

2016 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 18, 2016

Good afternoon. Thanks for being here today and for your contributions to the success of this great county.

It's fitting that we meet here at the Infinite Energy Center to reflect upon the state of Gwinnett County and to look toward its promising future.

You've got to love the name—Infinite, or endless, Energy—and the location—poised near the middle of what may be Gwinnett's primary MAIN STREET, the I-85 corridor.

The exciting activity and development being generated here is a great example of what is happening along many of the MAIN STREETs which spread all over Gwinnett.

We provided some eye candy during lunch.

On the screens, you saw a sampling of benefits from the County's Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, or SPLOST.

The state of the County is great in large part because Gwinnett voters have repeatedly said yes to improving transportation, public safety, parks, greenspace, and libraries through a one-cent sales tax.

SPLOST has built much of our MAIN STREETs and helped ensure that success continues to live here. So, let me thank Gwinnett voters for three decades of support for SPLOST.

Success also lives here because of the people who live and work on GWINNETT MAIN STREETs—our residents, our business people, our educators, our volunteers, and our county employees.

For just a minute or two, I want to highlight those employees who take pride in serving Gwinnett's 900,000 residents, 26,000 businesses, and countless visitors.

As just a sample, in 2015 they answered more than 800,000 911 calls, produced and delivered 25 billion gallons of clean water, responded to about 550,000 calls for police help, hosted millions of park visits, and handled nearly 56,000 medical emergencies.

Your officials and employees met tough standards for reclaimed water treatment, ran a nationally acclaimed parks and recreation system, won awards for financial reporting, maintained a Triple AAA bond rating, reformed criminal justice through accountability courts and reentry programs, set new standards for volunteerism and community engagement, and so much more.

For more of the 2015 story, take a look at the State of the County overview document at your seats. It's still just a summary, but when you read it, I think you'll find there's a lot to make you proud.

We can't just say things are good and rest on our laurels, though. We have to keep improving, evolving, and pushing forward as our environment changes.

Former Chairman Wayne Hill had a plaque on his desk that sums it up.

According to Will Rogers, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

»As I look toward the future, I see a Gwinnett with an even better mix of all of the things that have made the county a premier place to live, work, and play.

I see Gwinnett's main streets linking revitalized, thriving urban areas to our quiet suburban neighborhoods and even further out to locations that can retain a bit of country feeling.

With 437 square miles of ideally positioned geography, Gwinnett has the room and resources to cultivate residential and commercial areas that can suit a wide variety of needs and tastes.

And, I believe that the ability to provide that range of choices is a strong basis for future success.

A community is a little like an investment portfolio—diversification is a good thing that can buffer against changes and smooth out volatility. Or, as the old saying goes, it avoids "putting all our eggs in the same basket!"

We want to have areas in the County that appeal to all age groups and that offer attractive locations for businesses of all sizes and types.

As we create the future, however, we can't neglect the needs of today. We have to keep the fundamentals of Gwinnett's success strong and relevant every day.

We need to focus on the basic building blocks of a successful community.

»First and foremost, we have to keep our world class schools strong.

We can't forget that education at all levels is the foundation for future innovation, workforce and leadership.

The Board of Commissioners can't take credit for our exceptional educational institutions, but we do have a very important support role—as does everyone in this room.

One of the primary ways we can support our schools is to keep working hard at economic development. Private investment drives up the value of our tax digest and

helps provide our public schools with much needed revenues to fuel tomorrow's success.

Ensuring there are good jobs for households with school-age children also has a big impact.

The County is determined to do its part. Not only are we actively participating in Partnership Gwinnett, but we also are adding staff in the County organization to further support economic development initiatives. And, we're building and maintaining essential infrastructure.

»Second, we have to keep our community safe and secure.

County government is working to meet this challenge.

Almost 75 percent of the tax operating budget goes to public safety and the courts.

The approved 2016 budget emphasizes public safety needs for our growing population.

Chief Ayers now has funding to hire 55 additional police officers, and Chief Snyder has firefighter/paramedic positions to staff a new med unit.

The budget also includes funding for new positions in the DA's office, Sheriff's Department, Juvenile Court, and Magistrate Court.

The capital budget funds construction of a courthouse expansion and a new medical examiner and morgue facility, as well as body cameras for police and sheriff.

In addition, we are moving forward with a police precinct for the Bay Creek area and are planning the next station improvements for Fire and EMS.

»Third, water infrastructure is a key building block.

From the broad perspective, we're still dealing with our long-term water supply.

We're staying close to the ongoing litigation over water usage in the Chattahoochee basin and have our own attorneys, in addition to the legal team representing the Water Planning District.

We made sure that Gwinnett's interests were heard regarding the draft ACF water control manual that was released by the Corps of Engineers last fall.

