



Meeting 5 Report

Dec. 3, 2009

Engage Gwinnett, the citizens committee on the future of Gwinnett County, held its fifth meeting on Thursday, Dec. 3, 2009, at the Gwinnett Center in Duluth. The meeting started at 8:00 a.m. and lasted three and a half hours. The Engage Gwinnett committee will make recommendations by the end of March 2010 on county government services, the benefits citizens receive from those services, and how they should be paid for.

The first 45 minutes was held in plenary session (with all members present), so members could hear a presentation on the recent change in the county's millage rate by Chief Financial Officer Aaron Bovos. Members also heard brief presentations by spokespersons from the four Work Groups on their progress.

In his presentation, Aaron explained that earlier in the week the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners had adopted a millage rate change that would raise the county's portion of the property tax from 10.97 to 13.25 mills, a 20.8% increase. The 2010 budget has not been approved, Aaron said, but if the current proposals are adopted, much of the revenue increase would go to public safety, allowing the Fire Department to equip and open new or relocated fire stations and the Police Department to hire additional officers. Some of the increase would go to Gwinnett Public Libraries, allowing the library system to staff and open a 15th branch and maintain its existing branches with equal hours of service. There would also be funding for non-profits such as the Association of Retarded Citizens, the Children's Shelter and the Council for Seniors, whose subsidies might otherwise have been eliminated.

Because of the way property taxes are collected, Aaron said, there would be a one-time increase in revenues, which the staff will recommend be used to reduce accrued liabilities related to employee pension and health-care obligations. While new employees joining the county no longer receive traditional "defined benefit" pensions but rather "defined contribution" pensions (similar to 401-K plans), the pension obligations owed to earlier employees are significant and growing, Aaron said. Hence, the staff is studying options for the Board of Commissioners on the use of the one-time revenues to reduce the county's future year costs.

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

The cost of the millage increase to homeowners will depend on the value of their homes, Aaron said. 63% of Gwinnett's homes are assessed at under \$200,000 in value, and the increase for these homes will be less than \$13.36 a month. Another 30% of Gwinnett homes are valued from \$200,000 to \$350,000, and for these homes the increase will be \$13.36 to \$24.76 a month. For 93% of homes, then, the increase will be less than \$25 a month, he said.

Meeting Process

Bill McCargo and Mike Levengood, Engage Gwinnett's co-chair, welcomed the members, the alternate members, citizens and observers. Bill reminded them of Engage Gwinnett's mission:

- Look at the major benefits provided today by Gwinnett County government.
- Make judgments about these benefits, their levels of service, and how they are delivered.
- Recommend ways of paying for the ones that are truly needed.

Mike said that, in light of the Board of Commissioners' actions earlier in the week in changing the millage rate, it seemed to him and Bill that Engage Gwinnett would benefit by hearing about the increase and what it meant for the county's financial situation. He introduced Aaron Bovos whose comments are summarized above. Aaron's presentation is available on the Engage Gwinnett web site, www.engagegwinnett.com. (It is included in the Dec. 3 meeting materials under "December 2009 Millage Rate and Financial Update.")

The spokespersons for the four Work Groups then spoke about what their groups had learned and where they were focusing their attention.

Norwood Davis from the Community Services group said that, among the things his group had learned was that the library is not funded today at what the state defines as "optimum level," and that if support for the library system falls too far, it could lose some state funding.

Charlotte Nash of the Fire and Emergency Services group said that her group had learned that benchmarking Gwinnett's services against other counties is difficult. In other states, different laws and standards make comparisons difficult. And even in Georgia, it is difficult to compare Gwinnett's all-professional countywide services against counties that have some city-operated departments, some volunteer units and EMS that is managed in several ways.

Julie Post of the Development and Infrastructure group said her group had learned that Gwinnett County maintains the largest system of county-managed roads in the state. And because county water and sewer

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

system is entirely fee-supported (and does not receive general county taxes), her group would not concentrate on water services in its work.

Charles Swain of the Law Enforcement and Judiciary group said his group still has a number of presentations to listen to, but that in discussing police services it has asked how deeply police coverage could be cut before it has an impact on crime and quality of life.

Work Group Presentations

The four Work Groups received presentations and held discussions in their work areas. The following is a brief summary of some of the information that was presented.

