

2015 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 19, 2015, to Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and Council for Quality Growth at Gwinnett Center

Good afternoon. I want to thank each of you for being here today and for what you do to make Gwinnett great.

During your lunch, we provided views of Gwinnett from a perspective most never see—views from above the trees and below the clouds.

Driving around Gwinnett over the years, I've always admired the scenery—even as it's changed.

But seeing Gwinnett from above provides so much more context—it almost forces a look at the big picture.

Looking out over Gwinnett, I see the homes and neighborhoods that shelter about 880,000 residents.

I see commerce that serves our community and visitors, provides jobs and fuels the economy.

I see high-quality infrastructure, like 3,500 miles of roads that connect our corner of Georgia to the rest of the world.

Seeing the visible infrastructure, I can't help thinking about what is underground and out of sight, like enough water, sewer, and stormwater pipe to reach from here to New Zealand.

The view from above reveals so many great opportunities for leisure in outstanding parks and entertainment facilities.

I see the buildings, playgrounds, and stadiums of our many award-winning schools where about 10 percent of the K-12 students in Georgia learn.

The landscape is dotted with houses of worship ranging from the tiny to the mega.

And, the bird's-eye view proves there's an abundance of natural beauty tucked away, even in the most densely developed areas.

Much of the scenery is the result of the vision, planning, and hard work of Gwinnett's greatest resource—its people.

Seeing Gwinnett from above is a reminder of just how big and complex this community is—and how much opportunity we're blessed to have.

The view from above displays many accomplishments, but it doesn't reveal some of our greatest achievements.

Here are a few of my favorites:

Keeping our coveted Triple Triple-A credit rating through the Great Recession. This indicates that our financial strength is intact and available to unleash on infrastructure needs and an economic development vision.

Gwinnett's schools are amazing—two Broad prizes, the top high school in Georgia that is also ranked third in the nation... and multiple schools packing the top of the 2015 Niche rankings.

No fewer than a dozen institutions of higher education call the County home, including the fastest growing college in the University System—Georgia Gwinnett College. These convenient opportunities to expand knowledge or learn a new trade translate into strong workforce development.

The water in your glass today comes from one of the most advanced and sustainable water systems in the world. The system delivers high-quality drinking water to our more than 240,000 customers and treats and returns much of it to Lake Lanier and the Chattahoochee River cleaner than we found it. That's good for Gwinnett, and it's good for our neighbors downstream.

Nationally recognized parks and libraries add to our quality of life by exercising mind and body.

Through use of the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, Gwinnett has invested more than \$2.7 billion in capital projects on a cash basis, saving taxpayers over \$1 billion in financing costs while providing for current and future needs

Gwinnett's public safety professionals protect and serve with the highest level of professionalism, and the County's police department, correctional facility, and paramedic education program have all achieved national accreditation. Gwinnett PD, one of the largest full-service departments in the state, is one of only a few nationwide to achieve CALEA's accreditation with excellence—the highest level possible.

Top quality health care covers Gwinnett County. Most notably, Gwinnett Medical Center was recently identified as the top large hospital in the state by Georgia Trend Magazine.

We're lucky to have a thriving arts community—including an award-winning professional theatre and beautiful venues for local entertainers, cultural festivals, and big-time stars.

Gwinnett also boasts two professional sports teams and the annual PGA Champions Tour.

There's truly something for everyone here.

Many of Gwinnett's cities have been nationally recognized for being the "tops" in different quality of life categories and they give residents hometown pride.

We have more businesses operating in Gwinnett County and more jobs here than at any other time in our history. And those jobs are spread across many businesses, with the top private employer accounting for less than one percent.

Of course, the largest employer overall is the Gwinnett School System. Superintendent Wilbanks can correct me if I am wrong, but I expect those jobs will stay in Gwinnett.

The Gwinnett Chamber's leadership and support of our business community help ensure our businesses grow and prosper.

And then there is Gwinnett's diversity. Over the past 25 years, we've drawn an abundance of talent and new perspective from all over this planet. People from many backgrounds, races, ethnic groups, languages, and cultures live in Gwinnett County.

Our diversity, when fully leveraged, will help provide the energy and the brainpower to take Gwinnett to new heights.

Thanks to our economic development initiative, Partnership Gwinnett, there have been many successes over the last few years.

