

**State of Gwinnett County 2014 by Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman
Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on January 16, 2014, to Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce
and Council for Quality Growth**

Hello, everyone. Happy New Year, and thank you for being here.

2014 is truly a time for Gwinnett County to look forward to the future.

Like most other governments, businesses, and households in the United States, your county government has spent the last several years reacting to the Great Recession.

At the same time, we tackled other unprecedented local challenges.

But in 2014, we're shifting our primary focus to the future... to ensure that success will always live here.

Before I talk more about our plans for 2014 and beyond, I want to take a moment to thank our hosts today, the Council for Quality Growth and the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce, for their long association with the State of the County address.

My fellow commissioners are also here today. I want to publicly thank them for their dedication to serving all of Gwinnett County...

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

Many aspects of County government fall under the leadership of other elected officials... such as prosecutors, judges, and constitutional officers. As these officials stand, join me in showing our appreciation for their hard work and consistent leadership.

Gwinnett County is blessed with great opportunities in education at all levels.

Will those of you who lead our educational institutions – school board members, superintendents, college presidents, board of regents, and other educators – please stand so we can recognize you?

Gwinnett's 16 cities are important partners in serving our communities. Would all city officials and staff please stand and be recognized for your service?

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 thank our representatives and senators in Washington. I appreciate Derick Corbett for joining us. Derick is Chief of Staff for Representative Rob Woodall.

Some elected officials from nearby jurisdictions are here. Would each of you stand as I call your name?

- Richard Oden, Rockdale County Commission Chairman...
- Dick Mecum, Hall County Commission Chairman...
- Eric Clarkson, Mayor of Chamblee...
- And Thomas Brown, DeKalb County Sheriff.

Doug Hooker, ARC Executive Director, is here today as well.

Join me in welcoming all of them to Gwinnett.

The Board of Commissioners wouldn't get much done without the support of our staff and employees. Our County Administrator, Glenn Stephens, leads their efforts. I'd like to ask Glenn as well as County department directors and other staff to stand and be recognized.

If you've ever called my office, you've probably had the pleasure of speaking with Debbie Savage. She does her best to keep me organized, and I want to thank her for the support she gives me every day.

Finally, thank you to the business community for helping to make Gwinnett a great place to live. As you build your businesses, you create jobs and boost our economy.

I especially appreciate the four community improvement districts for investing in their areas. They are truly making a difference.

Would Board members and staff from the CIDs stand?

As I mentioned earlier, we've spent the last few years reacting to the Great Recession and a few other challenges, too.

I now know for sure that the same people who helped build a great Gwinnett can also guide the County successfully through any crisis.

Hopefully we've all learned a few lessons, but I am certainly pleased to see improvement in our financial outlook.

We are not so far out of the woods that we'll see rapid growth, but we do expect the tax digest to grow this year for the first time since 2008.

While it will take a while to recoup the 20 percent drop in value we saw, forecasts show a steady recovery over the next several years – enough to allow us to focus once again on long-range planning and implementation.

Normally, part of this forum is dedicated to providing an overview of prior year accomplishments, and there are plenty of successes to celebrate. Rather than reciting these, I'll ask you to take a look at the document at your tables that highlights some of the most significant accomplishments, achievements, and awards from 2013.

You'll find that same document posted at gwinnettcountry.com.

There are three accomplishments that I will mention specifically.

First, we commissioners have made a lot of progress in learning to work together. That seems simple and basic, but for some reason, it can be hard for many elected officials.

We have a scientist, an architect, a civil engineer, a financial planner, and a local government junkie. Each of us has a different perspective, and our personalities and approaches to life are varied. From Tommy who never meets a stranger to Jace who epitomizes the saying "still waters run deep," we are all very different. Ultimately, our differences make us stronger as a group and lead to better decisions for Gwinnett County.

Second, the Commissioners set priorities in May 2013 that are serving as guiding principles as we move forward. We know that time and resources are limited so we can't tackle every issue on our combined list. We have to focus on "first things first."

Third is the passage of the SPLOST referendum. This is really a community accomplishment. Thank you to those across Gwinnett who were involved, and thank you to Gwinnett voters for saying yes to funding vital infrastructure projects for Gwinnett cities and the County.

Now, let's talk about the future, which deserves our full attention.

As you may know, Gwinnett will celebrate its bicentennial in December 2018. While I certainly think we should plan a spectacular bicentennial celebration, I believe it is even more important that we prepare Gwinnett County for a successful third century. Just as we benefit every day from decisions made by past Gwinnett leaders, the lives of future Gwinnett residents depend upon our decisions and actions.

I believe that our plans should be aimed at Gwinnett continuing to set the standard for a thriving community, not just being a mediocre also-ran. And it's going to take all of us – not just those of us in this room, but all of Gwinnett's individuals and communities – working together to make this a reality.

I admit that planning for 100 years is a little intimidating. We can't be certain what we'll face over the next decade much less predict what life may be like in 2068 or the year 3000.

But think back to what it must have been like for settlers in 1818 when the County was created. Gwinnett was the frontier, the edge of Indian Territory, and you did not just call a moving company to get here. Can you imagine saying to your family, "I have a great idea. We're going to move away from civilized life here in Savannah or Charleston or Baltimore, travel by wagon across hundreds of miles and carve a farm from the wilderness"?