Community Services

The Community Services Work Group heard presentations from the Department of Community Services. Among the information the group received:

- In 2004, the Parks and Recreation Division “benchmarked” Gwinnett County’s parks services with five other large, fast-growing localities around the country that were known for their excellent public parks. The counties were Fairfax County, Va.; Howard County, Md.; Lee County, Fla.; Austin, Tex.; and Mesa, Az. At that time, Gwinnett offered 12.5 acres of parkland for every 1,000 people. The average of the five benchmark localities was 23.6 acres per 1,000. (Since then, Gwinnett has added 1,726 acres of parkland but because the population has increased, the county now has 12.1 acres per 1,000 population.)
- Under the county’s Unified Plan, it is anticipated that the Community Services Department will begin addressing “underserved areas” that can help the county achieve a “preferred place” status among Atlanta area localities. The underserved areas include greater support for the arts, youth services (such as after-school programs), cultural diversity programs, special needs programs (such as those serving the disabled), walkability initiatives, and new sports facilities (for non-traditional sports like soccer, lacrosse, cricket, etc.) and would move from building large “community parks” and green space to smaller “neighborhood parks.” But none of these additional services are anticipated in the foreseeable future because of lack of funds. If these services are added, new resources would be needed, beyond the 1 mill recreation services tax that the county collects.
- The number of full-time employees in the Department of Community Services has declined from 270 in December 2009 to 241 in June 2009. It is anticipated that the FY10 budget will see the number reduced further, to 229.

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

The Work Group also heard a presentation about the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services, which receives funding from Gwinnett County. The Coalition is a non-profit and receives most of its funding from state and federal sources, foundations, and businesses. (The county's anticipated contribution for FY10 is 12% of the Coalition's budget.) Among the information the group received:

- Gwinnett County is now a highly diverse county and while diversity is a strength, it brings new challenges. There are more than 100 languages spoken in Gwinnett County, requiring service providers who can speak many languages and understand many cultures. The population is aging, as well. In 2000, less than 8% of Gwinnett's population was age 65 or older. By next year it is projected to be more than 13% and by 2020 it is expected to be more than 21% of the population. This aging population will require different types of services.
- As Gwinnett changes, it is growing more like other counties in Georgia – meaning its social indicators are worsening. Gwinnett was once ranked among the best counties in Georgia for problems like high school dropouts, teen pregnancies, child death rates and low birth-weight babies. But it is now much closer to the state average. There are also growing problems with homelessness and poverty. An indicator of growing poverty: The percentage of children in Gwinnett's schools who receive free or reduced-cost lunches has more than doubled since 2000.
- One of Gwinnett's greatest problems is "community denial" – a lack of recognition that Gwinnett County residents are suffering from these issues, which are associated in residents' minds more with urban areas than suburban.

Development and Infrastructure

The Development and Infrastructure Work Group received one presentation from the director of Planning and Development and had a question and answer session with two deputy directors from the Department of Transportation.

Among the information the group received from the Director of Planning and development:

- The department is working on a plan to outsource some of its services. Although many other counties also outsource some services that fall under Planning and Development, there are no counties or cities comparable to the size of Gwinnett anywhere in the U.S. known to be completely outsourcing Planning and Development functions.
- The fees charged for services have not risen in 15 years. After comparing fees charged in neighboring counties, the department is recommending a list of fee increases and new fees to match those charged in the neighboring counties. The Board of Commissioners is scheduled to vote on the increases and new fees on Dec. 15.

Among the information the group received from the deputy directors from the Department of Transportation:

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

- The county maintains more than 650 traffic signals, including some that are located within cities. The county does not currently charge any fees to the cities for maintaining traffic signals within city limits.
- The county has plans to build new sidewalks that were approved through a voter referendum for the 2009 SPLOST.

Fire and Emergency Services

The Fire and Emergency Services Work Group held a question and answer session with the Gwinnett County fire chief. Among the information the group received:

- The Fire Department has had to reduce staff as a result of budget cutbacks. The majority of the positions eliminated were firefighter positions that represented staffing for yet-to-be opened fire stations. In addition to the firefighter positions, over 20% of the administrative staff positions were eliminated or transferred to field operations positions. In response to these cutbacks, the Fire Department reassigned many positions to ensure essential job functions were not cut.
- Members asked the chief to identify fire departments across the country that might serve as models for the Gwinnett County Fire Department. He mentioned Phoenix, AZ; Fairfax County, VA; and Cobb County, GA as possible models.
- Members also discussed with the chief the privatization and consolidation of functions---what the department has done already. He heard suggestions from members for other possibilities. He also discussed major types of hazards and calls for which Department must be prepared.

