

**State of Gwinnett County 2013 by Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman
Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners**

As prepared for delivery on January 16, 2013, to Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and Council for Quality Growth

Hello, everyone. Happy 2013 and thank you for being here.

As many of you know, I have deep roots in Gwinnett County, and I'm fascinated by its history.

I don't intend to go too far into the past today, but I will say that Gwinnett's story has been filled with ups and downs and plot twists along the way. The last few chapters were painful at times, and a few characters have been removed. But overall, Gwinnett's story is a tale of success and a testament to those who made it happen.

As we begin 2013, I believe we've reached a turning point. And today, I'm going to ask you to join me in shaping Gwinnett's next chapter.

But first, I need to thank the Council for Quality Growth and the Chamber of Commerce for organizing this event year-after-year.

Thank you, Jim Maran, for your service to the Chamber. Enjoy retirement.

I want to ask my fellow commissioners – who will be key players in the next chapter – to stand and be recognized for their service and leadership...

- **from District One, Jace Brooks...**
- **from District Two, Lynette Howard...**
- **from District Three, Tommy Hunter...**
- **and from District Four, John Heard.**

If you'll join me in thanking these folks.

It takes teamwork to move the County government forward – including the leadership of other elected officials... such as prosecutors, judges, and constitutional officers. As these other elected County officials stand, join me in showing our appreciation.

We are blessed with great education assets in Gwinnett. Would those of you serving as leaders in our education community – board of education member, superintendent, college president, board of regents member, and other educators – please stand so we can recognize your accomplishments?

I know many representatives from Gwinnett's 16 cities are here today. Would all city officials please stand and let us show our appreciation for your service to your communities?

With the General Assembly in session today, I suspect that our state legislators are at the Capitol – but if any are here, please stand so we can acknowledge your service as well.

I also want to give a shout-out to our Congressional representatives and senators. They truly have some big challenges ahead.

I'm honored that Commissioner Mike Berg from Dawson County is here today. Mike is the incoming President of the Association of County Commissioners of Georgia and a former Gwinnett district commissioner. Mike, please stand.

My fellow commissioners and I wouldn't get much done without the support of our staff and employees.

Glenn Stephens, County Administrator, leads the efforts of the County employees. Glenn, would you stand and be recognized please?

Also, would County department directors and other senior staff stand?

If you've ever called my office, you've probably spoken with Debbie Savage, who does her best to keep me organized. Debbie – thank you for the support and help you give me every day.

Finally, I won't make you stand, but I want to say thank you to the business community for your role in Gwinnett's success. As you build your businesses, you create jobs and boost our economy. I especially appreciate the efforts and contributions of the four community improvement districts in Gwinnett.

Now, let's talk about Gwinnett's story.....

You know how – when you're reading a good story – some chapters are better than others? Some bring joy and celebration, while others are full of defeats and loss.

The past few chapters in Gwinnett, frankly, have not been our best.

From the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression to wrongdoing by now-former commissioners, Gwinnett has taken hard hits over the last few years.

Through the end of 2012, we saw the County tax digest value shrink four years in a row, dipping almost to its 2005 level.

Average monthly sales tax revenues plummeted from a high of nearly 13 million dollars in 2006 to a low of less than 10 million dollars in 2009.

Thank goodness, we've seen a partial recovery there. Our 2012 sales tax collections averaged 11.6 million dollars per month.

Even as the economy slipped, the County's population continued to increase. Every year, we added thousands of new residents. So, the demand for services and facilities grew at the same time that revenues were dropping.

As the state grappled with its own budget woes, it cut funding to programs serving Gwinnett. This created pressure on us to fill the gaps and make up the difference. For example, since 2008, the state has reduced its funding for our library system by a third.

Yes, the down economy has made it tough to balance budgets, and its effects are still playing out.

As if a bad economy was not enough to deal with, some characters in our story put their own interests above those of the people they were elected to serve.

I am appalled to hear Gwinnett County and corruption mentioned together. Wrongdoing by leaders hurts the community, breaks the public trust, and embarrasses all of us who call Gwinnett home.

