

**State of Gwinnett County 2012 by Charlotte J. Nash, Chairman
Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners**

As prepared for delivery on February 15, 2012, to Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and Council for Quality Growth

Good afternoon! It's an honor and a privilege to be here today to talk about Gwinnett County. It's also a pleasure, because I love to talk about Gwinnett.

But first, I'd like to thank the Council for Quality Growth and the Chamber of Commerce for sponsoring this event year-after-year, and thanks to all of you for being here.

I also want to ask my fellow commissioners to stand and be recognized for their hard work and active leadership:

- from District One, Shirley Lasseter
- from District Two, Lynette Howard
- from District Three, Mike Beaudreau
- and from District Four, John Heard

It takes all of us working as a team to move the County in the right direction. I appreciate the contributions each of you has made.

Many functions of County government are under the leadership of separately elected officials: Judges, the Sheriff, District Attorney, Solicitor, Tax Commissioner, Clerk of Court. The efforts of these folks and their staffs play a major role in services provided and associated costs.

Would any of these elected County officials who are here, please stand so that we can show our appreciation?

I want to also say thank you to School Board members and Superintendent Wilbanks for leading the Gwinnett County School System to excel year after year. Would you please stand so we can recognize your efforts?

Many mayors, council members, and other officials from the cities in Gwinnett County are here today. Would all the city officials please stand and let us show our appreciation for what you do for your local communities?

Gwinnett has the distinction of having the most cities... 15, soon to be 16... of any county in the state. Thanks to hard work on both sides, though, Gwinnett and its cities are no longer in litigation about the provision and funding of services.

I doubt that any of our State legislators have been able to be here today since the

General Assembly is in session. However, I want to acknowledge the time and energy that they put towards representing us well.

I also want to give a shout-out to those individuals who represent us at the federal level.

Here locally, the commissioners and I could not get a lot done without the support of our staff and employees.

Glenn Stephens, County Administrator, leads these efforts. Glenn, would you stand and be recognized please?

Also, would County department directors and other senior staff stand?

The staff of the Communications Office has worked hard to prepare this presentation, and they are also here today recording so that this event can be shared online and on TVgwinnett with folks unable to attend.

Finally, if you ever call my office, you have likely spoken with Debbie Savage, who does her best to keep me organized.

Debbie, I want to say “thank you” for the support and help you give me every day.

Now, let’s turn to talking about Gwinnett County, our strengths, challenges, plans, accomplishments, and how we all can help.

Gwinnett County has been blessed for decades and has prospered as a result.

We can all name our important advantages:

- Pleasant climate
- Natural beauty
- Transportation networks such as railroads and a robust road system
- Proximity to Hartsfield-Jackson Airport
- Lake Lanier for both water supply and tourism, and
- Benefits like business activity, jobs, and amenities that come with being part of the Atlanta region

These all have created opportunities. But what has put us over the top is visionary leadership supported by good planning, hard work, community collaboration, flexibility, and the willingness to take action.

Gwinnett’s residents and businesses have not been satisfied with just depending on what’s available. Instead, Gwinnett’s leaders have made conscious choices that

contributed to Gwinnett's most attractive traits. Many of you in this room were major players in those decisions, and we all owe you a debt of gratitude.

Time after time, Gwinnett's people have seized opportunities and made the most of them. For example, we chose to build water and wastewater systems that can support future business and residential growth. We wouldn't be where we are today without the benefits of our award-winning water and wastewater systems.

We began investing in a world-class education system decades ago. Now, in addition to Gwinnett County Public Schools, Buford City Schools, and an array of quality private schools, we can boast about Georgia Gwinnett College, Gwinnett Tech, and many other post-secondary educational opportunities.

Our community brought quality health care to Gwinnett through Gwinnett Medical Center, Eastside Medical Center, and many quality private health care networks. More recently, we pulled together to bring open-heart surgery to Gwinnett, which is good for our people and good for the local economy.

Our business communities have also pulled together to create Community Improvement Districts. And our cities are turning their downtowns into more attractive destinations. These investments are already bearing fruit, but the future is even more promising.

We just have to see the opportunities and be ready to take advantage. It's tempting to see nothing but the obvious results of a worldwide economic downturn – vacant businesses and foreclosed homes. It's easy to lose heart. And, I'm not pretending we have no challenges. However, we already have the key to continued prosperity in our hands... building on the firm foundation this community has created to this point.

