

**Remarks of Charles Bannister  
Chairman, Gwinnett County Commission  
2009 State of the County Address  
January 15, 2009**

Good afternoon and thank you for being here.

I'm joined here today by my fellow commissioners: Kevin Kenerly, Mike Beaudreau, Bert Nasuti, and our newest Commissioner, Shirley Lasseter.

I also see many of our mayors and city council members, legislators, judges, prosecutors, and other elected officials.

I'd like to take a moment and thank them for the service they provide, and sacrifices they make to keep our community first-rate.

I also want to recognize the leaders of our community improvement districts and Partnership Gwinnett.

And I especially want to thank our good friends at the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce and the Council for Quality Growth for hosting us again this year.

And finally, I'd like to recognize our county administrator, Jock Connell, our deputy administrators, and our department directors.

All over the world, this has been one of the toughest economic years most of us have ever lived through. Jobs were lost... homes were lost... 401ks were hammered.

Nothing would thrill me more than to stand before you today and say Gwinnett County has escaped unscathed.

We haven't, and we won't.

For the past several years, we've seen financial challenges looming on the horizon. However, no one – not even the experts – foresaw the depths of this extreme economic downturn. It has put even more pressure on already tight finances and is causing us to re-evaluate every dollar we spend.

But I need you to hear me on this: As I stand here today and say with the utmost confidence that - considering the times - the state of Gwinnett County is not only strong – it's remarkably strong.

Where we are, compared to our neighbors, is a testament to the professional and fiscally conservative way we've run our county during the prosperous times. It has positioned us as well as we can be positioned for these lean times.

I'll talk more about our financial situation in a moment, but first I want to applaud the quality and professionalism of our county staff and employees.

Commissioners come and go, and of course we sometimes disagree among ourselves while we're here. But one thing I think we share is a common appreciation for the caliber of the good people who do the hard work of making this county safer, more beautiful and a great place to live and work. Their individual and combined efforts will prove critical to how well we manage our way through the current operational and financial challenges.

In fact, let me share with you some undeniably good news.

At a time when many counties are seeing higher crime rates, Gwinnett County has become an even safer place to live.

Violent crimes are down almost 8 percent. Property crimes are down more than 15 percent. We've increased our anti-gang task force activities and we've seen direct results.

Last year we made almost 1,000 gang-related arrests, identified 643 gang members, and began the process of getting their guns off the streets and their drugs out of circulation.

Since June, we've maintained a 93 percent fill rate in our public safety departments. We're getting more applications for jobs and having more people attend our job fairs. This means, of course, we have bigger and deeper pools to choose from. We hire the best of the best, and it is showing.

I am so proud of the men and women that help make Gwinnett County a safe place to call home. They have my deepest appreciation.

Our parks and recreation system has been one of the finest in the USA for several years. Our commitment to preserving greenspace and scenic public parks remains steadfast.

This year, five major park projects were completed and opened to the public. If you haven't had the chance, take some time to visit these new parks: West Gwinnett Park and Aquatic Center, Lucky Shoals Park Community Center, Peachtree Ridge, Duncan Creek, and Club Drive Parks. By the end of '09, we'll be talking about the Isaac Adair House as well as Settles Bridge and Freeman's Mill Parks.

Folks, I want you to know just how special this is.

This year, the National Recreation and Park Association, awarded us the Gold Medal for our park system, calling it the best park system in the nation. No other county is doing a better job with parks. It's just another reason Gwinnett is great.

And our economic development program continues to serve as a model for smart growth.

In June, Suniva announced it was moving its solar energy operation to Norcross, spending \$75 million to open a 60,000 square-foot facility. The Technology Association of Georgia named Suniva one of the state's 10 most innovative technology companies. Suniva will be creating 100 new jobs here in Gwinnett County. We worked with our Chamber of Commerce, the State, and Partnership Gwinnett to recruit this exciting, forward-thinking business to our county. We're truly excited to have them call Gwinnett home.

A couple of months ago, NCR Corporation announced it would locate its new Center of Excellence in Duluth. Partnership Gwinnett tells us NCR, a Fortune 500 company, has already created 100 new jobs at the Satellite Boulevard location, and they are still hiring. They will be adding 200 more jobs over the next two years. Welcome to Gwinnett, NCR.

We were also able to attract and retain smaller companies that collectively brought several hundred quality jobs to the county.

And this spring, the Triple-A Gwinnett Braves will open their inaugural season here.

The stadium is progressing nicely and is going to be a jewel in all of minor league baseball as well as a fun place to take the family close to home.

It would have been great to have sold the naming rights to the stadium by now, but corporations are doing the same thing we're all doing – tightening our belts.

We've taken some hits from critics over our stadium, but that's okay. I know I speak for my fellow commissioners when I say we'll gladly take those hits and invite those critics to check back in a few years.

