

2023 State of the County Address
Serving with Intention – Chairwoman Nicole L. Hendrickson
As prepared for delivery March 2, 2023

Good morning!

I'd first like to thank Nick and the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce, Michael and the Council for Quality Growth, and Pastor VanderWal and the entire staff here at 12Stone. What an asset we have in the people who make this event possible each year.

I'd also like to recognize my partners in public service on the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners — Kirkland Carden, Ben Ku, Jasper Watkins III, and Matthew Holtkamp. Gwinnett residents can rest assured that they're represented by people who believe in this community and work together to build on our strong foundation.

Thank you to my predecessors and former commissioners here with us today. And to my esteemed colleagues serving countywide, local mayors, city councilmembers, constitutional officers, and regional peers — thank you for your work on behalf of our residents and the region. I'm humbled and grateful for your presence and continued partnership.

Lastly, I brought my favorite guys along — my amazing husband Keverne and my favorite son Kaden, my two biggest supporters.

When I first took this stage three years ago, I stood here with profound optimism for a Gwinnett that would not only withstand, but also grow through whatever came next. Today, I can confidently say that the state of Gwinnett County is stronger than ever.

I'm proud to lead a remarkable team of 5,000 public servants who wake up each day to make our incredible community better, safer, and more capable.

Just like our employees, you are each driven by everyday choices that impact your family, friends, and community. Your choices led you to move here and stay here, to seek out your current position, and to make the connections you've built.

The choices of almost a million people — and more over the years — created Gwinnett's steady past, its vibrant present, and its promising future. And whether subconscious or not, every decision we make is guided by intention — the choice to proactively solve a problem, to ask if someone needs help, to put in the extra effort.

It's the small, yet intentional acts of bravery, kindness, and support that fuel the Gwinnett spirit.

This is serving with intention.

In Gwinnett, our intention is woven through the 437 square miles of our county and carried forward by a million people who call our boundaries home.

Every person leads in some way. Whether you volunteered to coach your child's little league team or motivated a group of neighbors to make meaningful change in your community, you saw a need for leadership and took the initiative to fill that need.

Leadership must be intentional to achieve its goals.

For decades, Gwinnett County Government has been intentional about our approach to ensuring the stability and strength of our county. When we make decisions that will impact our residents, businesses, and visitors, we don't do so lightly — and that intentionality has been the key to establishing ourselves as leaders in the region and beyond on topics like water quality.

Water is the center of economic and social development around the world, and it's foundational to our health and our ability to grow. By maintaining the highest standards in water quality, Gwinnett County affirms its commitment to protecting the environment, securing public health, and sustaining a vibrant economy.

In leading the way for future growth, Gwinnett signed a historic water storage agreement with the state of Georgia. The agreement secures Lake Lanier as the County's water supply for the next 30 years, setting our county on the right path for continued success.

Gwinnett is known for innovation in the water sector, and we recently earned recognition for having the best tasting water in the state. We're proud of the decades of work that led us to achieve that title, and we're working to ensure that we'll continue to lead in this sector.

In 2022, we opened The Water Tower, a public-private partnership to pursue technological advancement across the water industry. It offers a mix of research, demonstrations, training, and public outreach facilities, which we'll use to solve problems through applied research and development.

One of those industry-wide problems is staffing. Many water utilities are estimated to lose up to half of their operations staff in the next 5 to 10 years. To address this need, The Water Tower launched a program to train existing, and attract new water and wastewater operators. This program is intended to support not only Gwinnett's continued success in the water industry, but the success of the industry as a whole.

Through partnerships, Gwinnett has continued to push into uncharted territories to keep our promise to Gwinnett residents. Our public-private partnerships have kept Gwinnett's economy strong despite global economic uncertainty.

At just 2.3 percent, our unemployment rate remains lower than state and national averages — and Gwinnett is a fantastic place to do business.

