

2022 State of the County Address
Through the Kaleidoscope – Nicole L. Hendrickson, Chairwoman
As prepared for delivery March 3, 2022

Good morning! Thank you all for being here both in person and virtually. It's good to be back at 12Stone for my second State of the County Address.

I am especially excited to have my family join me this morning. I want to recognize all of my peers in public service – especially my colleagues on the Board of Commissioners: Kirkland Carden, Ben Ku, Jasper Watkins, and Marlene Fosque. It's an honor to serve alongside you every day.

Each of the elected officials in the audience today was selected to represent a group of individuals. We live in a country where decisions can't be made by polling every member of the community, so we choose people who reflect our values to make decisions on our behalf.

We're not representing land – we're representing people with a vast array of backgrounds, experiences, expectations, and desires. We're making choices about the place we call home. And we're promising to do what's best for our community.

We serve the people. We are here for you.

I've always appreciated our democratic republic, and representing almost a million people has given me a special understanding of how much goes into making decisions on behalf of others.

It is the honor of my life to serve as your chairwoman – your Collaborator in Chief.

And I'm extremely proud to be surrounded by such caring, passionate officials who strive to do right by the people who chose them as their leaders.

We will not let politics stand in the way of doing our jobs. Our decisions are not based on right versus left. Our decisions are based on doing what is best for our people.

We each bring something different to the table when addressing our common challenges and opportunities.

Each of us has a unique perspective – a special lens through which we view the world. It informs how we understand our surroundings and the people around us. It helps us interpret actions and foresee obstacles and opportunities.

Our lens is shaped by our past... inspired by our future. It's how we set goals, make decisions, and prepare for tomorrow.

In Gwinnett, our kaleidoscope is the lens through which we view progress. The kaleidoscope represents Gwinnett County as we vibrantly connect the unique people, place, and promise of our community.

Those three facets are intertwined and deeply interconnected – it takes all three to make Gwinnett the community that it is.

Our people are our greatest asset, and we certainly have a lot of them.

The 2020 Census showed our population at around 957,000 residents. That's almost 9 percent of Georgia's residents located right here in Gwinnett.

About 26 percent of our residents came from other countries, and many more came here from across the United States. Our diverse collection of individuals and communities carry ideas from the places they're from, and they bring their own vibrant cultures, energy, and strengths to the table.

Last year, we took the first steps toward creating an equity action plan to help us bring our people to the forefront. The plan will analyze our current policies and practices and chart a path forward to ensure we center equity in County government operations. It is our desire to ensure that no family or community is left behind.

We're committed to not only embracing our diversity, but also harnessing its energy, creativity, and innovative spirit.

Our ability to effectively communicate with our residents is of utmost importance.

Last year, we created a Communications Department, expanding our resources to better reach our people where they are. That means identifying solutions to get important messages to residents using a variety of platforms and languages.

And we're listening, too. Your voices are essential and we must listen to ensure we're building a community that works for everyone.

Through effective communication and in person outreach, we will build bridges between county staff and the people of Gwinnett, inviting them to seek additional resources when needed.

In all of our actions, we look through the kaleidoscope to focus on our people. We prioritize their needs, consider their ideas, and engage with them as we make decisions that shape the county we are and the county we will become.

In Gwinnett, we help people succeed from their earliest days through retirement.

Gwinnett is well-known for having high-quality schools — from Pre-K to Ph.D. — that prepare our children for the next step. We want to make sure kids are ready to learn when they get to the classroom by investing in early childhood education programs that offer enrichment for kids from birth to age 8, like our Building Brains Anywhere Initiative.

A thriving community is a healthy community, and we must work to address the challenges facing our population, from the inevitability of aging to the potential for a new COVID-19 variant.

A growing portion of our population is made up of seniors. In 2000, about 8 percent of our population was over the age of 60, and by 2019, that number had almost doubled. That means we must prioritize providing adequate resources to support our seniors and their caregivers.

We offer seniors opportunities to stay healthy, active, and social with our senior programming. And we're helping people age in place with in-home caregiving and services, like home-delivered meals and transportation.

Our seniors are just one segment of our population that's been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. And it's up to us to protect our whole community. So, when faced with the pandemic, we

prioritized our people and the things they value most — their health, safety, homes, and livelihoods.

