

2019 State of Gwinnett County Address
Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners
As prepared for delivery on February 20, 2019

Good afternoon, everyone. I want to thank you all for being here.

I feel very fortunate to serve as Gwinnett Commission Chairman as we begin the county's third century. Without hesitation, I can say Gwinnett is great. Success not only lives here but it thrives.

Gwinnett has attracted businesses and residents from around the globe. Through strong partnerships, the county has now blossomed into something exciting, colorful, and filled with life – a vibrantly connected community.

And, the county reflects and supports the many individual cities and communities that comprise Gwinnett.

After a year spent celebrating our rich history and the thriving community of today, it's fitting to focus now on the future of the county.

Just as partnerships and people have created the Gwinnett of today, so will they build tomorrow's Gwinnett. And this effort will be led by a diverse and inclusive group of leaders reflecting the beautiful mosaic that is Gwinnett.

A rare spirit of cooperation and connection has elevated this community and continues to strengthen it. A great example is Partnership Gwinnett which brings together private business, local government, and public education to coordinate economic development and community improvement.

Another example is Volunteer Gwinnett which last year drew more than 90,000 people who wanted to make a difference. They put in 1.6 million hours, assisting in every nook and cranny of Gwinnett.

What a powerful commitment to each other and to the vibrant connections among us!

Our partnership with education connects us to the future. We salute the good work done by our schools, from pre-K through med school, and support their efforts to prepare students of all ages for tomorrow.

Gwinnett and its 16 cities are also vibrantly connected through our symbiotic relationships. About 25 percent of the county's population and area is located within cities. However, the County provides many complex and costly services to almost all Gwinnett. These include water, sewer, transportation, fire and EMS, courts, sheriff,

libraries, and more.

In addition, the County's Police Department, which is the second largest full-service department in Georgia, provides services to seven cities, as well as unincorporated Gwinnett. It also partners with police in the other nine cities to provide specialized services and manpower for critical incidents.

With the County handling many of the fundamental services vital to any urbanizing community, Gwinnett cities have been able to focus resources on placemaking and nurturing a sense of community that makes each of them uniquely successful. We all recognize that we can do so much more by working together, and we are committed to ensuring that the County remains financially strong to provide services and support to Gwinnett cities in the future.

Then there are the connections that the Board of Commissioners has to our constituents and to each other. We've each been elected to serve this county and to make decisions to benefit Gwinnett today and tomorrow. Listen now to a message from each district commissioner, including our two newest members.

(Play short videos featuring District 1 Commissioner Jace Brooks, District 2 Commissioner Ben Ku, District 3 Commissioner Tommy Hunter, and District 4 Commissioner Marlene Fosque.)

Join me in thanking the commissioners for the effort and thought each gives to decision making. Together, we set the strategic vision for the County that guides our dedicated, skilled employees and shapes Gwinnett.

Gwinnett County's ability to play its role effectively is dependent upon financial strength. In 2018, all three bond-rating agencies gave Gwinnett a Triple-A rating for the 21st year in a row, placing us in the top 2 percent of counties in the nation. Our fiscal soundness comes from responsible decision-making, excellent management by staff, strong relationships with community partners, and support from residents and businesses.

The Board has a lot of important projects in the works right now, including the exciting developments beginning here at the Infinite Energy Center and the potential for the OFS property recently purchased by the County. I would love to highlight some of these, but I'm going to focus the remainder of my remarks on transit expansion.

In my opinion, this is the next big decision for Gwinnett, akin to those made in the past regarding water, sewer, and roads. In fact, the decision on transit can be viewed as a "trailblazing moment" – one that will set the path for Gwinnett's future.

We have a unique opportunity before us to strengthen one of the most important foundations for a vibrantly connected Gwinnett – transportation and mobility.

Gwinnett's road network unites our 437 square miles and links us to our neighbors and to the region. That network includes more than 8,400 miles of roads, with 70 percent being the County's responsibility.

Maintaining and improving our road network is critical to our future success.

But roads alone cannot provide enough mobility choices now or in the future. As another 500,000 people call Gwinnett home over the next 20 to 25 years and business activity grows, the pressure on our transportation network will only increase.

That's why we had to look for other alternatives. Current and future mobility challenges led us to launch an in-depth study of transit options, resulting in the Connect Gwinnett Transit Plan.

In developing the plan, we took the same approach we've successfully used in addressing other infrastructure needs. We combined technical analysis with public engagement.

Research for the plan looked at current and projected demographic data and factors that affect traffic patterns, such as where people live and work. The process also considered all modes of transit and how best to utilize these to serve Gwinnett's needs across the county and across time.

In addition to technical analysis, we cast a wide net for public input. We asked for opinions and experiences from residents, the business community, and neighboring jurisdictions through a multitude of in-person events and surveys.