Let me be as clear as I can be about this: The Braves moving their Triple-A team to Gwinnett is good business for our county. The stadium is an economic development project that is a wise investment in our future, one that will benefit us tremendously over the long haul.

Long-range planning was another focus in 2008.

The County completed its 2030 Unified Plan last year and submitted it to the Atlanta Regional Commission for review. This new plan will guide the county's growth and infrastructure development for decades. I encourage you to visit the county website and view the plan documents as the board moves towards a February approval of this innovative roadmap for smart growth in Gwinnett.

At this time, I'm going to pause for a moment and let you see some of the positive momentum I'm talking about.

(SHOW VIDEO)

Folks, that's just a sample of some of the major accomplishments this county made in 2008. Despite the downturn, we have made great strides forward and we must find ways to continue to do so.

Thanks to \$110 million of federal and state grants, we are well on our way to implementing the state's first High- Occupancy Toll lanes on a 14-mile stretch of Interstate 85.

Every year, traffic in metro Atlanta ranks high on the list of citizens' concerns. Some of these trouble-spots are here in Gwinnett. The new HOT Lanes are but one of the ways we are responding.

Studies in states that have created these toll lanes have shown the same thing: They work. They make a marked difference in traffic congestion relief, and you will notice a pleasant difference, perhaps as early as January 2011.

And of course this year, we opened the new interchange at Ga. 316 and I-85.

This \$147 million dollar project, which began in February 2006, added three overpasses to carry traffic to and from Lawrenceville. No longer is traffic coming from Ga. 316 forced to merge into one lane. To further reduce congestion, the "flyover" also provides an exit directly onto Pleasant Hill Road.

Back at GJAC, we continue to enhance our IT systems to make them more useful to you as citizens.

As of last quarter, traffic tickets can be paid online. And beginning this month you can also pay your water bills and review your account online.

By the way, we welcome your water business. As for the traffic tickets, we'd much rather you slow down. Even in this economy, we'd prefer to find the money elsewhere.

Or, more likely, if people slowed down, we'd realize a real savings as a result of reduced incidence of traumatic injury.

To that point, let me digress for just a moment and urge everybody here to let our legislators know that we support funding an improved trauma system for the state of Georgia.

We're truly fortunate to have a very fine local trauma center at Gwinnett Medical, but we still have far too many traumatic injuries in our county... and the costs associated with those injuries are huge. Beyond the human toll, we pay a high price as a society in lost productivity plus the cost of providing long-term care to trauma survivors.

On another front, we got the vote we very much needed in July authorizing us to create Tax Allocation Districts.

Gwinnett is a great and beautiful place to live. But abandoned, blighted sites dot our otherwise wonderful landscape, and it need not be that way.

TADs allow the increase of property taxes from improved property values to be used to support debt on specific improvements and infrastructure. Revitalizing these areas makes economic sense.

We get nothing out of an abandoned building. But we all benefit from a thriving, tax-paying business. So it makes economic sense and aesthetic sense.

The proper use of TADs requires total due diligence, careful oversight, openness, and transparency. And this is a great way for us to make improvements in our county at a time when other funding options are greatly limited.

Solid waste management is an area where there's still much work to be done. Recently, a Superior Court judge issued an injunction on the new solid waste plan. Therefore, the County will continue operating under the old garbage collection system, which allows customers to contract with an approved hauler of their choosing.

But it's not just the court order... We've heard loud and clear from the public on this. I want to emphasize that we believe the goal of the new solid waste plan is valid – specifically, to reduce waste in our landfills and increase recycling opportunities.

Be assured that we will be reviewing and adjusting the plan with your concerns in mind. And we will get it right.

As for now, let me reiterate that you can choose to keep your current company or select any approved hauler.

Now – let's talk more about the budget.

Our budget process this year has been a little different – a lot different, actually.

The first thing you should know is that – because of our economic situation – we’re now several months into a government-wide process designed to identify and implement as many cost-saving options as we possibly can.

But that process is a massive undertaking, and we were not able to complete it in time to incorporate all our findings and recommendations into the 2009 proposed budget that I was required – by law – to submit by December 1st.

So, I submitted a proposed budget knowing full well that it would require changes. That enabled us to satisfy our legal requirements even as we continued the hard work of identifying further opportunities to reduce spending.

Let me give you a sense of what we’re wrestling with.

I proposed a general operating budget of \$919 million. That would have been an increase of 6.3 percent from last year in order to fund 125 new positions, primarily to staff the new facilities we’ve opened and continue to strengthen our public safety operations.

On the other hand, my original capital budget was \$503 million, a 35 percent decrease from last year. The December 1 proposal would have required us to dip deeply into our general fund reserves in a way that would have put our financial stability at risk.

