

2017 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 16, 2017

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

I know you came to hear about the State of the County.

What a privilege it is to tell you that the State of Gwinnett County is remarkable!

And, I'm not talking just about county government; I make this claim about our entire community.

Bragging is not our style, but I think this is a good point in our history to pause and take stock of what Gwinnett County really is.... a brand of remarkable excellence.

We've been building this brand over the course of decades – but, today, I see a strong Gwinnett brand that's newly reinvented.

Gwinnett is now a proud cosmopolitan community.

People from all over this country and from every corner of the world have moved to Gwinnett – and they keep coming. In just three short years we are likely to be 1 million very diverse people strong.

And residents and businesses will keep coming here because the Gwinnett brand is excellence in education from Pre-K to PhD.

They'll come here because the Gwinnett brand is good jobs... a robust business community... and a well-trained workforce.

They'll come here because the Gwinnett brand is a safe, healthy community with great public safety and medical services.

They'll come here because the Gwinnett brand is an abundance of leisure, recreation, and entertainment opportunities.

They'll come here because of all the people in this room and across the county who have built – and will continue to build – the remarkable Gwinnett brand.

Now, local governments contribute significantly to Gwinnett's excellence, and your county government is no exception.

As you may know, Gwinnett's brand is Triple AAA-rated.

All three major bond rating agencies just reaffirmed our AAA standing, marking 20 consecutive years of holding the highest possible rating. There are more than 3,000 counties nationwide, but only 49 at this level. A Triple AAA bond rating not only saves

us millions of dollars, it's an independent measurement of the quality of your county government's operations and fiscal strength.

And, this fiscal strength is the foundation for public investment, now and in the future.

The Gwinnett brand is unmatched stewardship of water resources.

Few utilities in the world have taken the steps we have to ensure an abundant, clean water supply for our own community as well as for downstream neighbors. We return more than 14.5 billion gallons of the water we use annually to Lake Lanier and the Chattahoochee River – and we send it back cleaner than we found it.

And, due to our conservation efforts, we use less water today than in the past – despite our growth in population.

Our good work in this area played a starring role in the state's case that led to Judge Lancaster's ruling that was announced Tuesday.

The Gwinnett brand is innovation.

At the F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center, we already turn waste from the treatment process into fertilizer and convert methane into electricity to run the plant.

However, we can't stand still.

Our Water Resources staff are working with research institutions and others in the water industry to find new ways to produce clean water more efficiently and to stretch the boundaries of reuse.

Some forward-thinking private sector firms are also seeking partnerships with us.

The Gwinnett brand is the competency and professionalism of our county employees at all levels in all departments – from public safety... to finance... and everything in between.

They are capable, well-trained, and highly motivated – and they are dedicated to serving you.

Across county government, our departments and staff are consistently identified as the best of the best by their peers, by professional organizations, and by accreditation programs.

The Gwinnett brand is public participation and delivering on promises.

The best example I can cite is the management of our SPLOST programs, where citizens from varied backgrounds recommend project priorities to the Board of Commissioners, and then county government delivers those projects.

The Gwinnett brand is cooperation among local governments and community partners.

We know we can accomplish much more if we all pull together.

A very concrete example is the shared facility opened last year for the new Lilburn city hall and the relocated Lilburn Branch Library. We're also working with Duluth and Norcross to relocate the libraries that serve their communities and we're in discussions with Snellville and Lawrenceville to do something similar with funding from the 2017 SPLOST.

Another example is the joint funding of transportation projects by the County, cities, and CIDs.

And, Partnership Gwinnett brings together the private sector with governmental entities and the Chamber to focus on our economic vitality.

The Gwinnett brand is also community building and place making.

All of the cities in Gwinnett are engaged in this work and have made great progress. And thanks to Explore Gwinnett, one of the most recognized spaces in Gwinnett is right here at the County's Infinite Energy Center.

While the Center is successful now, we believe it can be so much more. In fact, we see the Center as the catalyst to create a truly remarkable business and entertainment district unlike anything that exists in Gwinnett now. We believe in this vision so much that we have acquired additional property, contracted to build another entrance and set aside millions of dollars for public investment at the Center.

Private investment is also an important part of the plans to reinvent and expand the Center. As you may be aware, North American Properties has been selected as the private sector partner for this undertaking. We are pleased to have here with us today Mark Toro with North American, and I have asked him to share his thoughts about the project.

Would you help me welcome him to the stage, please?

(Mark Toro speaks)

Thank you, Mark and North American, so much for believing in Gwinnett and for your decision to invest here. We can't wait to see this site in a few years.

Let me remind you of another partnership opportunity.

We have acquired the 24-acre Olympic tennis venue on Highway 78 and are preparing to demolish the stadium as the first step in redeveloping that property. We'll be seeking a private sector partner through a competitive process, so start thinking about what makes sense for the site. The Evermore CID is anxiously awaiting the venue's transformation.