And, we looked at potential funding and the practical aspects of project delivery and operations. In keeping with Gwinnett's tradition of financial responsibility, the plan adopted by the Board last summer balances transit needs across the county with projected funding that includes proceeds from a one-cent sales tax that will be implemented on April 1 if the transit referendum is passed.

It also leaves flexibility to incorporate changes that make sense over time and as technology advances.

At your seats is a handout that provides highlights of the plan.

High capacity bus rapid transit is a major component. Think of this as a train on rubber tires. It will operate in dedicated rights-of-way and have upgraded stations. BRT can be provided at a lower cost and in a shorter time period than rail while providing many of the same benefits.

The plan includes 50 miles of BRT. It also includes 110 miles of BRT-Lite, or Rapid Bus, which travels partially in mixed traffic.

The plan includes a range of bus services, including more express commuter and local bus routes with greater reach and frequency.

There will also be expanded door-to-door Flex Service in less dense areas. A pilot program for this service has been a hit where it's been operating in Snellville.

Our ability to provide services to seniors and to passengers with mobility challenges will also increase significantly.

And, yes, the plan includes an extension of rail from Doraville to Jimmy Carter Boulevard and a multimodal transit hub that can easily accommodate transfers among rail, BRT, bus, and other modes of transportation. This is a critical element for making connections and transfers easy and convenient for riders.

Our transit plan also provides for multiple connections to the larger MARTA system in neighboring jurisdictions that will help tie Gwinnett to the rest of the region – and the region to Gwinnett.

Finally, I want to reiterate the level of flexibility that is inherent in the plan. It must adapt to changing conditions and technology advances over time, and we have tried to ensure that such adaptation is anticipated.

For example, the dedicated rights-of-way in which BRT operates today may be the corridor in which light rail runs in the future or in which a new technology is deployed.

We know changes are coming, but we do not have the luxury to sit still now to wait for those changes to occur. We have to get moving in order for Gwinnett to be able to keep moving in the future.

To implement transit expansion in Gwinnett, we've opted to contract with MARTA. This would never have happened without the vision and focus that Robbie Ashe, former Chair of the MARTA Board, brought to the process. Also critical were the support of current Board Chair Freda Hardage and General Manager Jeff Parker. Would you join me in thanking them?

Our agreement allows us to leverage access to MARTA's expertise and overall system while protecting Gwinnett's interests. The Board of Commissioners and MARTA approved the contract last year, but final approval goes to the voters in the upcoming referendum.

Let's consider a few of the notable provisions of our contract, some of which are based

on legislative changes enacted in 2018.

First and foremost – Gwinnett controls Gwinnett funds, expenditures and projects.

The transit sales taxes collected in Gwinnett are identified as Gwinnett funds and will be sent from the state directly to Gwinnett. From those funds, Gwinnett will make payments to MARTA based on approved contractual obligations.

The funds collected in Gwinnett must be spent for the benefit of Gwinnett.

Now, in exchange for access to the overall MARTA system, Gwinnett will pay a fair share for operations and maintenance of the overall system going forward.

The transit projects built and operated for Gwinnett will be based on the Connect Gwinnett Transit Plan.

The contract allows us to set standards for Gwinnett services and facilities and perform design review and value engineering on major capital projects.

And we can audit MARTA's financial transactions that affect Gwinnett's costs.

Finally, Gwinnett will have three seats on the MARTA board, giving us a voice in the future development and operations of the MARTA system.

To learn more, please visit GwinnettCounty.com or attend one of the seven remaining information sessions.

Let me be clear... I do not claim that our transit plan and contract are perfect. However, I believe that both are very good and we cannot afford to delay while we search for perfection.

As we begin Gwinnett's third century, the future of transit in the county will be determined by Gwinnett voters, who will soon start weighing in on this big decision.

Election Day is Tuesday, March 19, but early voting begins Monday, February 25 at the Main Elections Office in Lawrenceville and expands to seven satellite voting locations beginning March 4.

There is only one question on the ballot. And, its wording was determined by state law – "Gwinnett County has executed a contract for the provision of transit services, dated as of August 2, 2018. Shall this contract be approved? Yes or No"

I believe the Connect Gwinnett Transit Plan is an excellent way to keep Gwinnett vibrantly connected in the most literal sense. I also believe robust transit options are

critical to attracting and maintaining the talented workforce we all need.

Make no mistake about it-- we are in a battle with hundreds of other communities for the best and the brightest. In my opinion, transit can give this great county the final competitive edge we need, especially among younger age groups, to keep your businesses successful and Gwinnett vibrant.

The Board of Commissioners and I voted to execute the contract with MARTA and to put this measure on the ballot. Now it's up to you and all Gwinnett voters to decide if Gwinnett moves forward.

Gwinnett is an amazing place. I love this vibrantly connected community, and I thank you all for allowing me to speak to you today about this remarkable county and what I believe is the most important issue facing Gwinnett today-- the future of mobility within the county and around the region.

Good afternoon and safe travels.

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