries ago or two years ago, they become part of this living legacy.

We honor that legacy through preservation and placemaking. Following the success of the award-winning Hooper-Renwick Themed Library, we're taking the same community-driven approach to the restoration of the Maguire-Livsey Family Big House.

The Big House and surrounding area have been fixtures of our county since the 1820s. Through this preservation, we have the unique opportunity to capture the stories of those who not only felt its influence but also the families that called the house home. Thank you all for being here today.

During our meetings, we've heard raw, honest insights and precious family memories from the descendants of those who built, bought, and made the house a Gwinnett landmark. With those memories captured, we preserve Gwinnett's significant and complex history and ensure our past remains a living part of our future.

When we preserve our past, we strengthen our sense of who we are. In that way, preservation and placemaking go hand in hand. Through public art and thoughtful design, we're cultivating belonging and pride across our county.

From murals that highlight the spirit of our community, to sculptures that invite us to see the world differently, to crosswalks that make neighborhoods safer and more beautiful — these aren't just installations. They are expressions of who we are: creative, forward-looking, and vibrantly connected. They shape how we experience Gwinnett and they signal where we're headed, together.

Gwinnett is no longer just a place on a map; we're a destination. For more than two decades, Gas South District has brought elite performances, conventions, and professional sports to our community, generating more than \$1 billion in economic impact. I see you, Stan Hall, and I appreciate you.

This week, we host the 2026 Ally ACC Women's Basketball Tournament for the first time, signaling to the nation that Gwinnett is a premier stage for world-class athletics and tourism. That's why the Board committed to modernizing the arena, ensuring we remain competitive and connected for decades to come.

It's also about quality of life. In 1986, visionary leaders and voters invested in a countywide parks system, recognizing that vibrant communities need spaces to gather, play, and reflect.

This year, we celebrate four decades of nationally renowned parks that have hosted the milestones of our lives: first games, family reunions, cultural festivals, and quiet walks. It's proof of how the early seeds we planted have turned into something truly remarkable.

We invest in places because places shape people. And nowhere is that more evident than in our young people.

Nehemiah Hamilton, a graduate of our Gwinnett Youth Commission, turned civic inspiration into action, launching "The Little Things" project which mobilized support for children in Foster Care.

Nehemiah, your story demonstrates the multiplier effect of civic engagement. When we plant the seeds of leadership in our youth, the entire county reaps the harvest of their compassion. This is the beauty of a life rooted in service.

Twenty years ago, I chose to plant my life in this soil as a student with a dream. I didn't know then that one day I would stand here as your Chairwoman. But I knew this county felt solid; I knew it felt possible.

I'm living proof that if you pour your heart into Gwinnett, Gwinnett will pour its strength back into you. That park you saw at the beginning — the one I visit with my family — exists because someone, decades ago, believed in a future they would never fully see. They planted, they planned, and they protected.

Serving as Chairwoman of this extraordinary county is a responsibility and a promise to lead with a steward's mind and a servant's heart, and to ensure every voice matters and every opportunity remains within reach. I do that work alongside a Board, a staff, and a community that share that commitment.

We are living in a defining moment. Across this nation, people are searching for stability, for belonging, and for confidence that the ground beneath their feet is firm. In Gwinnett, it is. Our foundation is strong because we know where we came from and we're intentional about where we're going.

We know our history. We know the courage it took to build this place. And now, it's our turn.

Look ahead twenty years. Another generation will sit in those parks. Another family will build a life here. Another leader will stand on this stage.

What will they say about us? What did we plant? What did we protect? What did we build? The future of Gwinnett is not a distant dream — it's a decision. So let us choose wisely. Let us build boldly. Let us remain rooted in principle and united in purpose.

Because Gwinnett is where we're rooted. Gwinnett is where we grow. And together, Gwinnett is where we thrive.

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