It also makes the job of every county employee more difficult and leads to lower morale. From the receptionist, to the field crew, to the commissioner, we deal every day with the effects of the loss of public trust.

We know that we'll have to work hard to overcome this, and we've taken steps to do just that. Ultimately, it will be our behavior over time that will help us regain the community's trust.

In spite of everything, though, 2012 was a good year full of accomplishments:

- **Last year, the County website won national awards for transparency and design. And today, you'll find on it almost anything you want to know about county government.**
- **With renewed commitment from both the County and the cities, the service delivery litigation ended with a negotiated settlement.**
- **We balanced the budget for 2012 and ended the year with even better results than we expected, thanks to staff's hard work.**
- **We maintained the County's Triple-A bond ratings from Moody's, S&P, and Fitch.**
- **At Pleasant Hill, we've started construction on the first of two Diverging Diamond interchanges across 85 and will start the second at Jimmy Carter this year.**
- **We completed the latest segment of Sugarloaf Parkway Extension to 316 near Dacula. Thanks to the State DOT for help on this project.**
- **Both the diverging diamond and the Sugarloaf Parkway extension were**

partially funded by SPLOST.

- We're also expanding our one-stop center for Senior Services.
- Thanks to SPLOST, we were able to open two new parks – Bryson Park and the Yellow River Post Office Historic site – and renovate several others, including Rhodes Jordan and Vines.
- We also used SPLOST funds to renovate the Five Forks Branch Library and make energy saving improvements.
- Our Neighborhood Stabilization Program worked to reduce the impact of foreclosures, and we partnered with the state to get mortgage payment assistance to qualified homeowners.
- Operation Good Neighbor kicked off with a cleanup in three neighborhoods, thanks to the efforts of Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful.
- Water Resources completed a successful overhaul of the Yellow River Water Reclamation Facility.
- It won LEED Gold certification for sustainability and several construction and engineering awards. Even more importantly, this project allowed us to close small, obsolete plants.
- Gwinnett businesses and residents responded to our call for volunteers, resulting in just shy of a million hours of service across the County.
- We won the coveted Green Communities designation from the Atlanta Regional Commission.
- And our Finance department saved 2.2 million dollars by refinancing bonds at lower interest rates.
- We saw at least 19 relocations or expansions representing more than 800 new jobs in our community.
- And, departments and offices all across County government delivered services to the community every day – they delivered clean water, fixed traffic signals, cooked meals for seniors, maintained police vehicles, locked up bad guys, saved lives, and more.

That's just a sample of last year's highlights. So, yes, the good far outweighed the bad in 2012.

On December 30th, three of us – Jace Brooks, Tommy Hunter, and I – were sworn in to begin our first full terms on the Board of Commissioners. And Lynette Howard and John Heard, who are just two years into their first terms, were there to support us.

We're poised and ready to begin a new chapter. We don't have to just wait, though, to see what happens next. We may not control the entire story, but we can certainly help shape it.

For 2013, you'll see County government focus on a few critical areas and issues. These include:

- Re-building public trust.
- Continuing to manage in a difficult economy.

- **Planning for the next SPLOST referendum.**
- **Pursuing economic development.**
- **Protecting water resources.**
- **And, updating our comprehensive plan.**

As I mentioned earlier, we've taken steps to address the lack of public trust... steps like revising the Ethics Ordinance, adopting a strict land acquisition policy, and expanding the information easily available to the public.

But, we can't stop now.

In the 2013 budget, we've funded the District Attorney's request for a senior investigator to focus on potential corruption.

In 2013, you'll see us take more steps to be accessible through town hall meetings, listening sessions, and technology.

Maintaining services in the midst of our financial situation will continue to be difficult. However, we took a big step forward at our first meeting of 2013 when the Board unanimously passed a balanced budget.

This was the most difficult County budget of my career.

We face another year of declining tax revenues in 2013 and built the budget on a further loss of almost 2 percent.

We had to adjust for revenues lost to the new City of Peachtree Corners and fund the impact of legislative changes.

We also had to manage the financial effects of implementing the service delivery consent order.

Some County services, including Police and Fire and EMS, will be provided and funded within service districts, leading to variations in County taxes according to geographic location. For example, the County Police District will include unincorporated Gwinnett and all the cities that don't have their own police departments.