Last year, with the first widespread availability of vaccines, we partnered with the Gwinnett County Health Department to open the Gwinnett Place Mall mass vaccination site. Then, we worked with Piedmont Eastside to open another site to enhance access in southern Gwinnett.

To date, more than 1.3 million doses of vaccine have been administered in our county. About 63 percent of residents have received at least one dose and 58 percent are fully vaccinated.

While we're outpacing the state, our vaccination rate lags behind the national average. And that puts our entire community — even the fully vaccinated — at risk.

We have lost too many people to this deadly disease, but our multi-layered efforts are paying off. With the help of federal funding, we've increased access to vaccines through special community events, vaccinating almost 8,000 people.

We will continue doing everything in our power to share the science about these lifesaving shots, put targeted measures in place for specific populations, and remove barriers to vaccination across our community.

But of course, the pandemic has impacted far more than our physical health — it has also taken a toll on our mental health.

About 20 percent of calls for police service involve a mental health or substance use crisis, and for many departments, that demand is growing.

So last year, we launched a Police Mental Health Collaboration pilot in partnership with View Point Health. The pilot pairs a mental health professional with a police officer to respond to incidents in which a person is experiencing a behavioral health crisis. In this year's budget, we allocated funding to expand the co-responder model to all six precincts.

With on-scene behavioral health intervention and follow-up services, we can prevent future incidents from ever happening, making our community safer and improving the lives of the residents in crisis. As this program continues to grow and as we strive to remove stigmas and decriminalize mental illness, our residents will reap the benefits.

It's no secret that we have people who are precariously housed in our county. Everyone deserves a place to go where they feel safe and welcome.

So last year, we opened warming stations at five locations around Gwinnett. When temperatures drop to 35 degrees or below, our stations activate to give residents a place to warm up, eat a meal, and get some much-needed rest. Since the stations first activated in November, we've kept 985 residents out of the cold on frigid nights.

We're also working to increase access to human services. We've allocated \$25 million from the American Rescue Plan to expand OneStop operations in southern Gwinnett and an additional \$30 million in ARPA funds to create a OneStop Gwinnett, which would act as a central hub for residents seeking resources related to shelter, food, employment, mental health, and more.

Our people are the fabric of Gwinnett, and the vibrant connections between us unite our community and create our sense of place.

Our place is more than our well-situated 437-square miles – our epicenter with global reach. Our place is the feeling of belonging... of being welcome among strangers... of access... of safety... and of quality of life.

We work to keep our community safe and clean – somewhere you want to live and raise your family. So we look through the kaleidoscope to see a snapshot of the things that make our community a special place to live, and to shape our vision of Gwinnett's future.

For decades, we've invested in sustainable practices to ensure we're leaving behind a place where our children and grandchildren can thrive. Safeguarding our environment is an essential service.

In 2018, we were the first county to achieve Platinum certification from the Atlanta Regional Commission's Green Communities Program. Since then, we've continued to invest in ways to reduce our environmental impact and help our residents do the same, most recently with programs that help them dispose of hard-to-recycle plastics and glass.

We've gone a step further to formalize and enhance our sustainable practices. Last year, we formed a Sustainability Commission made up of skilled, passionate residents. This group is working alongside staff to evaluate our current practices and see where we can be intentional about creating a more sustainable future.

We also have Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful, and our dedicated Code Enforcement Staff working daily to make Gwinnett cleaner, greener, and a more livable community. We want to ensure your neighborhood, workplace, and even your daily commute are places you can be proud of.

Safety is another essential facet of a great place to live.

One in three respondents in the Atlanta Regional Commission's Metro Atlanta Speaks survey listed crime as the biggest challenge facing metro Atlanta. Fortunately, crime rates in Gwinnett are low compared to counties as large as ours, and they keep dropping.

In 2020, property crime rates fell a staggering 22.5 percent, which coincided with people staying home during the early days of the pandemic. As we took strides toward normalcy last year, however, the rates didn't pick back up... they actually dropped another 2.5 percent.

And while violent crime rose across the nation and certain categories increased within Gwinnett, overall violent crime rates dropped in our county in both 2020 and 2021.

By tackling root causes and building strong relationships between our public safety officers and our residents, we will continue to build safer, more stable communities. And we will ensure that our law enforcement officials are equipped with the tools and resources they need to effectively protect and serve our communities.