That’s not something any of us are willing to see happen.

So, what we have done is this: We passed an interim budget to keep operating while we continue to look at cost savings, service reductions, and revenues enhancements that allow us to pass a fully balanced budget that still responds to the county's most pressing needs.

In the meantime, we have identified about 150 cost-saving options as part of our operational review. In fact, as part of the interim budget, we’ve already implemented about \$26 million in cuts while delaying decisions on another \$10 million in proposed program additions.

At this time, we’ve cut more than 100 full-time positions, postponed adding 88 new court and public safety positions, and extended our hiring freeze. We have also delayed expansion and renovation plans for two county buildings.

While these decisions give us some real breathing room on our fund balance, more difficult decisions lie ahead.

In a sense, the good news is the bad news. There are not a lot of costly services in our county that are unnecessary. But that means we'll have to dig deeper and take an even harder look at our revenue and expenses.

Preparing an annual budget for a county this size is never easy. It's not supposed to be. As good stewards of taxpayers' money, we need to take a critical look every year at what we fund with your hard-earned dollars.

We also have to be mindful of how a single budget affects future budgets.

This year, it's particularly tough.

In fact, this may be the most important budget we've ever addressed, because some of the tough choices have a significant impact on the budgets for 2010 and 2011.

As you no doubt have heard over the last few months, Gwinnett County had to offer retirement incentives or lay off more than 70 employees. We did so with heavy hearts.

Like I said earlier, to come before you and pretend that the economic struggle of our Nation, and our State, has no impact on Gwinnett County would be foolish.

In order to be good stewards of taxpayers' money, we have to recognize, and even embrace, the fact that when revenue is down and operation costs are up, changes have to be made.

The status quo has become unsustainable and, therefore, unacceptable.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on the subject of water.

First, I want to remind you that we are still in a severe drought, and I want to thank all Gwinnett County citizens and businesses who have responded to our plea for conservation over the past year.

Thanks to your efforts, we reduced consumption 17 percent in 2008, and that really is a good thing. Not so good, however, is the reduction we've seen in water revenues. Water revenues alone were down \$16 million last year.

That's a big hit at a time when we're counting on those dollars to help pay for the new pipeline delivering highly-treated reuse water to Lake Lanier as well as other water infrastructure. Between the drought, the economic downturn and the debt service obligations, we find ourselves in the midst of a perfect storm.

I am confident we can work our way through this – and we'll be saying more about it in the months ahead – but I did not want to deliver this speech without at least touching on this challenge.

Before we adjourn, I want to tell you a quick story about one of your public servants.

Amiziah Smith III is a Senior Correctional Officer in our county corrections facility and the kind of man you hope is around in time of need.

Officer Smith was driving his work-detail bus along Indian Trail Road near Oakbrook Parkway last February 25, when he witnessed an automobile accident. One of the cars in the accident struck a guardrail, returned to the roadway and caught fire. After securing his vehicle, Officer Smith rushed to the aid of the two occupants in the burning car. The driver was able to escape after Smith forced open the driver's door. But the passenger, who was injured, was unable to move on her own.

At great personal risk, Officer Smith freed the passenger and carried her to safety. He then used his vehicle's fire extinguisher, and along with another officer, extinguished the fire – preventing further property loss.

Ladies and Gentlemen, never before, in its 50-year history, has the Gwinnett County Department of Corrections awarded a Medal of Valor. The criteria for receiving the Medal of Valor Award requires the employee to perform "A conspicuous act of gallantry or heroism while risking life or serious injury above and beyond the call of duty and such act shall be performed in extremely hazardous or dangerous conditions."

Amiziah Smith, please stand up. You saved lives and made a little history this year. You, sir, are a hero.

I usually don't like to single out someone in a gathering such as this, because there are so many county employees who go the extra mile, all of whom are deserving of recognition. To each of you, let me say "Thank you."

Last year, when I delivered the State of the County address, we talked about a pending recession and wondered whose definition we'd use to determine whether or not a recession existed.

We had seen residential building permits fall 47 percent in 2007. We had seen sales tax collections drop. Last year we saw sales tax collections drop again and we saw another 70 percent decline in permits. In fact, since 2005, we've seen an 88 percent drop in residential permits.

Folks, we're in a fight. However, I can think of no better group of commissioners, public servants and citizens to be in this fight with.

Next year, when we are looking back on 2009, what will we be saying about Gwinnett County and the way we weathered this economic storm? Can the hard, and sometimes unpleasant, work we're doing now lay a new, firmer foundation for success?

God willing - as a nation - we'll be talking about how the corner had been turned economically, how jobs were increasing, and how the stock market had stabilized.

And as a county, we can, and I think we will, be talking about a very bright and prosperous future for Gwinnett County.

God bless America and God bless Gwinnett County.

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