As we celebrated a few of these Tuesday at the reception for new companies, I was struck by the variety, energy, and innovation in the room.

Tomorrow's economy is growing in Gwinnett today.

Going forward, you can expect to see our efforts broaden and deepen as we emphasize even more support of existing businesses while continuing to cast a global net for new ones.

We may not win every time, but you can bet we will be in the game!

With Gwinnett's positive attributes—a strategic location, world-class infrastructure, amazing schools, outstanding quality of life, economic and cultural diversity, and smart, hard-working people—I expect to win overall.

To ensure we can support economic development, County government has continued to invest in infrastructure like roads and water and sewer.

And, we've been working to keep public safety and other fundamental services strong.

This won't change other than to step up the pace and adjust our approach to meet the needs of the community.

We'll also add strategic investments intended to spur redevelopment and development in key areas.

Some of the progress you can expect to see this year includes the continued expansion of the film industry in Gwinnett.

Eagle Rock is completing its massive television production sound stages on Best Friend Road and, as the company puts it, “is staking a claim to a big share of Hollywood East.”

Nearby, on the grounds of the OFS plant, plans are moving forward on the Atlanta Media Campus, a vast array of movie and TV sound stages that has already yielded several feature films. Master plans for the campus also include a hotel, office space and education facilities to teach media production skills.

Just this week, Comcast’s decision to expand its regional headquarters here was announced. Nothing says success like a long-time Gwinnett business expanding locally. The new “Big South” office here in Gwinnett will help support Comcast’s continued growth across Georgia.

We also congratulate Rock-Tenn on its combination with MeadWestVaco to form a \$16 billion global giant and look forward to seeing the business opportunities that are created as a result.

Earlier this month, the County closed on 227 acres of greenspace on the Chattahoochee River in Peachtree Corners. The purchase of the Simpsonwood property preserves a very special tract of land as a passive park to be enjoyed by all of us now and in the future. The master plan to guide Simpsonwood’s preservation and use will be a focus this year.

To improve emergency response, the County is adding an additional fire station near Georgia Gwinnett College and is relocating Station 10 to better serve the Mall of Georgia area.

We will begin construction of another \$50 million or so in transportation improvements, like bridge replacements, school safety projects and road widening.

And, we are taking steps to keep possibilities open for future projects.

For example, just this past Tuesday, we approved purchase of land that will be needed for a grade-separated interchange at State Route 316 and State Route 8 when the State has funds to build it.

This year, we will also kick off the first update to our Comprehensive Transportation Plan since 2008. It will focus on Gwinnett’s transportation needs for the next 25 years.

The County is proud to be a partner with the Gwinnett School System and Junior Achievement in the JA Biz Town opening at the new Discovery High School in August. Middle schoolers will get a chance to learn about real world business and life experiences there—including the role of county government.

And, in an effort to give all residents an opportunity to become more informed and more involved, we’ll launch our citizens academy this spring and follow with another in the fall.

Looking back at the aerial tour of our county, it's apparent that we have tremendous opportunities for further economic development.

There are previously developed areas that are being revitalized and are on the verge of exciting redevelopment, as well as plenty of land on 316.

When I look into the future, I see a grown-up Gwinnett that has literally grown up in areas along our interstates and major thoroughfares where it makes sense.

I see choices in lifestyles, all the way from urban hip to mini-farms and everything in between.

I see a range of transportation options to serve the million and a half people who will call Gwinnett home in 25 years and the businesses that will be here.

I see Gwinnett Center at the heart of a booming entertainment and cultural arts district.

I see thriving and interesting gateways to Gwinnett at Jimmy Carter, on 78 at Stone Mountain, on 985 and 85 at the northern borders, on 316 to the east, on 29, on 141, on 20 and more—areas that say “you just entered Gwinnett and we're glad you're here.”

I see a reinvented Gwinnett Place area that is the center of Gwinnett's downtown.

And, I see a cosmopolitan Gwinnett as a tourism magnet where global cultures can be experienced without a long flight or a passport.

But, it's not enough to see the vision and to describe the future—we have to create it.

The future I see is too exciting to delay.

I am ready to start building it right now.

I believe my fellow commissioners are ready as well.

However... we need your help, so how about you?

Can you see Gwinnett's future?

Do you want to be a part of it?

Are you ready to work hard to build it?

Then, let's act like Gwinnettians and create our future together!

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