Partnership Gwinnett reports that last year, Gwinnett saw 15 company expansions, 11 relocations, and more than 3,800 high-paying new jobs. Last year, Intuitive's \$500 million expansion earned statewide recognition as the Large Deal of the Year from the Georgia Economic Development Association. Intuitive's expansion is an example of our long-standing collaborative approach to economic development. I'd like to thank Partnership Gwinnett, the city of Peachtree Corners, our Economic Development Team, and our state partners for this significant achievement.

2022 was also a big year for entertainment and tourism in Gwinnett. We watched as the Exchange at Gwinnett expanded its footprint with new businesses and leisure activities for

people from all walks of life, and even during renovations, which were recently completed, the Gas South District saw its best financial year in its 30-year history.

Gwinnett's social scene is on the rise along with our small businesses.

Early last year, we opened the Gwinnett Entrepreneur Center alongside our partners at Georgia Gwinnett College, creating a space for small business leaders to receive customized mentorship, coworking space, and tools to help their businesses succeed.

I want to give you an example of the kind of results we're seeing.

Jennifer Hong is part of our inaugural group of members who entered the Entrepreneur Center last year. She applied to the center to learn how to grow and scale her medical billing and credentialing business, Eli Medical. Access to the center provided Jennifer with peer-to-peer learning opportunities and office space to grow her staff. With intentional coaching and guidance, Jennifer expanded her client base and learned how to navigate obstacles. Now, a little more than a year later, she's making remarkable strides in another venture — opening her first pharmacy in Gwinnett. We're so excited to see her graduate later this year with two successful business ventures under her belt.

I'm proud to say that the center's 25 members have already created 47 jobs. The center is also reaching beyond its members to provide workshops and networking opportunities to entrepreneurs throughout the region. There has never been a better time to be an entrepreneur in Gwinnett! We will continue to do everything possible to help our small businesses thrive.

It's also critical that we provide support for those who lead the way for others — which is why last year was a pivotal turning point for how we support Gwinnett's veterans.

In opening the County's first Veteran and Family Services office, we've made an intentional investment in ensuring our veteran population is connected to the resources they need. This effort was inspired by retired Army Lieutenant Colonel and District 3 Commissioner Jasper Watkins, who saw a need in our community and committed himself to addressing it. Funded by the American Rescue Plan, the office reduces the burden on our veterans and their families by connecting them to local, state, and federal resources.

Today, veterans like Wesley Houx-Garcia can get connected to the critical resources they deserve. A Navy veteran, Wesley first visited the Veteran and Family Services office shortly after it opened in October. At the time, he was experiencing income issues due to a service-related disability that left him unable to hold a regular, full-time position. Our community navigators worked with Wesley to connect him with local resources, including those offered by Disabled American Veterans Chapter 90. Our community navigators also worked to make sure his family was taken care of throughout the holiday season.

We're ensuring care and support are available to all residents through the fiscally sound and thoughtful use of federal funds granted to the County. In late summer, we teamed up with United Way of Greater Atlanta in Gwinnett to award more than \$4 million of ARPA funding to nonprofit agencies providing critical services in Gwinnett. The 50 nonprofits selected to receive these funds tackle some of our most critical community needs — like childcare, food insecurity, and housing.

We lead by taking time to understand our community's needs, clearly establishing our intent, and developing holistic strategies to bring our plans to life.

As our population grows, it's imperative that we maintain the excellent quality of life Gwinnett is known for while also ensuring everyone who wants to call Gwinnett home has a place to live.

Last year, we made the conscious decision to elevate our actions around affordable housing after the conclusion of our Housing Study. In the fall, we created a new Housing and Community Development Division led by a familiar face — former HomeFirst Gwinnett Director Matt Elder. The division administers federal funds, supports our homeless population, and ensures residents have pathways to stable housing and can afford to stay housed.

Gwinnett was also selected by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and UGA to take part in the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing — which will help us create and launch a locally based plan to meet our housing needs. And over the next few years, in partnership with Gwinnett Housing Corporation and Gwinnett/Walton Habitat for Humanity, we will be able to provide 390 affordable low-income housing units.