Don't forget – we still have a record of successes that most areas would envy and because of that, I believe we're positioned for continued success. I know I'm not alone in that conviction – and to prove it, let's look at just a few businesses that have recently decided to invest in Gwinnett...

(VIDEO VIGNETTES)

Take a bow Nick Masino and Partnership Gwinnett.

Thanks to businesses like the ones we just heard from, employment in Gwinnett is up more than two percent* over last year, and unemployment is the lowest of the five core metro counties. Despite continued population growth, more than half of our employed residents work right here in Gwinnett.

There are many reasons why we're so attractive. As already noted, we excel at all the basics – infrastructure, transportation, health care, and education – plus this is one of the best places in the country to conduct business, to raise a family, to retire, and to just plain enjoy life.

So yes – our future looks promising. We're growing. We're diverse. We're attractive. We just have to manage our way through current conditions while preserving our ability to take full advantage of the coming recovery. We all have a role to play in Gwinnett's continued success.

Businesses are an enormous asset to this community because they do so much more than simply supply quality goods and services. Focused by the Chamber of Commerce and a host of more localized business associations, Gwinnett's business community is leading our continued success... growing the local economy and supporting our schools and local governments.

I want you to know that your county government will do its part, too. We'll continue to provide quality services that focus first on our primary responsibilities, but we won't ignore the amenities, like parks and libraries, that voters have approved and that are important to quality of life.

In addition, we will continue to keep a tight rein on the County's financial matters. We know that both services and fiscal responsibility are critical during tough economic times and to future economic development. Part of managing responsibly is to take a realistic look at our current challenges.

We can't ignore our empty homes and businesses. They're not a true measure of our community, since most others are in the same boat. But to move forward, we are addressing our vacancies in several ways.

First of all, we all know that creating new jobs is key to putting income in the hands of potential homebuyers.

The County is working closely with *Partnership Gwinnett* to help attract new employers and new investments, and to work with existing businesses to help them expand here in Gwinnett. You heard directly about some of these successes in our video. We are excited about these and many other job-creating decisions in Gwinnett.

We're also focusing help for selected areas through the Neighborhood Stabilization Program. The County is actually buying foreclosed homes in targeted neighborhoods, fixing them up, and making them available to qualified buyers. Using federal funding, we've acquired and rehabilitated approximately 190 single and multi-family units that

are now homes to 160 families.

While this may seem like a drop in the bucket compared to the overall foreclosure problem, it's providing welcome relief for those communities where homes once stood vacant and decaying.

Our Code Enforcement staff does a great job in tackling the negative effects of vacant and foreclosed properties, despite the hurdles that can exist. However, there are limits to the resources available and the actions that we can take. It can be difficult to simply identify and contact the current owner of a property that needs attention. And... except in very specific circumstances, County resources can't be used to clean up private property. Yet, some property owners are unable or unwilling to address the problems on their property.

To combat decline in properties and neighborhoods, we need help from residents and the private sector.

With this in mind, I'm pleased to announce the formation of the **Operation Good Neighbor** program. This program is intended to address issues that the County cannot handle directly by pulling together and organizing volunteer efforts from nonprofit organizations, businesses, the faith community, homeowners associations, and neighbors themselves. I hope that members of the real estate and banking industries will add their expertise as well.

More details will be coming soon, but I can say that Gwinnett Clean and Beautiful has signed on to lead the way for other organizations. And... we are looking for pilot projects... consider what you can do to fix up Gwinnett.

It's no secret – we haven't issued many building permits over the past few years...but I'm beginning to see signs that situation may soon turn around. Despite the staffing cuts made in the Development and Inspections staff as construction came to a halt, we have kept in place a core of experienced staff. We will be ready when construction begins to recover.

The County will also keep providing top-quality public safety and justice services because that's what our residents and businesses demand and deserve... and solid public safety also helps attract new businesses and new employees.

To move ahead, we must maintain existing infrastructure and preserve services like parks and libraries that make Gwinnett a great place to be. But with a declining tax digest, we face a tough balancing act. Less revenue for services means we must prioritize and continue to innovate.

In developing the County's budget for 2012, it was clear that some of our service levels are falling behind our strategic plans. However, we know residents and businesses are struggling to make ends meet... and we recognize that it is not a time to increase taxes. So, we are making do in County government, just as you have been making do in your businesses and homes. For County government, this means postponing many projects and improvements.

Looking to the future, though, we have to keep in mind the need for new facilities like fire stations and police precincts, and the staffing to support those operations.