Law Enforcement and Judiciary

The Law Enforcement and Judiciary Work Group heard a presentation from the Gwinnett County Clerk of Courts. Among the information the group received:

- The Clerk of the Courts is an elected official whose official duties are all mandated by state law. These duties include, but are not limited to, maintaining court records, filing and recording land records, collecting fees and fines, transmitting case dispositions to other departments, and other duties.
- Gwinnett's Clerk differs from virtually every other county in that the Clerk has oversight for three courts: Superior, State and Magistrate. This produces efficiencies not found in other jurisdictions. It also means the Gwinnett Clerk processes more transactions than any other Clerk in the state.
- The total amount of charges each year for services and other direct revenue are between \$32 million and \$35 million per year. Expenses in the fiscal years from 2008 to 2010 fall within the range of \$8.8 to \$9.1 million per year. The amount that the Clerk can charge for services is governed by state law.

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

The Law Enforcement and Judiciary Work Group also heard a presentation from the Gwinnett Judicial Circuit, which includes the Superior Court, the State Court and the Magistrate Court. Among the information the group received:

- The Judicial Circuit hears domestic, criminal and civil cases in the County. The Superior and State Courts serve as trial courts, while the Magistrate Court, which operates 24 hours a day, issues warrants, conducts various hearings and provides support to other courts.
- The Gwinnett Superior and State Courts each serve more citizens per judge than any of its peer counties in the Atlanta region (Fulton, DeKalb, or Cobb). In the past 10 years, the number of filings in all courts has grown. The Superior Court has seen a 44% increase in cases filed since 1999. The State Court has seen a 184% increase, and the Magistrate Court has seen an 87% increase in that same period.
- Among the challenges facing the courts are the increasing complexity of cases and the increasing number of defendants per case, which results in a statistical skewing of benchmark data.

Miscellaneous Notes

The following notes were also captured in each of the Work Group discussions.

The **Community Services** Work Group captured the following notes on the flip chart:

Major decisions we reached today:

- Next meeting: focus on parks/recreation and library
- Roundtable discussion without county staff presenting, but have them available in case questions come up

Presentations or general information we will need for the next session:

- No presentations
- Digest the details
- Template/timeline
- How we're going to organize thoughts and information

Specific services we would like more information about for the next session:

- FY10 Budget

A representative of the Community Services Work Group also captured the following notes during presentations:

Phil Hoskins

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

- Voter registration mandated service – other than that, only the recreation millage is mandated. All other services are voluntary
- Underserved areas: special needs groups, after-school programs, arts programs, new sports
- Have many agency and corporate partners and special interest groups (e.g., Gwinnett area trail riders, disc golf association)
- Core services were outlined within parks and recreation area – 1,690,747 citizens participated in programs in 2008.
- Maintain 37 parks, 2,107 park acreage and 148 sports fields
- In 2004: Benchmark was 23.6 acres per 1,000 people. Gwinnett was at 12.5 acres per 1,000 people (added 1,726 acres since)
- Five programs compared to .5 FTE per 1,000 (Gwinnett is at .2 FTE per 1,000)
- Discussed the National Award and getting it at not a full funding level at millage rate of .79 rather than 1 (impacts of population growth and other factors: more people/more taxes)
- Gwinnett environmental and heritage center served over 20,000 students in 2008 (K-12 education programs) – eliminated 9 part-time positions already
- Department wide – December 2008 = 270 FTE. March 2009 = 256 FTE. June 2009 = 241 FTE. 2010 Proposed = 229 FTE.
- Capital projects will have operations at current lower level and renovations will not involve higher staffing (mainly renovations)
- Community centers are operating fewer hours (base level of service is lower)
- Applauded foresight of planning and strategic thinking that has gone on during each new opening of a park

Ellen, Health & Human Services – Executive Director of Coalition of Health and Human Services