Also, stay tuned for developing news in the Gwinnett Place area as we work with the CID to turn concepts for connectivity and walkability into reality. We're also encouraging the private sector through incentives and public investment to convert parking lots and big retail spaces into mixed use developments.

We look forward to partnering with the Gwinnett Village CID as it updates its Livable Centers plan and implements recommendations to improve traffic flow and pedestrian access.

And, county government has important capital projects underway or soon to start, as well. Take a look at the screens for some examples...

All in all, there is a lot to celebrate when we look at our remarkable community and its prospects for the future!

Now, I'm aware that the Gwinnett brand has taken a few hits.

But if you look at even the most serious challenges we face, you'll see that most are the by-products of our success.

Take transportation, for instance. You'd be hard-pressed to find a better road system than Gwinnett's. But I think we'll all agree that at least twice a day on weekdays, for longer and longer periods, it can be tough to get around.

We have to find solutions to improve mobility for both people and freight as we continue to grow. We can't stop improving our road network, but expanded transit options must also be part of any long-term solution. I'm grateful for the work being done under the Gold Dome this session to provide us better tools to implement transit solutions and for the continued discussion of the State's role.

For our part, we're embarking on a comprehensive transit development planning process within the next 90 days. We'll consider a range of transit options and provide for extensive public participation. This is not just another study... it is mandatory in order to be eligible for federal funding. It is also a critical step toward my goal to give Gwinnett voters a chance to vote, yay or nay, on transit improvements based on accurate information and ample discussion.

On the other side of the transportation spectrum, one of our best kept secrets is an abundance of walking and biking trails. However, these need to be linked to create major trail networks.

As a first step, work is already underway to connect some pathways. And the County, cities, and CIDs are developing a countywide plan to guide the creation of a remarkable trail network.

Not only will a robust network of pathways give folks another choice for travel, the connections and activity add to the feeling of community that so many are seeking – and that's good for development, too.

As noted earlier, we have great county employees. However, we face challenges in keeping them and hiring new talent. In some areas, such as law enforcement, our compensation has fallen behind the market.

We have made progress, but more is needed.

Over the next few months, staff will bring forward recommendations for the Board's consideration, and then it will be up to us to make funding decisions.

Another primary commitment arises from the diversity of our growing population and the need for inclusion of all our neighbors.

Inclusion does not just happen. It takes intentional effort.

Let me be perfectly clear – failure to respect all Gwinnettians and welcome their participation in our community is neither acceptable nor smart.

Gwinnett's future success depends on all of us, working together to build the community. We must engage and empower leaders from our diverse population who love Gwinnett to champion this important work.

To address the issue of inclusion, this board created a formal community outreach program two years ago. Nicole Hendrickson, our Director of Outreach was recently recognized by the Chamber for her work in creating the successful programs that have been implemented.

The Gwinnett 101 Citizens Academy has provided more than 100 people a behind-the-scenes look at their county government. We have Academy alumni with us today. Would you all stand and be recognized now?

Keep your eye on these folks as they take leadership roles.

Another program – Dinner and Dialogue – has facilitated meaningful, informal discussions between commissioners and residents. The County has hosted Building Bridges events for various constituencies to interact with county government, and more are planned this year.

But there's more to do, as recent events have shown.

I have made a personal commitment to seek ways to increase my own understanding of varied racial and cultural backgrounds. I hope that my fellow commissioners will do the same.

To symbolize our deepened commitment to engage with our diverse community, we are adopting the tagline "Many Voices, One Gwinnett."

Feel free to use that as a hashtag.

Coming attractions include broadening our Gwinnett 101 program with opportunities for youth... making site visits with community groups to learn and connect... opening county facilities for community tours and interaction... inviting groups to display their traditional art, clothing, crafts, and heritage in county facilities... producing videos and launching a TV program to spotlight the many cultures that make the Gwinnett brand unique... strengthening outreach efforts aimed at small businesses and minority job applicants... and incorporating into our bicentennial celebration the stories of Gwinnett's black communities and those of our more recent arrivals.

In summary, we're determined to ensure that Gwinnett is a welcoming place that provides opportunities for all our residents and acknowledges their contributions.

I've focused on just some of the aspects of the remarkable Gwinnett brand today because it's important to put things in perspective. Sometimes when you're focused on overcoming hurdles, you can overlook all the good things right in front of you.

Years ago, many of us got a daily reminder of the Gwinnett brand when we traveled up and down I-85. Two water towers once sent us off and welcomed us home with the message that Gwinnett Is Great and that Success Lives Here.

Those towers are gone now, but this Board of Commissioners is focused on the rebirth and reinvention of the remarkable Gwinnett spirit those towers represented!

As we race toward our bicentennial in 2018, we're working on new symbols of the Gwinnett brand, symbols that reflect today's Gwinnett and the promise of our bright future.

Until then, don't lose sight of the Gwinnett brand, which is what?

REMARKABLE!!!!

If you believe in remarkable Gwinnett, take one of the buttons on your table and wear it with pride.

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