

2018 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 14, 2018

Good afternoon. Thank you for being here and thank you sponsors for your support.

2018 is a special year because it **marks** our 200th birthday.

We're celebrating with events and activities throughout the year honoring our county's past, present, and future. I hope you'll explore gwinnett200.com for all things related to Gwinnett's Bicentennial.

The festivities kicked off this past December and will culminate here at the Infinite Energy Center with a grand finale on December 15th of this year. Without the efforts of the Gwinnett Bicentennial Advisory Committee, this yearlong celebration would not be possible. I'd like to ask the members who are here today to stand now and be recognized for their hard work. Thank you very much.

I would also like to thank the Gwinnett Daily Post for being our bicentennial media partner.

At each of your seats, you'll find a coin that's been minted to commemorate Gwinnett's 200th year as a county.

The Elisha Winn House is on one side of the coin. The Winn House, which still stands in eastern Gwinnett, was the first County seat and is a perfect symbol of our humble, frontier beginning.

The official bicentennial logo is on the other side of the coin. This logo incorporates the new Gwinnett County brand, which symbolizes the vibrant and diverse Gwinnett of today.

We usually have the logo facing up as we look to the future. But because this is our 200th birthday, let's flip the coin and reflect on some of the history that has led us to where we are today.

In 1818, Gwinnett was home to about 4,000 residents. Early pioneers came for opportunity, primarily the chance to own land. During the decades from 1818 to 1950, we slowly grew as a community of farms and small towns, with some trade and manufacturing.

In 1950 we were still mostly rural with about 32,000 residents. But, a few key decisions by federal, state and local leaders prepared the way for some of our greatest opportunities.

- the expansion and growth of what is now Hartsfield Jackson International Airport,
- the creation of Lake Lanier, and
- the completion of I-85 from Atlanta to South Carolina, right through the middle of Gwinnett.

The impact of these decisions is a reminder that Gwinnett is tied to our region and to the rest of Georgia and beyond.

Then, some daring 20th century local pioneers decided that Gwinnett should help create its own destiny. They made the visionary decision to leverage our proximity to Lake Lanier by investing in a countywide water system. At about the same time, county leaders began developing a robust road network, a world-class system of public schools, and modern public safety services.

Those initial investments transformed Gwinnett from an outlying slice of rural landscape into a desirable suburban bedroom community. Residential development exploded, and, as businesses took note, commercial growth began to parallel our residential growth.

Success bred success. Our residential and commercial boom continued unabated during the 1990s and into the 2000s. Gwinnett began to mature, becoming more urbanized and more diverse.

Gwinnett voters made a series of shrewd decisions that would set us apart from our peers by repeatedly approving penny sales tax programs. As a result, \$3.2 billion was generated for County infrastructure and amenities and \$2.6 billion for schools.

And SPLOST continues to help us address capital needs, with such projects as:

- the expansion of the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center for much-needed Courts space,
- a new Fire Station 15 in Lawrenceville, under construction now,
- a new Police Precinct adjacent to Bay Creek Park,
- parks and libraries, and
- almost \$500 million in transportation improvements funded by the current six-year SPLOST.

Gwinnett's focus on long-term planning, its strong management and finances, and a willingness to innovate have helped the County successfully navigate decades of rapid growth. Along the way, we also picked up an elite triple-triple A bond rating, which we still hold.

The decisions of the county's leadership and residents have led to the Gwinnett of today that's home to about 960,000 people. We're not a bedroom community anymore; we're an employment center and a destination. Together, County government, our schools, Chamber of Commerce, cities, CIDs, and so many other Gwinnett institutions have created a strong brand of excellence that other communities seek to copy.

Yet, 200 years after our founding we remain a community of pioneers, with many of our residents having come from across the U.S. and from around the globe, seeking opportunity and prosperity. And, we have home grown pioneers who continue to innovate and make our community better. This pioneering spirit is the true source of Gwinnett's

strength—to be nurtured and encouraged. This spirit is not satisfied to simply accept what is, but rather strives to create what should be.

Georgia Gwinnett College is a perfect example of Gwinnett's modern-day pioneering spirit. In the 1980s the lack of a four-year college was a gap in Gwinnett's education system and Gwinnett leaders began working to fill this need. In 1994, a Gwinnettian in the right place and a supportive Governor gave Gwinnett the opening it needed. History was written within minutes of a discussion between then-Commission Chairman Wayne Hill and Virgil Williams, chief of staff for Governor Zell Miller. The Board of Commissioners authorized acquiring a site for the proposed college and committed funds for its development. With that action, we were off to do what others said was impossible—create the first new four-year college within the University System of Georgia in a century. And we set new standards for education accessibility and value while doing it. Thanks to everyone who played a role and to those who continue to pioneer in higher education by focusing on student success.