- Major common issue is denial – perception of community as white and affluent
- State is ranked 46 out of 52 in child well-being, and catching up in getting worse
- Please look at the presentation to look at the detailed information covered

Arts – Caryn

- Performed a study
- Set up a granting program – raised look, economy tanked, stopped their efforts
- Need to increase level of arts in community
- Developing a board – art education programs – help the artists to sustain themselves
- Know that need arts for visitors – bring more visitors and able to bring more corporations into the county – we're losing revenue from these opportunities
- Need to improve marketing and working on several initiatives

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

- Metro Atlanta Arts Fund – we have received very little from them
- New name: Artworks
- Leaks in roof of Hudgeons Center – how can we assure that these issues get fixed
- No funding for arts now

Ellen (Additional notes)

- Needs have increased dramatically as population and diversity have increased. Services and funding for services have not kept up with needs
- Unemployment is projected to be more than 10% by year end
- Personal bankruptcies have doubled in the past 10 years
- Gwinnett had the highest percentage increase in Georgia for number of food stamp recipients and Medicaid cases
- Gwinnett leads the Atlanta region in percent and net increases in poverty
- Over 25,000 foreclosures in 2009
- Free and reduced lunches went from 21% to 46% between 2000 and 2008
- Public health – second highest number of cases, lowest in state funding – funding is based on 1970 population

The **Development and Infrastructure** Work Group captured the following notes on the flip chart during a presentation from the county Department of Transportation:

Major Results and Benefits

- Roads and their maintenance are top notch
- Connecting sidewalks in-house
- Stimulus money for some roads, operations
- Service Request Line can be reached at 770-822-7474

Traffic Signals Maintenance

- Are there opportunities to cost-share with cities, state for their roads, signal maintenance?
- What is the perspective of the municipalities?
- Service delivery agreement between county and municipalities in court now

Sidewalks, Bike paths, Multi-use paths

- \$37 million from 2008 SPLOST for sidewalks, over 5 years
- Projects were recommended by a citizen panel
- Currently connecting existing sidewalks in-house (several miles per year)
- ADA compliant

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

- Would like the list of planned sidewalks under SPLOST

Inmate Labor

- Good for: litter collection, some tree trimming on Reagan Parkway
- Challenges: Heavy equipment, security

The Development and Infrastructure Work Group also captured the following notes on the flip chart during a presentation from Planning and Development:

Major Results and Benefits

- Joining Planning and Development with Economic Development and Business Licensing is helpful for synergy
- Code enforcement by Police Department is more effective

Fees

- Previously, fees covered department expenses due to high volume
- Going forward: outsource functions, increase fees to cover costs (in-line with other counties), fees have not been increased in 15 years
- Unified Plan: not funded under 2010 budget, planning studies, implementation

Information Requests

- Outsource plan/model (vs status quo)
- Fee structure
- Redevelopment plans

The **Fire and Emergency Services** Work Group captured the following notes on the flip chart.

Major decisions we reached today

- No presentation next time
- We will discuss info received and begin making decisions
- We will do site visit next week

Presentations or general information we will need for the next session

- All info from chief
- Benchmark info
- Best practices (Phoenix, Fairfax County, Cobb)
- ISO vs. Insurance rate chart

ENGAGE GWINNETT
MEETING 5 REPORT
DEC. 3, 2009

- Outsourcing assessment – EMS, transport, warehouse, others?

Fire Department's comments regarding benchmarks (counties)

- Chief's recommendation for best practices for Gwinnett – model is in business plan
- Suggestion: comparison is more effective on a local and regional level

Top three counties

- Phoenix, Fairfax County (volunteer supported), Cobb County
- Best practices of those on the operations side so we can compare

Impact Statement

- ISO from 4-3 vs ins cost
- Class 3 rate for these homes and class 4 and 5
- Certification standards: changes in EMS training standards

Are there areas where outsourcing is appropriate?

- EMS Transport?
- Copy of last year's analysis
- Warehousing – possibility of outsourcing
- Volunteer Fire Department culture?

The **Law Enforcement & Judiciary** Work Group captured the following notes on the flip chart:

Presentations: 12/19 – 45 min w/Q&A

- Corrections
- Prosecution (Benchmark Communities) Before 12/19
- Dialogue on benefits from services