But our work doesn't stop there.

As we plan for the future, we're also using federal funds to address urgent needs with a new shelter in Gwinnett. We'll convert a multi-family building into shelter units to serve adult men and couples with no children.

Everyone deserves a safe place to live, no matter their economic situation or what corner of our community they live in. Housing is a complicated and essential need, and our multi-pronged efforts in this area will continue to evolve with the changing needs of our residents.

We're tackling new and familiar issues like this one, all while maintaining the long-standing trust of our residents when it comes to their tax dollars.

Since 1997, we've maintained our AAA/Aaa bond rating from all three credit rating agencies — but it's not just about whether these agencies trust our fiscal soundness. We have to earn the trust of our residents, too.

In November, voters chose to renew our one-cent Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax, which will officially begin collections on April 1 — the day after our 2017 SPLOST program expires.

The 2023 SPLOST program is expected to raise \$1.35 billion over the next six years to help the County and our 16 cities fund critical capital projects like road improvements, public safety facilities, and park expansions, to name a few.

At the end of the day, SPLOST helps the County maintain the quality of life that our residents have come to expect. They expect that because we've led the way to address challenges in the past, and we've made a promise to act with intention to create a better Gwinnett.

Careful, well-thought-out actions add up to something bigger.

In January, we moved one step closer to ensuring mobility for all by approving the expansion of key microtransit and local service routes. These new routes enhance connectivity and reliability in historically underserved areas of our county. Good public transit meets people where they are, so we're being intentional about building key transit corridors that will better connect our residents and visitors to the places they need to go.

We also unveiled the new name and look for Gwinnett County Transit — Ride Gwinnett. Not only does it tell you what to do, but this new name and look connects with Gwinnett County's brand to show riders that they can expect the same great service they get from their County government in their local transit.

It's also intended to encourage a new wave of riders. We want Ride Gwinnett to be the mobility option of choice. Keep an eye out for the newly branded buses during your daily commute and check the route schedules to see how you can use our service.

This year's budget also focuses on enhancing recreational services in south Gwinnett. We'll be expanding Lenora Park Gym into a community recreation center to offer more programming and community space, and we'll be breaking ground soon on a community resource hub in Centerville. These two community hubs will aid in placemaking and increase access to services for residents in the south side of the county.

For Gwinnett to continue to thrive, safety is paramount — and we believe that public safety must be viewed holistically.

While crime is trending down in Gwinnett, we recognize that the stories that capture headlines are real, and that the threat of gun violence is one we can't take seriously enough.

Too often, we hear about heartbreaking losses that reverberate throughout our community. Last year, one of those losses hit very close to home. In December, Senior Correctional Officer Scott Riner was shot and killed while arriving to work. No family should ever have to face this kind of devastating and senseless loss.

Please join me in a moment of silence as we remember.

[Moment of silence]

We continue to wrap our arms around his family and loved ones as we celebrate his legacy.

I'm grateful to the Gwinnett Police Department for their quick work to apprehend and charge the suspect in this crime.

Our police department uses forethought and data to tackle criminal activity. Through the Gwinnett Safe Communities program, we leverage our Situational Awareness and Crime Response Center to work with community stakeholders who provide access to cameras, license plate readers, and other technology. Early and accessible information leads to more efficient and effective response.

Our Police Department is also leveraging technology to reduce and respond to gun violence. When a gun-related crime is committed in Gwinnett, our Gun Crimes Unit uses ballistic science

to connect shell casings from scenes to guns possessed by suspects, and they enter the information into a national network to make connections with other crimes around the country. I'm proud of this thoughtful and data-driven approach.

As we seek practical solutions to gun violence, we're also working to break the cycle of recidivism through initiatives like the Rehabilitation Enables Dreams program. RED is a nonprofit restorative justice organization dedicated to keeping first-time non-violent offenders out of the criminal justice system by addressing social determinants of health. Our District Attorney's office has partnered with RED to offer programming that enhances the social, civic, and financial literacy of individuals referred to court. In 2022, the program successfully graduated its inaugural class, and these individuals now get a second chance in life.