Properties located in cities with a police department will not be taxed for County police service. These changes will impact County property tax rates this year.

Most property owners will see a modest increase related to public safety funding. Those who live in a city with its own police department will see a reduced rate.

Unfortunately, County employees will go a fourth straight year with no raises, and funding for most services has not kept pace with population growth and service

demands.

We know that we will have to address this situation soon but could not in this budget.

We are concerned about threats to the economic recovery and decisions at the national and state levels that will increase our costs.

We are watching legislative proposals very carefully, in DC and in Atlanta.

Another major issue we'll address this year is a referendum for the next SPLOST program. The worth of SPLOST funding has been proven again and again since it was first authorized in 1985. It has generated over 2 billion dollars for projects for Gwinnett County and our cities. Usage of SPLOST has provided cash for needed projects in lieu of issuing bonds and has saved taxpayers more than 1 billion dollars in financing costs.

Please keep an eye out over the next few months for more details about the program to be put before voters in November. There will be plenty of opportunities to be a part of this important decision.

Business growth and job creation are essential to our residents and to our community.

Gwinnett is an attractive place for business for lots of reasons – a talented workforce; outstanding schools, both K-12 and post-secondary; excellent infrastructure; rich diversity of cultures; and amenities that add up to an enviable quality of life, just to name a few. However, this isn't enough to automatically lead to success.

With the level of competition that exists today for business expansions and relocations, we must aggressively pursue economic development.

We're fortunate to have a well-organized and effective approach in Partnership Gwinnett, a collaborative effort across many segments of the community.

Beginning this year, our participation will be through a newly-created nonprofit corporation. Public funds will be clearly segregated to ensure transparency.

We look forward to exciting announcements by Partnership Gwinnett this year.

Water has almost disappeared from the public discussion over the last year or so, but there are important decisions pending. While the Courts have affirmed drinking water as an allowable use of Lake Lanier, how much water will be allocated for water supply is yet to be determined. Decisions made by the Corps will have a big impact on the long-term stability, operations, and capital needs of

our water and sewer system. Please know that we're following this issue closely and will remain actively engaged.

Finally, we'll initiate a limited update of the County's 2030 Unified Plan, which is intended to provide a guide for long-term decisions. This won't involve rewriting the whole plan, but there are some areas that need adjustment based on the new economic reality and input from the current commissioners. Recalibrating the plan to reflect current circumstances and the latest data keeps it fresh and useful as we move into the future.

Friends.... Gwinnett has always been a can-do community.

We work together to solve problems. Private citizens volunteer their time to help government set priorities. We listen to each other.

We reach agreements on the best way to proceed. And we follow through and deliver on our promises.

My fellow commissioners and I are excited about the roles we'll play in this new chapter – 2013. Don't take my word for it, though... I want you to hear it directly from your district commissioners – if you'll please direct your attention to the video screens.

(VIDEO PRESENTATION)

As for me, I love this County, and I intend to keep the oaths I swore as I took office. The District Commissioners and I are committed to ensuring that Gwinnett County Government does its part to keep this community great. But, we need your help as we move forward, and I'm asking for that help right now from every resident and every business owner in Gwinnett.

We need you to be informed, to get involved, and to stay in touch.

As a first step, please become informed about your county government.

Certainly, read the paper and watch the news, but you really should know some of the other things that aren't interesting enough to draw media coverage.

I encourage you to watch a Board meeting on TV Gwinnett or attend one in person.

Visit our website, which is a great source of information.

Subscribe to our e-newsletters. You can sign up at gwinnettcountry.com or in the breezeway outside as you're leaving today.

The more you and your neighbors know about your government, the more effective your government can be.

Next, get involved.

Be an ambassador for our local government and for your community as a whole.

Volunteer to serve – perhaps on a board or a committee, or maybe directly in one of our departments.

And perhaps most importantly, communicate with us, send an email, or pick up the phone.

If you have a question, concern, or a suggestion, we need to hear from you.

OK – the page is turned.

So now... help us write the next chapter of Gwinnett's fascinating history!

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