Our population is seeking amenities that make Gwinnett feel like home. And as a county government, we have an obligation to ensure the services we provide meet their needs and wants and allow private sector investments to fill in the rest.

Housing has been a challenge throughout our country's history, from overcrowding to affordability to homelessness. In recent years, like many of our challenges, these issues have only grown more prominent.

We embarked on a study to determine the county's housing challenges and to help us shape a path forward. What we've learned so far is that the growth of our housing supply has slowed to a crawl; that our existing housing supply is aging; that the cost to purchase or rent a home has dramatically increased; and that no new homes were built at a cost that would be considered "affordable" to the third of our households that earn less than \$50,000 a year.

We will be instituting a working group to analyze the data and review recommendations to help us develop a comprehensive plan that promotes housing development, increases affordability, and preserves and maintains naturally occurring affordable housing.

In the short term, we've developed programs to keep people stably housed, despite hardships related to COVID-19.

Last spring, our successful rental assistance program evolved into Project RESET 2.0, so far providing \$46 million in rent and utility assistance to more than 4,800 households using federal funds. I'm proud to say that the program was recognized by the US Treasury as a model for other local governments across the country.

Throughout the challenges of the pandemic, we're still making progress for our residents. And that Gwinnett Standard I mentioned last year... well, it's still flying high.

We love the community and sense of place we have today, but we have to prepare for the changes to our county that will come along with our inevitable growth.

We're tackling a familiar issue — one you heard multiple people reference as a challenge in the video at the start of my speech — transit and transportation.

Our large and growing population means more vehicles on our already-busy roads. Our budget this year incorporates some immediate solutions, allocating \$2 million for a multi-year expansion of the Gwinnett County Transit system that will bring new routes to a wider area of the county, including microtransit.

In January, we selected a firm to analyze current conditions and identify needs and opportunities for Gwinnett's transit system. The 18-month study will result in a new plan to increase the accessibility, connectivity, and mobility of transit throughout Gwinnett and the region. And we're embarking on an update to our Comprehensive Transportation Plan to ensure that our roads, transit routes, bicycle amenities, and pedestrian facilities are ample, modern, and useful.

We're also making unprecedented efforts to ensure that development around the county centers our people and place.

For years, Gwinnett Place Mall has fallen behind the vibrant and diverse business district that surrounds it. That's why the Board of Commissioners approved the purchase of the mall.

We're using a community-driven process to reclaim, reimagine, and reconnect Gwinnett Place Mall to its surrounding community. The site's future will be guided by equity and informed by community feedback.

And the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District will build on our findings to develop the Gwinnett Place Mall Site Revitalization Strategy — an implementation playbook to help attract

private investment and ensure the end result of this project enriches the surrounding community and provides a significant return on our investment.

We're grateful for the partnership and dedication of our six CIDs, which work to preserve and enhance Gwinnett's sense of place.

Another exciting project in the works is The Water Tower at Gwinnett, a county initiative to support applied research, innovation, workforce development, and community engagement in the water sector. The Water Tower opens later this month and will draw in national engineering and consulting firms from around the world.

Through all of this new development, we're also working to preserve and maintain our existing assets. Gwinnett County has \$10 billion in capital assets of all shapes and sizes that include roads, parks, water treatment plants, police precincts, fire stations, and more.

About 28 percent of our facilities are more than 30 years old, so we're constantly evaluating our assets to maintain them and extend their useful life. These evaluations also help us identify when something needs to be replaced... and when we need to expand capacity to keep up with our growing population.

Investing in our infrastructure is necessary to maintain the Gwinnett Standard, and we're grateful to our voters, who have repeatedly approved the Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax that helps us do just that. Thanks to SPLOST, we've been able to build, maintain, and replace our capital assets when needed. Some of our recently opened SPLOST projects have been new libraries in Duluth and Norcross... and now we're building one in Snellville, all in partnership with our cities.

I truly love the relationship we have with each of our 16 cities. Our mutual trust and comfortable collaboration allows us to provide the highest quality of services to our residents.

The trust of our residents and cities is critical to our success... and helps answer one burning question – why Gwinnett?

What makes this the perfect place for cutting-edge development?

Our convenient location, skilled and educated workforce, and history of innovation certainly contribute. And so does our long history of fiscal responsibility – evidenced by our decades-long AAA/Aaa credit rating – and our consistently strong and vibrant economy. That makes businesses choose Gwinnett to plant their roots and build their legacies.