By the way, the County's fire protection services were recently evaluated by the Insurance Services Office, or ISO. These ratings are used by insurance companies in setting premiums. We maintained a rating of 4, and were just a few points shy of a better rating of 3 thanks to the addition of stations, equipment and staffing that has occurred since the last rating in the late 1990s.

Our rating was also helped by the creative cross-training of staff – each member is trained to fight fires and handle medical emergencies. In addition, an excellent water system and outstanding 911 center were important. Congratulations to Chief Myers and the entire Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services!

For all County operations, we're still looking for more cost-cutting measures that have the least impact on residents, businesses, and visitors. Please be patient when you see the effects of our cost-cutting. Lines may be a little longer, and some facilities may have to wait for a fresh coat of paint. We are stretching our dollars in some areas so that we can fund critical and mandatory functions.

And yet, if we defer repairs too long, we know we'll create an even higher cost down the road. So you can expect your County Government to look closely at where we need to invest... what we need to cut... what we need to defer... and how we can operate more efficiently.

We're looking very closely at capital projects. Most that increase operating costs are being deferred, and we are focusing on projects like road and building rehab that can reduce future operating costs.

A possible silver lining to the downturn is that the County organization is leaner and more innovative. I commend our County officials and staff for their many ideas that are now helping us do more with less.

I can't resist giving a few examples.

How about a cool one million dollars each year in savings on energy cost at the F. Wayne Hill Water Resources Center? We are capturing methane gas from the treatment process and using it to generate heat and electricity for plant operations.

Based on energy audits of all our buildings, we are making improvements and retrofits – and we'll recoup the cost back in energy savings of over \$200,000 every year.

We upgraded our computer systems to make a wide variety of efficiency improvements possible, like online services and mobile ticketing technology.

We are also looking to Gwinnett residents for help.

As planned last year, we're rolling out an aggressive new volunteer program... to give every resident an opportunity to give back to our community in a meaningful way... to gain valuable experience... and to help us keep expenses down.

Please visit our website at gwinnettcountry.com to learn more about volunteer opportunities.

Last year, volunteers donated 471,000 valuable hours, which gets us well on our way to our goal of achieving 1 million hours by 2015.

Our new volunteers will supplement our talented and dedicated County government workforce... and I really can't say enough about our employees.

These are people who most of us take for granted every day. Some are highly visible, others are behind the scenes – but they all work together to keep our community safe, clean, efficient, and livable.

I believe Gwinnett County does a great job of providing quality services... and at a good value.

A typical homeowner pays the County about \$2.50 per day in property taxes for county government services. Three-quarters of that – or almost \$1.90 per day – pays for public safety and courts. The other 60 cents per day covers all the other property tax-funded county services combined.

We have a new feature on our website where you can see exactly where your own property taxes go. In the "Your Money" section, look for our new property tax calculator. Just enter the address of your home or business and the calculator will show your most recent property tax bill and where each dollar went in the County budget.

Before I wrap up, I owe you an update on last year's accomplishments and our plans for this year and beyond. You'll find a handout at your chair that lists several of last year's accomplishments.

We tend to focus on new initiatives and programs, but County government's real job is to ensure that the myriad details related to its basic functions are handled in a way that is taken for granted.

When you turn on your tap, you don't have to think much about how the water got there... or what happens after it goes down the drain. But our folks in water resources think about it a lot. Last year, the department produced 27 billion gallons of safe, reliable drinking water and treated 18 billion gallons of wastewater.

To deliver the water to your home or business, they also maintained over 3,400 miles of water mains. If laid end to end, the pipes would stretch all the way from Miami, Florida, to Vancouver, British Columbia.

And while on the topic of critical infrastructure, our transportation staff maintained 675 traffic signals and more than 2,700 miles of roads – or roughly the distance from Savannah to San Francisco.

Our network of roads is important to our public safety officers who need to get to emergencies quickly.

In 2011, our fire and emergency services department responded to over 64,000 fire and medical calls while our police officers answered almost 900,000 calls for service. That's one call about every 35 seconds.

Our parks and library systems contribute a great deal to our quality of life. Patrons of the Gwinnett County Public Library checked out 7.7 million books and material in 2011 – the largest circulation in the state and an increase of 11 percent compared to the year before.

Parks and recreation served nearly 80,000 people through a variety of classes, programs, and events while even more just enjoyed a trip to one of our award-winning parks.