As we approach Gwinnett's third century, the pioneering spirit is still important. We face challenges and decisions that represent opportunities for the future, and we're exploring new territory in diversity and inclusiveness. To continue to thrive, we must make the most of all our assets.

When I list Gwinnett's assets, our people are at the top. We're a community of doers who radiate energy and optimism for a better future. And, a large portion of our population is young, with a lifetime to do great things for themselves and for Gwinnett. Despite predictions that suburbs like Gwinnett would be a wasteland for young adults, more than a quarter of a million millennials live here. Further, the migration of millennials to the city is reversing as many finally settle down and have kids. In recognition of this trend, Realtor.com has recently published its national list of "Top 10 Affordable, Kid-Friendly Suburbs That City Parents Won't Hate." And, yes, a Gwinnett community made the list—my hometown of Dacula.

In addition to millennials, Gwinnett is home to over 250,000 members of the next younger generation. These young adults and children are Gwinnett's future.

In the meantime, though, we have a responsibility to make the right decisions, so the Gwinnett we pass along is the very best it can be. We're currently working on the foundation of those decisions as we develop the 2040 Unified Plan, and we want your input.

A robust economy is fundamental to a healthy community. Fostering job creation and economic opportunity is a primary focus for County government. We're the single largest funder of Partnership Gwinnett because we believe that a coordinated approach to economic development is critical.

Eight years ago, private sector jobs in Gwinnett had dropped to about 256,000 as a result of the Great Recession. Today the number stands near 320,000. Adding public sector

jobs brings the figure closer to 345,000. Partnership Gwinnett made a big difference by influencing the creation of almost 21,000 of those jobs and the addition or expansion of 233 businesses, resulting in over \$1.5 billion in capital investment. Congratulations to the PG Team and to all its investors. And PG's wins continue, as we heard just last week the announcement of OFS's plan to expand in Gwinnett, adding jobs and significant investment.

In addition to the efforts through Partnership Gwinnett, we've added County staff to focus on business and economic development, primarily existing and small business. To better connect with our business community, our Economic Development team will be launching Coffee and Conversation this year. There is information in the Gwinnett Magazine at your seats about this initiative and our economic development program.

The creation of a Small Business Resource Center is aimed at supporting entrepreneurs. In addition, we continue to refine our regulations and processes to support business activity in balance with the needs of our residents. We're experimenting with overlay districts, mixed use zoning provisions, and infrastructure support aimed at encouraging revitalization of areas that are ripe for change.

And, in combination with CIDs and other community partners, we're giving extra attention to some specific areas like Gwinnett Place, Jimmy Carter Boulevard, and the Highway 78 corridor.

The demolition of the former Olympic Tennis venue is in the final stages, so the County will soon actively seek a private-sector partner to redevelop the site. What a great location at an important entry to Gwinnett—and with a beautiful view of Stone Mountain!

In the Gwinnett Place area, we're acquiring land for a major hub for Gwinnett's expanded transit system. And we've begun the process for connecting one of the gems in our park system, McDaniel Farm Park, directly with the transit center and an extensive multi-use path system envisioned for the future.

In the Jimmy Carter Boulevard area, we're also looking at transit options and connectivity, as well as ways to improve freight movement in one of the busiest freight centers in the metro area. We've teamed with state DOT, Norcross, and Peachtree Corners to fund intersection improvements for Jimmy Carter Boulevard at Buford Highway.

And, promising discussions about redevelopment possibilities for both of these important areas continue.

Our excitement about the project here at the Infinite Energy Center is building, as the finishing touches are put on the plans and financing to get ready to turn dirt. At PG's economic development breakfast on February 27th, you can hear the latest on North American Properties' plans for Revel.

It also seems every city in Gwinnett has new development activity and projects planned

and underway, adding to economic vibrancy.

To thrive economically, every community has some basic needs. Among these, water is the greatest limiting factor for Gwinnett and the rest of our region.

While we're already a global leader in water and wastewater, we continue to innovate to meet Gwinnett's needs. Most recently, we have funded a Water Innovation Center at the F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center. Conceived as research facility, think tank, business incubator and public education center, the facility will bring together all aspects of the water industry. The pioneering techniques developed and implemented there will benefit Gwinnett and its partners.

In addition to the excitement of creating this new facility, though, we have to keep a steady hand on the everyday business of operating, maintaining and expanding a water and sewer system to serve the soon-to-be largest county in Georgia. Without the daily commitment to excellence and robust capital investment, it's easy to fall behind, but very difficult to regain lost ground. We have to keep pushing hard now to build facilities in time to meet future demands.