Last year, thanks to Partnership Gwinnett, companies brought more than \$1.6 billion in investments to the county. We also gained almost 3,000 new jobs – and they're high quality, high wage careers that people want. But, like communities around the country, we've felt the impact of pandemic-related labor challenges. So attracting quality jobs is one way we've been able to speed up our pandemic recovery.

With all of our projected growth and development also comes the need to preserve Gwinnett's natural beauty. Our recently adopted Parks Master Plan establishes a long-range vision for advancing parks and recreational resources over the next decade and beyond.

Through community input during the plan's development, we found out some great things that you heard echoed in the video earlier – that people like our diverse and widespread facilities and are

satisfied with our programming. We found that people are invested in the conservation of greenspace and our environment, and that they want parks and recreation close to home.

Our residents – no matter their socioeconomic status or location within the county – deserve access to high quality recreational facilities. By adding amenities like pocket parks and trails in underserved areas, we can ensure equitable access to these natural resource areas. Our residents want balance between growth and preservation, and we're listening.

Our work to continually improve services and quality of life is an example of the Gwinnett Standard. It showcases our promise – to support our vibrantly connected community by delivering superior services.

The center of our kaleidoscope is a visual cue for our employees each day when they come to work and see the logo on our buildings, uniforms, and vehicles. It's a unifying crest – a symbol of our integrity and a token of our unwavering mission to make life better for the people of Gwinnett.

We hope that it becomes a cue for our residents, too. When they see the crest, we want them to feel safe, protected, and included. We want them to know the person behind the desk, wearing that uniform, or driving that vehicle has their best interests at heart. So we work to set and raise the Gwinnett Standard with our services.

But we don't expect you to trust us just because we've won awards and gotten recognition. We work to earn your trust, by being responsible stewards of County resources and your hard-earned tax dollars.

That's part of the reason Gwinnett shines a light on our budget process each year. We publish our departments' and elected officials' budget requests, and we give residents a seat at the table as Citizen Budget Reviewers. Through this process, they're able to review requests and share feedback from their perspective. We also give *all residents* a chance to review the proposed budget and share comments.

Another way we're upholding the Gwinnett Standard for transparency and quality is by undergoing an Operational Performance Assessment. The assessment will analyze what's working well and evaluate what could be better, more efficient, and more effective.

We promise to use your tax dollars wisely and transparently, to be good stewards of our natural resources, and to prioritize our people and sense of place in all that we do.

Our employees are the ones who carry out those duties... who work with residents every day.

They have served admirably throughout the pandemic, in many circumstances putting themselves at risk to ensure our residents have essential services like fire protection and drinking water.

The national labor market challenges have also impacted our County workforce. Our vacancy rate is almost 15 percent, which means we're relying on fewer employees to do more.

So while we continue to recruit, we're also investing in our workforce with incentives like last year's market adjustment for all employees and an additional increase for first responders. We've also given employees access to mental health and weight loss apps – and skills development tools like LinkedIn Learning.

I can't tell you how proud I am of this tremendous administration, under the leadership of County Administrator Glenn Stephens. As an organization, we promise to lead with our vision to ensure that Gwinnett is the preferred community where everyone thrives.

And our promise extends far beyond our workforce. It means that we will work to create an environment where residents have every opportunity to learn, grow, advance, and flourish. A growing and dynamic community also needs new energy, new ideas, and new businesses.

In January, we opened the Gwinnett Entrepreneur Center – an incubator to mentor and connect entrepreneurs to resources to help them succeed. Sponsored by the County and Georgia Gwinnett College, the center offers coworking and office space, classes, workshops, business coaching, and peer learning.

The first group of entrepreneurs – representing a range of industries and backgrounds – are already hard at work getting their businesses off the ground. We're hopeful that by helping new businesses flourish, they will create jobs, boost revitalization, broaden the tax base, and mentor other new businesses.

Our business community is dynamic and strong, thanks in no small part to the chambers of commerce that operate in this community from the Gwinnett Chamber to specialized groups that represent our vibrant and diverse businesses.

Our small but mighty Economic Development team is also working hard to better support small and minority-owned businesses by providing access to capital, content and connections. With the addition of the Entrepreneur Center and resources from the county, Gwinnett will continue to be a place that fosters economic growth and prosperity for all.