On the research front, Gwinnett is participating in several projects by national consortiums that are aimed at better use of water technology.

With thousands of miles of pipe in the ground, we're focusing on efficiencies in how we manage our water and wastewater systems.

And, we aim to cut future costs through proper installation and maintenance now.

»Another of Gwinnett's key building blocks is our transportation infrastructure—along and connecting MAIN STREETs Gwinnett.

The biggest challenge facing Gwinnett is how to improve mobility and still maintain our existing system that includes, in round numbers, 6,000 lane miles of roads, 200 bridges and culverts, 700 traffic signals, 20,000 traffic control signs, and sidewalks that could reach from here to California.

We need to improve our roadways not just for our passenger trips, but also for movement of freight, especially as the County sees more truck traffic originating from the port of Savannah.

In addition, we have more demand for transit service and growing interest in walkability and bikeways.

»So there is a lot to consider as the County develops its updated comprehensive master plan for transportation.

This plan will be a guide for transportation investments for the next 25 years.

You and many others across Gwinnett will have an opportunity to voice opinions about priorities in the coming months. And we look forward to hearing from you.

Parks, greenspace, libraries and other factors associated with quality of life have also been major building blocks in Gwinnett's recent success.

As the entire Atlanta region develops more densely, greenspace and parks will be even more important community amenities.

Gwinnett already shines in this area, but the County will continue to develop and renovate parks to meet the many recreational needs of the community and to set it apart.

Our growing population places demands on the library system, and the County is responding by relocating and improving some of our older facilities, as well as by looking at modern ways to deliver service.

If you look at our priorities and our performance, you'll see that my fellow commissioners and I are committed to delivering fundamental services while using your dollars wisely.

»At the same time, we are focused on creating the future.

Last year at this event I described Gwinnett's future as I saw it. Today I want to share some visuals that illustrate that vision.

Now I'm not pretending that these are more than a glimpse of one version of the future, but it's important to keep reminding ourselves of possibilities.

If you will.... close your eyes... and, in your mind... move 24 years into the future.

Gwinnett's population will exceed 1.5 million people.

Technology has advanced and business and society have adjusted.

Today's infant is a young professional.

Today's teenager worries about his teenaged child

And the millennials are on the other side of the age divide.

As you open your eyes, the year is 2040.

»Okay, some of us are probably saying we won't be here in 24 years, but let's suspend reality and take a look at MAIN STREETs Gwinnett in 2040.

Satellite at Sugarloaf is where Gwinnett comes to be entertained, with everything you can imagine from Broadway shows, to art galleries and shopping, to comedy clubs and the latest music acts. Or enjoy a world class meal before a leisurely stroll to take in a show at the outdoor theater.

You might even decide to star in your own virtual reality adventure.

Gwinnett Place is THE address for business, especially international business. Consulates for most countries may have an official address elsewhere, but the real interaction happens at Gwinnett Place because it's a comfortable, neutral zone. Major international companies make sure they have a presence here as well.

President Jimmy Carter never dreamed that his name would be linked with the Hollywood of the South. In 2040, Georgia outranks California in the virtual reality and video industry, and Jimmy Carter Boulevard at Brook Hollow Parkway is the epicenter of this industry for the state.

The F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center is the primary site for research and innovation focused on clean water and hosts the Georgia Water Alliance. It houses an incubator for water-focused technology firms and anchors the largest concentration of water-related industry in the U.S.

The gateway to Gwinnett at Stone Mountain showcases its proximity to one of the natural wonders of the world. Biomedical firms needing to expand beyond the Emory/CDC area have found an ideal combination of amenities and reasonably priced space along Highway 78.

Downtown Lilburn has never looked better or been busier. Joint improvement projects by the county and the city sparked a revitalization of the entire area, and Highway 29 is once again a major MAIN STREET for Gwinnett.

Following 29 northward, Gwinnett's county seat, Lawrenceville, is a college town where Georgia Gwinnett and downtown are woven together, creating a vibrant, creative community.

Eastward on SR316, the promise of the Innovation Crescent is coming true. Research and development facilities have found an ideal location that provides access to multiple universities and the peaceful environment for innovation that is sought as a relief from the frantic frenzy of life in 2040.

»And scattered along the many MAIN STREETS of Gwinnett, there are exciting destinations and downtowns created by our wonderful cities—we already see these taking shape across the county.

Now the future may or may not match my vision, since all of Gwinnett has a say in what we create here.

One thing we know is that we're headed toward that future, and the decisions we make today affect tomorrow's Gwinnett.

We have to continue dreaming dreams about tomorrow and what can be accomplished.

In the meantime, though, we can't back away from what it takes to keep today's Gwinnett a place where success lives, works, learns, and plays.

So there's no time to waste...

Let's get back to work!

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