

2021 State of the County Address

Nicole Hendrickson, Chairwoman, Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners

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Good morning, and thank you, Nick, for that warm introduction.

I would like to give my personal thanks to the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and the Council for Quality Growth for your partnership and for organizing today's event.

I asked Nick to leave me a few introductions, so I want to start with a couple of quick shoutouts.

To the staff – I not only want to thank you for your commitment to serving this county every day, but also for stepping in to help make this transition a smooth one for me and my fellow commissioners

Thank you for all who are joining both in person and virtually. Your support means a lot to me.

And thank you to my husband who is here supporting me today.

In the spirit of Women's History Month, I want to acknowledge a few women here in the audience today, who serve as a powerful force in the state and who inspire me daily: Cobb County Chairwoman Lisa Cupid, Henry County Chairwoman Carlotta Harrell, Forsyth County Chairwoman Cindy Jones-Mills, and former Gwinnett County Chairman Charlotte Nash.

Thank you for your friendship and for being here today.

This, of course, is my first State of the County address as Chairwoman. And let me tell you – following Charlotte Nash – both in giving this speech and as chair of the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners – is a tough act to follow.

She is someone who exemplifies the Gwinnett Standard – an expectation of greatness in all that we do. You may not have heard the phrase the “Gwinnett Standard,” but I can guarantee you've felt it.

What's normal here would be amazing almost anywhere else. What's ordinary in Gwinnett is extraordinary elsewhere.

I first encountered the Gwinnett Standard when I came to the county back in 2006. I was drawn here by opportunity – the offer of an internship with the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services.

While serving in that role, I fell in love with the county. I was amazed by the diversity of this community – by being able to travel the world and experience cultures from every continent in less than 440 square miles.

I enjoyed the collaborative spirit of Gwinnett residents, and I recognized a unity of purpose that brought together people of all backgrounds to volunteer, organize, and rally behind important causes. I saw our community pull together to serve the needs of others.

I witnessed the love we all share for Gwinnett County in the form of countless heroes who decided that loving our community means more than just standing by and hoping for a good outcome – loving our county means that the only way to overcome tough challenges is by extending grace, finding common ground, and working together.

At the time, I didn't have children, but I knew this was where I wanted to start and raise my family. So, I officially made Gwinnett my home in 2008.

And after eight years with the Gwinnett Coalition, the Board of Commissioners trusted me to execute their vision to develop a Community Outreach Program in 2015. The many interactions I had with residents, organizations, businesses, and community partners led me to fully appreciate the connections that unite every facet of this community and the excellence evident in our everyday actions.

Gwinnett has grown even stronger, more united, and more visionary in the years since I chose it as my home.

I've come into the role of chairwoman during a momentous time – not just in Gwinnett, but in the history of humanity. Through many life-altering days, months, and years, Gwinnett has still managed to move forward and find success – thanks to leaders throughout Gwinnett's history who set a standard of excellence that touches every person who encounters our great county – the Gwinnett Standard.

As I settle into my new role, I'm grateful for where we are today. Gwinnett is a strong, well-positioned community. My job, and the job of my fellow commissioners, is to listen to Gwinnett residents and set a vision for our path forward, building on the successes of the past to help our county thrive. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that we love this community. We're proud to represent it. And we join with all who lift up and rally behind the Gwinnett Standard to ensure that this community achieves excellence in everything we do.

By setting excellence as our benchmark, we create a paradigm that applies even in areas that some may take for granted, because things often go unnoticed when they're going right.

For decades, Gwinnett County has earned coveted Triple AAA/Aaa bond ratings – one of only a handful of US counties to hold this distinction. These consistent bond ratings have a significant, positive impact on the cost of borrowing money for improvements, allowing us to save on future financing, and ultimately lowering costs for residents and businesses.

The Gwinnett Standard is also the reason that people come – in normal times – from all around the world to tour our F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center. We use cutting-edge technology to ensure that the wastewater we clean and return to the environment is some of the highest quality in the world.

We also have world-class parks and libraries. These valuable resources give our residents healthy and informative recreational opportunities. They also help attract new residents and serve as evidence of our high quality of life, prompting businesses to start, expand, and move here. And that brings new money into the local economy and creates jobs.

Our police department has been repeatedly recognized by the Commission on Accreditation for

Law Enforcement Agencies. They assess our compliance with more than four hundred standards that promote fair and professional law enforcement services. Only about four percent of more than 18,000 law enforcement agencies nationwide can claim CALEA accreditation, but it's something Gwinnett Police have earned again and again since 1993.

And we can still do better. We're committed to listening to our community – so this year, with the support of our Police leadership, we established a Police Citizens Advisory Board to take feedback from residents and inform future policy.

And we know the job is more than just responding to crime – it's about preventing crime, too. Many factors that are linked to crime – factors like poverty, substance abuse, mental health challenges, and lack of education – can and should be addressed before a crime is ever committed.