Communities that are safe — where people's needs are met — are the communities that attract economic prosperity, keep residents healthy and happy, and foster innovation.

Late last year, I joined federal, state, and local partners to break ground on the Rowen knowledge community — another gleaming example of intentional collaboration that will unlock opportunity for Gwinnett and beyond. Rowen will be home to innovation in the agricultural, environmental, and medical fields. From this initial phase, Rowen is prioritizing economic equity, pursuing a small-, women-, and minority-owned business enterprise goal of 30 percent for all of its contracting.

Rowen is just one of the many economic development initiatives underway to set us up for a thriving future.

Across the board, our progress would not be possible without a dedicated workforce, which is why County leadership has continually prioritized investment in our employees — the backbone of County government. We need people who care passionately about their jobs — who understand the County's vision and go about their daily duties with intention. So, we must support our people to ensure they can focus on supporting our community.

As the market continues to tighten, Gwinnett has authorized several market adjustments to support employees' financial well-being with additional adjustments for public safety employees to support retention in those critical and hard-to-fill areas.

Gwinnett looks to the holistic well-being of its employees. In 2022, we established parental leave and enhanced family planning benefits to ensure our employees find satisfaction and fulfillment at home as well as at work. Last year, we also added Juneteenth as a paid holiday to acknowledge its importance to our vibrant and diverse workforce. As a good friend of mine always says, "Diversity is our strength, and inclusivity is our superpower."

As a welcoming community, it's incumbent upon us to ensure our workforce is uniquely positioned to confidently serve residents whose first language is not English, which is why we're investing in language learning for our employees. Investing in our people and furthering the capabilities of our County government is another way we're taking action to remove barriers and expand opportunity today and tomorrow.

When you think about your intentions for your future, what do you think of? Maybe it's goals for your family? Your health? Your career? Do you know what it will take to achieve your dreams? It'll take time, resources, and support from those around you. And it will take deliberate effort. In everything we do, we must strive to achieve our goals with focus, logic, inclusion, and fairness.

As a forward-thinking and agile government, that means setting goals for our future that will enhance life for those that call our community home — and setting the stage to achieve those goals through research, planning, and collaboration.

For more than a decade, the County has organized its sustainability efforts through a program called Sustainable Gwinnett. Sustainable Gwinnett means more than lofty buzzwords. Many of our initiatives happened organically — the result of an idea to save money or reduce our environmental impact.

We've continued to build upon those good ideas over the years. For the second time, we certified Platinum — the highest level in the Atlanta Regional Commission's Green Communities Program. But as we move forward, we strive to achieve even bolder results, which is why — at the recommendation of the County's new Sustainability Commission — we'll soon be hiring a dedicated Sustainability Officer. Finding the right person for this unique role will position Gwinnett as a leader in Environmental Sustainability — and it will allow us to be laser-focused on implementing new tactics and motivating Gwinnett residents, employees, and stakeholders to be active participants in our sustainability priorities.

Investing in our environment isn't just practical — it's vital to our future — and we know sustainability is about more than environmental factors. It's about building resilience among our communities.

Gwinnett last conducted a full-scale human services needs assessment in 1991. That doesn't mean that we haven't continued to react to our community's evolving needs, but we all know how much Gwinnett has changed in the last 30-plus years, so, it does mean we're well overdue for a formal evaluation to understand how our current offerings line up with what our community truly needs. The needs assessment will give us the backing necessary to affirm or update our current practices and future plans.

The well-being of a community can also be measured by the vibrancy of its culture. The County is partnering with Artworks Gwinnett as it embarks on the County's first ever Arts and Creative Economy Master Plan. The goal is to grow creativity and support arts and culture as an engine for the County's prosperity. The plan will provide a roadmap for job creation, talent development, and defining Gwinnett's pathway for regional and national leadership in the arts and culture.