Safety is also crucial to a thriving community. We recognize this and invest heavily in public safety. That includes upping compensation for our law enforcement professionals, where we see the greatest competition from both the public and private sectors, and leading nationally in training and equipping our public safety personnel.

We take pride in pioneering new approaches, like having fully cross-trained fire medics who can save your life in case of a medical emergency or a fire. These cross-trained personnel played a major role in the recent upgrade of Gwinnett's ISO rating, which could lead to lower insurance rates for property owners.

We stay alert to changes that dictate the need for our public safety operations to evolve, such as the use of body cameras by our law enforcement. And we continue to look for ways to reduce risks by focusing on prevention.

Transportation, another basic building block for a successful community, has always played a major role in Gwinnett's economy. The County just completed its comprehensive transportation plan to guide spending for the next two decades. To meet the challenge of moving more people and goods as we continue to grow, we must find ways to make the most of our transportation networks, as well as add capacity. And, there are disruptors, like intelligent vehicles, coming faster than previously predicted.

One example of how Gwinnett is seeking to pioneer new transportation solutions is the Peachtree Industrial Boulevard Smart Corridor project. This groundbreaking technology will enable traffic signals to communicate with cell phones or directly with vehicles that have the right capability. It will tell you how long until a signal changes, when you're in a work zone, or from what direction an emergency vehicle is approaching. The project will add connected vehicle technology to the entire 20 miles of PIB in Gwinnett and

installation will start by 2019. It will help reduce the number of crashes and enhance the flow of traffic, including granting traffic signal priority to transit vehicles and preemption to emergency vehicles.

We're not ignoring Gwinnett's main street either. Along with Georgia DOT, we are launching an in-depth study of the I-85 corridor to determine ways to improve traffic flow on the interstate, its ramps and connecting roadways. There are no easy solutions, and all potential improvements will be expensive, so we'll need your help in convincing state leadership that these improvements should be a priority for the use of state dollars.

Now, let's talk about what I believe is the next big decision for Gwinnett—significantly expanding transit. While the Comprehensive Transportation Plan did not fully address public transit, an expanded system in Gwinnett has to be part of our multi-pronged approach to providing mobility solutions for the future.

This is where our current initiative, Connect Gwinnett, comes in. Through this effort, we are identifying improved and expanded transit options and laying out a plan for implementation. However, what we do with transit will not happen in a vacuum. As I noted earlier, Gwinnett is a part of the greater region, and transit is certainly one area in which this connection is critical.

I'm very encouraged by the attention transit is receiving from the state. I participated yesterday in the press conference related to legislation proposed by Chairman Kevin Tanner, because I believe it provides a good approach to transit solutions for the greater Atlanta area. I was honored to be involved with the development of the ideas included in this bill.

On the Senate side, Chairman Brandon Beach has also introduced transit legislation which has worthy ideas as well. It is my hope that lawmakers from both the Senate and the House will reach consensus to pass legislation this session that addresses both transit governance and funding.

Striking the right balance between regional oversight and local control is difficult, and there are obviously hurdles to overcome. However, I believe we have a window of opportunity that should not be squandered. I encourage you to contact your legislators about this important issue.

Regardless, Gwinnett's population is projected to exceed 1.5 million in 2040, and there must be expanded options for travel. We are facing a decision point, and the decision will determine Gwinnett's future, just as surely as past decisions created the Gwinnett of today. My goal is to present a viable transit approach to voters, perhaps as soon as this November.

Now, I want to circle back to Gwinnett's greatest strength, its people. We need the best from every Gwinnettian, young and old, from every background, so we're making it easy to be engaged through outreach initiatives and volunteer opportunities.

Our Gwinnett 101 Citizens Academy has now graduated 168 participants, and there are several here today. Would you stand now and be recognized?

We also successfully launched a similar program for high schoolers, called the Gwinnett Youth Commission, and the courts completed their second year of the SMILE program, which introduces high school students to the legal profession.

Our Community Outreach staff are seen everywhere as they host and attend events, often with involvement from Commissioners and County staff. So, look for Gwinnett Outreach at bicentennial gatherings throughout 2018.

As we celebrate this year, we honor our past and those who built today's Gwinnett through 200 years of opportunities and decisions. And as we approach the next 100 years, we still need a pioneering, can-do spirit to face our challenges together and develop new solutions.

If you're ready to be among the pioneers for Gwinnett's next century, I ask that you take your coin and turn the bicentennial logo face up. Join the district commissioners, other community leaders, and me as we set about creating tomorrow's Gwinnett.

And, don't forget to be here at the Infinite Energy Center on Saturday, December 15th for the big party celebrating Gwinnett's 200th birthday.

In the meantime, have a great day and a great Bicentennial 2018.

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