So, as we work to ensure police accountability, we must also make intentional investments in policies and programs that address these systemic issues.

The state, region, and our nation are watching, and now is the time to show the world that we will be a leader in improving relationships and building trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Above all else, we work for you. Through our policies and actions, we want to show how much we value your feedback.

This community is certainly not the same place it was forty years ago, or even a decade ago. The population continues to boom, and people – like many of you – are drawn here from all over the world by our accessible location, our reputation for superior services, and the inclusiveness we project.

Population growth alone would have been enough to change the county, but the type of people who came here have made a world of difference. Today we have almost a million residents. About a quarter of them were born outside the United States, and more than a third speak a language other than English. Each of them brings a fresh perspective and a unique set of skills, memories, and connections with other members of our community. Those differences bring a constant pulse of new ideas and innovations, and the framework that already exists in our community supports the best of these ideas and allows them to come to fruition.

While our county is always growing and changing, one thing remains constant – the Gwinnett Standard. Since the days of the water towers on I-85, we've proudly proclaimed that Gwinnett is Great...and that Success Lives Here. That feeling stays with us. Our traditions are a yardstick for measuring success.

Whenever someone new comes to this county, they see the services we provide all around them, the education their children receive, how community organizations offer support and encouragement, and the way residents interact. As they see what this county has already accomplished by working together, their standards rise to the Gwinnett Standard.

Meeting more than basic requirements becomes the new normal – but the solution is always balanced by fiscal realities. In Gwinnett County, we find ways to exceed expectations while

staying within budget.

Each person who experiences our County's excellence carries it forward, and we have another set of hands raising the Gwinnett Standard.

Something I find exceedingly special about Gwinnett is our interconnectivity. Looking at projects underway across the county, it seems like almost every one of them is the result of a partnership. The County with a city...a CID with a local business...a nonprofit with a school. When we all rally behind the same Standard, it becomes easy to collaborate and trust each other to do what's right.

One recent example of this collaborative spirit is the preservation of the Hooper-Renwick School, which served as Gwinnett's only school for African American students for decades during segregation. After integration, the school closed, but it served several different purposes before ending up vacant.

The city of Lawrenceville purchased the school, intending to tear it down. But then, former students – passionate about keeping the building around – formed the Hooper-Renwick Legacy Preservation Committee. In December, the County and the city agreed to collaborate and turn the school building into the first themed library in the Southeast.

Through this cooperation between the county, city, library, and preservation committee, the old school building will display cultural and historical artifacts, along with the library's resources and information. Residents today and tomorrow will get a better understanding of a significant – and often overlooked – part of our county's history.

The County is using SPLOST pennies to fund construction, thanks to residents who have repeatedly voted to uphold SPLOST funding for capital projects. This project is a result of multiple agencies trusting one another to collaborate on a public resource made possible by funding agreed upon by the residents who will ultimately benefit.

Gwinnett displays excellence in so many ways, but that doesn't mean we've achieved perfection. There are injustices and inequities in our community that we must tackle with the same resolve and standards we use to address challenges like water quality and public safety.

My fellow commissioners and I recognize that there's still work to be done in many areas to create a more equitable and just Gwinnett.

[\(Commissioners' video plays\)](#)

The areas my fellow commissioners have highlighted are just some of the challenges we face. The pandemic has compounded the burdens that struggling families have been dealing with for decades. These struggles are not new. These struggles are the reason I ran for office. But it doesn't mean we can't address them with the Gwinnett Standard in mind.

Think about food insecurity. In 2018 – well before the pandemic – 11.4 percent of our population lived below the poverty line. Women 25 to 34 and boys 6 to 11 were the demographics most affected.

To fight food insecurity among our most vulnerable populations, we launched our Summer Meals Program in 2019 to provide breakfast and lunch to children who often suffer when school meals aren't available. When COVID-19 took hold, leaving rising unemployment and increasing need in its wake, we amped up the service, adding 11 new locations around the community and offering meals to seniors in need as well.

The county and many of our partners are still pitching in to keep residents fed throughout this ongoing crisis, along with countless nonprofits, faith-based organizations, and other charities dedicated to helping those in need. I believe we must maintain this collective spirit to address the issues that we face ahead.

Outside factors will continue to impact this county. We'll be faced with challenges none of us can predict. But we can be certain that our population will grow, faces in leadership will change, and technology will evolve. Gwinnett in 2050 will look as different from today as Gwinnett in 1990 looks to us now. We have shown resilience in the face of adversity throughout the years, and we must continue to stand together with the Gwinnett Standard in our hearts as we face both new and familiar challenges.