2011 was a tight budget year, so new initiatives and projects were limited. Even so, we did move forward on several fronts:

- Gwinnett DOT opened the third section of the Sugarloaf Parkway Extension and we're working now to connect it to State Route 316 at Dacula

- Water Resources is upgrading and modernizing several water reclamation plants, which allows us to close several smaller, less-efficient ones
- We're working on traffic-signal timing... installing traffic cameras and real-time remote signal controls from our Traffic Center... and the ongoing widening, paving, road alignment, sidewalks, and turn lane projects that are making our roads safer and more pedestrian-friendly
- We completed major renovations at Rhodes Jordan Park in Lawrenceville... almost... there's still a new soccer complex coming this spring. By the way, Rhodes Jordan Park is a great example of a long-term partnership between the City of Lawrenceville and Gwinnett County. The City owns the original park property and the County operates it under a long-term lease
- We also renovated the Bethesda Park Senior Center... Collins Hill and Mountain Park Aquatic Centers... and Vines Park renovations are happening now
- And we've got expansion projects underway at Rabbit Hill Park, Harbins Park, and the Ivy Creek Greenway

Our service delivery agreement with all 15 cities, or the lack of an agreement at all – has prompted much discussion over the past few years.

I cannot tell you how happy I am that the cities and the County last week approved the settlement of this issue, followed a day later by the Judge's approval of the consent order jointly proposed by all the parties.

Am I thrilled with all aspects of the settlement? Of course not, but our decision to settle was the only responsible action to take. Otherwise, we were faced with either the horrendous impacts of the Judge's Order issued in September of last year or the prolonged uncertainty and friction of the appeal process. Now, we all can focus on the real work that needs to be done without the distraction of the dispute.

Last summer, the Board passed two measures intended to address lack of public confidence.

First, we adopted a new land acquisition policy that clearly outlines strict procedures to follow. It holds the Board and County staff accountable for our actions – and was the right thing to do.

Later in the year, we adopted a new Code of Ethics that establishes ethical standards of conduct for all elected officials and County employees.

As we enter 2012, we are confident that these new policies address concerns brought up by the Grand Jury and our constituents... and set a course for accountability and public trust.

I'm also delighted to say that we passed a balanced budget this year at our first meeting of the year – one that did not depend on drawing from reserves or making additional cuts in service during 2012.

We're still among the three dozen or so counties – out of more than three thousand in America – with prized triple-AAA credit ratings that help keep our borrowing costs low.

We've preserved core services... and maintained park and library access... complied with all new state and federal mandates, but otherwise added no new or expanded services... no new positions... and no pay raises. And we will continue reducing costs and streamlining our operations.

I owe a debt of gratitude to David Crews, Norwood Davis, Lois Love, Laurie McClain, and Herman Pennamon. I'd like these folks to stand up if you're here. They are the five individuals who served on my budget review committee alongside County staff. After long hours spent reviewing the needs of every department while balancing projected revenues and expenses, their hard work paid off.

I also appreciate all of the elected officials and department heads for voluntarily trimming their funding requests and constantly seeking more efficient ways of doing business.

I hope **you'll** help us achieve new milestones in 2012.

It's an important year for every community in America... because this year we will vote for a president and other government officials – including many here in Georgia and right here in Gwinnett County.

The referendum on a regional sales tax for transportation will be on the July 31 ballot... I won't tell you how to vote, but I ask that you take a look at the proposed projects and make your decision.

Please do your part – learn about the candidates and referendum proposal... then vote.

Here in Gwinnett, consider what you or your organization can do to help. Check out our new volunteer program by visiting the County website.

Stay tuned for details about the Operation Good Neighbor initiative. We can all make a difference right here at the local level, and I challenge you to join us in doing so. Sign up to volunteer in some capacity and convince a friend to do the same.

As the national economy begins to stabilize, we'll work to stimulate our local economy and to seize opportunities for improving our quality of life and the business environment in our community.

We'll continue our conservative approach to county services and infrastructure... as we protect and encourage vital public and private investments that strengthen our success in Gwinnett County.

With your help, we will build on the strong foundation of all that we've built together in the past.

As I look around this room today, I see people that I know are capable... and competent... and dedicated to building an even better community.

As I look to the future, I know we **will** work together to strengthen this county... we **will** accomplish our common goals... we've done it before, here in Gwinnett. With all of us working together, we can do it again.

Now, let's get to work.

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**The original speech included a research error regarding the increase in employment. The actual increase of 2.3 percent was inadvertently reported as more than 3 percent but has been corrected in this version to read more than 2 percent.*