The vibrancy of our people extends beyond arts and culture into every facet of life in the county. In recent months, I've sat down with minority business owners to have tough conversations surrounding the barriers that stand in their way, which is why we're launching a disparity study. The study will help us assess the inequities that exist in our County procurement and contracting — and the ways we can break through them.

Faced with workforce challenges like organizations across the country, we're being intentional about attracting the next generation of County staff and leaders.

This year, we're ramping up for our second Career Starts Here internship program. County departments will again host local high school and college interns to jump-start their careers. Students ages 15 to 21 who need a leg up will participate in workshops and career preparation, followed by an opportunity to explore a career in local government through a paid internship in fields ranging from marketing and management to emergency services and engineering. This

successful program provides valuable workplace experience and helps build interest in local government careers.

Gwinnett's emphasis on youth development is evident and seen through the young people who have participated in our Outreach Programs. Lucero Mendez, a senior at the Gwinnett Online Campus, learned about our Youth Commission program through her district newsletter. And with a passion for local government, she applied. After successfully completing the summer training, she was sworn in as a Gwinnett Youth Commissioner, fully aware that she'd stay engaged and become an ambassador for the County. From there, she participated in the Career Starts Here internship program, where she was placed at the Sheriff's Office as a Community Outreach intern.

In a personal note, Lucero shared that if it was not for the Youth Commission, it would have taken her longer to find her voice. Through the program, she learned what Gwinnett County does for its residents and grew both professionally and personally. Knowing Lucero, I'm confident she would find success in life even without our programs, but I'm proud that we were able to give her the tools she needed to grow and find herself. She's a remarkable example of why the County continues to strategically focus on investing in our young people.

Through our Youth Development Programs, I'm confident I've already met future County leaders — and maybe even future commissioners.

With intentional planning, we will reach our goals and achieve our vision. And that's something we'll have to consider every day, through every choice and action. Serving with intention is a decision we make as a County and as a community.

As we look ahead, we know there's still work to do — but we have proven that we're ready and we can tackle whatever challenges tomorrow brings when we stand together and lead with intention. A spirit of collaboration has always been Gwinnett's secret weapon.

Looking around the room, I see leaders, thinkers, innovators, and implementers.

We have five commissioners, each bringing their diverse experience and talent to the dais, working to take on our biggest challenges. We have 16 wonderful cities, and we continue to work alongside them to improve quality of life for all. From our frontline teams — maintenance crews, law enforcement officers, firefighters, engineers, and more — to our department directors and my valued County leadership team, you all play an integral role in keeping Gwinnett moving. We have local, state, and federal officials, our business leaders, community advocates, nonprofit, academic, and faith institutions, all being intentional about the decisions that will better our communities.

The path to success is understanding your goals and choosing the course of action that you believe will bring them closer. Regardless of your role, each of us is a leader in some way, and leadership carries even more duty to be purposeful in our words and in our actions.

When you arrived this morning, you were asked the question, "What are your intentions for the year?"

When you leave here, I want you to spend just five minutes thinking about the answer to that question. Tomorrow, I'd like you to spend another five minutes thinking about how you can bring your intentions to life. Make it a habit. Our intentions bring about our reality.

We each play many different roles in life, which means we each have endless ways to impact our community. We must lead with the knowledge of our past, act with the purpose of today, and strive for a future we can all be optimistic about.

To serve with intention is to be thoughtful, purposeful, and deliberate in the things that we do and to ensure today's decisions build toward tomorrow's solutions.

I know this sounds like a lot — because it is.

But I'm proud of this community, of the people who for generations have decided to pour immeasurable time and effort into making Gwinnett somewhere we can feel accepted, supported, and safe.

Whether this county is your new home or you have been growing roots here for generations, whether you live north, south, east, or west — this is our county.

And I promise to continue working my hardest every day to make it better for you – for all of us.

Now, it's up to you to do your part and make each day count to ensure each action and decision builds on these efforts.

Today — this very moment — is the time to affirm that you will serve with intention.

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