So, what's most important?

Some would say health... some the economy... still others equity, redevelopment, safety, or traffic... and some would have an idea none of us in this room has even thought of.

New challenges and demands pop up daily. Priorities compete for funding, resources, and human capital. No two people have the same perspective, or the exact same ideas about how to make progress. Nonetheless, we strive to meet each day with care and compassion.

Today, I'd like to celebrate three groups that did just that, looking through the kaleidoscope to support the people, place, and promise of Gwinnett. And for the first time, I'm going to present the Standard Bearer Awards.

Facing new and familiar challenges, these groups made outstanding efforts to support our community. They are examples of the Gwinnett Standard – and always strive to do better for those around them.

There are three categories representing the interlocking aspects of Gwinnett's kaleidoscope. After I announce the winners, I would like for them to all join me on stage to be recognized as a group.

First up – the People category.

This individual puts Gwinnett's people first in everything he does. Just months before the pandemic hit, he launched his business to provide high-quality meals to people facing food

insecurity – not knowing just how critical that service was about to become.

When the pandemic hit, he joined the County government and the public library to expand his services using CARES Act funding, donating meals at drive-up distributions throughout the county.

Since then, he's continued to find new ways to get meals to people who need them. And he's always ready to lend a hand where needed, recently pitching in to provide meals for volunteers at a food distribution event hosted by the Sheriff's Office.

He's said before that helping people is his calling, and it's clear to see that he'll do anything to let 'em eat. Our first Standard Bearer award goes to Chef Hank Reid with Lettum Eat!

Next up, we have the Place category, and I want to recognize a business that truly embraces Gwinnett's unique spirit.

This place of culture and commerce shows time and time again how much its leadership cares about uplifting the community that surrounds it. It celebrates our people and provides a warm, inclusive environment where they can feel supported, safe, and at home.

During our Finish Strong Together vaccine event last year, it was a natural choice as a location for one of the sites. During the three-day event, 1,800 people chose to receive their COVID-19 vaccine onsite – including more than 500 people who received their first dose.

At the end of 2021, Comcast chose the location as the newest home for its Internet Essentials program and Lift Zone to help facilitate digital literacy and academic achievement.

This vibrant community center helps its businesses and visitors prosper. The 2022 Standard Bearer Award in the Place category goes to Plaza Las Americas!

Last, but certainly not least, the Promise award celebrates a group that has kept its promise to our community and has lifted the Gwinnett Standard high.

This small, hardworking group was dealt a tremendous task in the face of COVID-19. Through late nights and weekends, this group of County employees fully committed themselves to the residents and businesses of Gwinnett.

This team jumped to action to use federal funding in the most efficient and effective way, keeping our first responders equipped with PPE; getting funding to local businesses in need; helping our leadership set up our emergency rental assistance programs; and procuring gift cards for our vaccine incentive events. And that's just a fragment of the projects they've been tasked with.

Despite their ever-increasing workload this group is consistently willing and eager to help fellow employees and members of the community.

The 2022 Standard Bearer Award in the Promise category goes to the Gwinnett County Grants Division under the leadership of Grants Director Shannon Candler.

Now, it's my pleasure to invite Chef Hank, Arturo Adonay from Plaza Las Americas, and the Gwinnett County Grants Division to the stage to be recognized. Let's give these Standard Bearers one more round of applause!

Thank you – each of you – for your time, effort, and dedication to Gwinnett County. These groups truly enrich this community and contribute to the success of our future. I'm so grateful for what they do now and all that they'll do in the future.

So, now that we've recognized some of our Standard Bearers, I want to zoom out.

At the start of my speech, we heard from residents like you. We heard what you love about Gwinnett, what needs work, and how you see the future of our community. The responses reflect the three unique and unbreakable facets that make up our kaleidoscope lens – our people, place, and promise.

Through the kaleidoscope, we see a future where services are high-quality, efficient, and affordable... where development is equitable, and where safe and comfortable places to live, work, and play are accessible to all... where people are valued and included... and where they have the resources they need.

Our dynamic people and place will continue to evolve, bringing everchanging possibilities... and through it all, we're counting on community leaders like you to help us uplift our vibrant people and keep Gwinnett the preferred community where everyone thrives.

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