So, as we move into the future, I look forward to raising the Gwinnett Standard of excellence as we set our sights on superior economic development in areas like the former Olympic Tennis Center and Gwinnett Place Mall. I'm encouraged by the prospect of identifying strong, affordable housing solutions with the data gathered from our Housing Study. I'm excited to launch an inclusive approach to economic development that gives disadvantaged businesses an equal opportunity to do business with the County. We will address transit challenges to bring mobility options, in the short term, to those who need them most. We will employ every strategy available to us to close the racial wealth gap and increase household median income through workforce development and entrepreneurship opportunities. And I look forward to people coming from around the world to visit our innovative, groundbreaking research and development sites like Rowen and the Water Tower.

As it has for decades, our Standard will hold true. Our flag is still there.

The Gwinnett Standard is a promise. It brings stability and continuity in the things we value most – safety, education, economic opportunity, and quality of life.

We'll face each change with determination, knowing that we're all working together to keep Gwinnett the best place to live, work, play, and raise a family.

For a year now, our expectations have been challenged and our institutions have been tested by COVID-19. But as we learned more about the pandemic, our community quickly answered the call and adapted to keep us building and moving forward.

The County – like so many other organizations, agencies, and businesses – identified services we could bring online. Courts, Planning & Development, and Water Resources emphasized their existing online tools to help people continue to access vital County services.

We reworked many events and celebrations to remain connected with one another during the pandemic. Virtual versions of our Memorial Day and Veterans Day ceremonies enabled us to reflect on those who gave everything for us while we were making small sacrifices every day to

keep each other safe.

One of the greatest challenges we faced this past year was how to keep our children learning and thriving throughout this difficult time.

We have high standards for our schools. One of the many reasons people and businesses move here is the strength of our school systems, and we're nationally recognized for their quality. Schools were faced with a massive challenge, with no perfect solution.

So, I want to take a moment to celebrate our teachers and our school staff, who have been a remarkable force in maintaining normalcy for our children. Our teachers have been adapting their lessons to simultaneous in-person and digital learning. They're doing everything they can to continue to teach Gwinnett's students and keep them engaged and connected.

As a mother, I've seen firsthand how teachers have risen to the occasion to help kids learn and continue to achieve during this difficult time. My son is a student at an elementary school in Gwinnett, and I can personally attest to the quality and dedication of our teachers and our schools.

The perseverance of local businesses is also something to commend.

Starting curbside service, increasing sanitation, reconfiguring spaces for social distancing, and implementing other COVID-19 measures has been a costly and complicated process just to remain open for business.

We're grateful to the Chamber and our Economic Development staff for the work they've done to share information about relevant legislation, connect business owners to resources, and offer support and education throughout this crisis.

Through the test of COVID-19, we have held our Standard high to protect our residents and businesses.

For many of us, this pandemic has been an inconvenience and a challenge — something ever-present but simmering away on the backburner as we go about our daily lives.

But COVID-19 has also stolen jobs from family breadwinners. It's stolen nest eggs with costly medical bills from extended hospital stays. And it has stolen our loved ones. Almost one thousand Gwinnettians have lost their lives to this disease.

I want to thank our health care workers and our first responders, who have worked tirelessly to help those affected by this disease despite personal risk.

And I can't say enough how much I value the hard work, determination, and dedication of Dr. Audrey Arona and her staff at the county Health Department to help our community combat this pandemic.

Throughout the past year, they've been a steadfast resource for the decision makers throughout this community. They've kept us informed and provided expertise, transparency, and consistency as we faced this pandemic. And now, with the mass vaccination center, they'll be

able to vaccinate up to 3,000 people a day when supply increases, helping us achieve the immunity that will someday bring us back to our normal daily lives.

So now the question for each of us is this – how will you uphold the Standard?

We need your support now more than ever to work together to defeat COVID-19. Institutions have adapted, but it's going to take each of us moving forward with resolve and dedication to keep each other safe throughout the vaccine rollout. I believe that we can and will do it because time and time again, our county has risen to the challenge to do what is necessary to achieve success.

Now, this room is full of Standard Bearers. And each of you carries the vision and promise of Gwinnett with you in all that you do.

Your high expectations for our community inspire us all to maintain the Standard, to support sound decisions, to ensure that Gwinnett's future is bright, and to continue to set new standards of excellence.

The Gwinnett Standard rallies us behind one common purpose – to see this community achieve the remarkable, dynamic success we've all grown to expect.

This is a time of need, but it's also a time of great opportunity. We have fought through a difficult year, and though the journey isn't over, a new horizon stretches before us.

Despite the challenges we face, I have never been more hopeful about Gwinnett's future than I am today. With the Gwinnett Standard of excellence as our foundation we are strong, and we are resilient.

And I, alongside my fellow commissioners, will continue to set ambitious goals, forge new paths, and find innovative solutions to the challenges ahead as we carry the Gwinnett Standard into our vibrantly connected future.

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