The only certainty that existed for those early settlers was opportunity – opportunity to own land, to build a life, and to be successful.

And, isn't that really what we need to ensure for those who will live and work in Gwinnett in the future – opportunity? Opportunity to get a good education... to earn a good living... to live in a safe, vibrant, and attractive community... to build a business... to be involved... to have available services and amenities for a well-rounded life... and to be free to choose.

So what does it take to see that opportunity exists here in the future?

The good news is that we already have all the necessary ingredients for Gwinnett's future success. A fantastic location, good infrastructure, safe communities, great schools, our workforce, nationally recognized parks and libraries, and moderate taxes all make my list of Gwinnett's best attributes.

We may need to refresh and update some factors... we may need to fit the community pieces together differently, but we have a real head start that we should take full advantage of.

As is always the case in real life, there are a few challenges that must be addressed. Good education assets are fundamental to a successful community. We're very lucky to have two fine public school systems and an array of private school choices for K-12. Post-secondary options include Georgia Gwinnett College and Gwinnett Tech, along with Philadelphia College of Medicine and satellite campuses for several other colleges.

Our school systems have done a remarkable job of handling the changes in the demographics of the students they serve. Despite the challenge of the multiple languages spoken by students, our schools are delivering quality education and helping the majority of students achieve success.

However, fiscal challenges and the impact of the decline in average household income are putting increased pressure on our schools.

I was glad to hear that the Governor's proposed budget includes more funding for education, and I thank him for choosing to make education a priority.

On the other hand, some things have to be done at the local level too.

The best way to help with the fiscal challenges is to add value to the tax digest through new private investment and to boost household income by giving more Gwinnett residents an opportunity to earn a good living.

Both private investment and jobs stem from business expansion and relocation in Gwinnett. We've made progress on job creation over the last few years, and I want to congratulate Partnership Gwinnett for its leadership in economic development activities.

In spite of impressive results, though, we still have work to do.

The county's population continues to grow, and wages for many jobs are lower than they were before the Great Recession. Thus, we have to bring even greater vigor to our economic development efforts and strengthen our focus on good paying jobs within industries that are likely to be here over the long run.

I understand that an active economic development program is needed, but Gwinnett must also be fundamentally attractive to businesses in the future. We have to renew and reinforce our efforts to ensure that Gwinnett County is business-friendly, not just to large firms but also to small businesses. As one step, we'll be asking a task force of business owners to advise us on ways we can help businesses be successful in Gwinnett. I hope that many of you here today will be willing to participate in the work of this task force. Among other things, the group will take a look at our County regulations and processes that affect businesses. We can't ignore the responsibilities that we have under law, but we can work to minimize constraints and costs.

We'll also initiate a series of workshops for small businesses in Gwinnett County designed to help them learn how to do business with us.

Gwinnett must also continue to appeal to individuals and families. We need the best and brightest here since the talent, creativity and skills of Gwinnett's workforce will always be critical to drawing and keeping businesses.

We have to ensure a safe community with dependable services... a community where we take seriously its overall appeal and the amenities offered to residents... amenities like great medical care, green space, recreational facilities, libraries and arts and cultural opportunities.

Another area that requires attention is the engagement of all Gwinnett in the hard work of community building. Gwinnett is arguably the most diverse county in the southeastern U.S. – more diverse than either Georgia or the U.S. No race or ethnic group represents a majority of Gwinnett's total population. About a quarter of our residents were born

outside the U.S. Dozens and dozens of languages are spoken. And our population continues to grow more diverse every day.

Since this diversification has happened so quickly, we're still figuring out how to work across groups and to educate all our residents about our community. We know that we must consciously focus attention on engaging new residents as well as those who've been here for decades. We need everyone working to make Gwinnett the very best community, so we can't afford to have anyone standing on the sidelines.

This year we have included funds in our budget for a community outreach initiative designed for engaging our diverse communities. You'll be hearing more about specific plans as they are developed.

Do you remember that I mentioned earlier that the commissioners identified priority goals in May 2013?

Those include:

- Fostering a culture of integrity and positive leadership, including continued emphasis on engaging the community.
- Addressing workforce retention and development.
- Facilitating economic development.
- Encouraging revitalization of declining areas.
- Ensuring an adequate long-term water supply.
- And maintaining and improving infrastructure.

I find it encouraging that these goals fit so well with the long-term needs of the County, even though we set them for the present.

So, yes, we head into 2014 clearly focused on the future.

The district commissioners and I understand that the stakes are high, but we're eager to do our part to ensure that Gwinnett's future is bright.

We're optimistic because there is every reason to be. Gwinnett has all the factors needed for success, as well as a special advantage – we have Gwinnettians.

I am unabashedly a fan of Gwinnett County and believe that anything can be accomplished here. We pull together for the good of Gwinnett, and members of the Gwinnett community constantly amaze me with their willingness to commit time and energy to make Gwinnett a better place. For example, folks here in Gwinnett spent over one million hours in 2013 as volunteers across all segments of County government. Through Engage Gwinnett, we set a goal of achieving one million volunteer hours annually by 2015, but our community blasted through that goal two years early!

We're counting on that kind of enthusiastic participation from folks across the County as we work to make sure that Gwinnett is successful in its next 100 years.

And we're counting on you!

So, get involved – and be ready to work with us.

I hope you all have a safe and prosperous New Year.
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