



Meeting 8 Report

Jan. 20, 2010

Engage Gwinnett, the citizens committee on the future of Gwinnett County, held its eighth meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 20, 2010, 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 25 minutes was held in plenary session (with all members present), so members could hear reports from spokespersons for the four Work Groups that make up Engage Gwinnett and receive an overview of the day's activities from Jon Abercrombie, the Engage Gwinnett facilitator. Members then went to their Work Group meeting rooms, spending the next three hours in Work Group sessions.

Meeting Process

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

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

Mike said he was pleased with the progress the Work Groups had made in framing possible recommendations on services and service levels. He urged them, as they finished this work, to document their observations – basically, why they were making these recommendations. He also reminded them to list the benefits that people received from these county services. “Some of this might seem elementary,” Mike said, “but I think we owe it to the taxpayers to be clear about what they are getting from the services provided by EMS, the library system, the courts and so on. So let's tell them.”

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Mike added that at the next Engage Gwinnett session, on Feb. 3, the plenary session will be longer so Engage Gwinnett members can hear from Mac Holladay, an economic development consultant, who will talk about how Gwinnett County can remain economically competitive. There was a brief discussion of the topics that members would like Mac to address in his presentation. (The results of this discussion are captured later in this report.)

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

Charlotte Nash of the Fire and Emergency Services group said that her group held another information session with Fire Chief Bill Myers because it wanted to learn more about fire marshal services. She added that she thought her group would finish its major recommendations at today's meeting. Because Fire and Emergency Services is a little farther along than the other Work Groups, it has been asked to examine and make recommendations about "internal services," services the county provides for its own agencies (services such as human resources and finance). Charlotte said that the Work Group would begin looking at internal services soon.

Charles Swain of the Law Enforcement and Judiciary Work Group said his group had completed an initial round of brainstorming and was looking seriously at three recommendation areas: automation efforts that might make the criminal justice system more efficient (such as moving toward a paperless system and installing kiosks to accept citation payments); outsourcing (such as, possibly, courthouse security and animal control); and joint planning among law enforcement, corrections and judicial entities. His group, he added, was focused on "creating a world-class criminal justice system that is cost effective and innovative."

Jose Perez of the Development and Infrastructure Work Group reported that his group made site visits to water resources and transportation facilities, including a highway construction site. While his Work Group had originally decided not to focus on water resources, since its services are paid from user fees, the group had rethought that decision. The reason, he said, was a concern that the county's stormwater fund may not be large enough to finance future needs. Therefore, he said, his group is considering some recommendations on stormwater revenues. Jose also said his group was concerned that the Planning and Development Department should become more business friendly, in light of the county's need to bring in more commercial development in order to bolster its tax base.

Norwood Davis from the Community Services group said that his Work Group was coming to a consensus on several major recommendations on health and human services and on the library system, but needed to do more brainstorming on parks and recreation.

Work Group Discussions

The four Work Groups held discussions and considered possible recommendations in their work areas. The following is a brief summary of some of the discussions that were held and recommendations that were considered.

Community Services

The Community Services Work Group refined its preliminary recommendations for the public library system and health and human services, but continued to discuss possible recommendations on parks and recreation.

The group's consensus is that the library system's staffing model is too rigid – that by dictating that all branches have a minimum set of professional staffers, the system has created too little flexibility in a time of shrinking resources. The library system, then, needs to be pushed to make its staffing requirements more flexible. The group discussed several ways of doing that and tentatively settled on recommending that the Board of Commissioners freeze the system's budget at 2010 levels for the next few years, while mandating that the branches remain open for 71 hours a week. This would force the library administration, the group felt, to lower the cost of operating the branches through staffing revisions.

The Work Group felt that the library administration's proposal last year to create a regional approach to libraries – in which branches are differentiated but all citizens are within driving distance of a comprehensive set of library services – may have merit. But because the proposal was presented with so few details – including costs savings – it did not get a fair public hearing. The Work Group urged the library administration to bring it a more complete plan, including projected savings.

In the health and human services area, there appears to be a consensus that the subsidies that the county provides for non-profit groups (such as the Association for Retarded Citizens, the Gwinnett Children's Shelter and the Gwinnett Council for Seniors) are appropriate uses of public funds but that the system of making the grants is flawed. The Work Group's tentative recommendation is that the Board of Commissioners delegate the awarding of grants to an outside group that can examine applicants carefully and hold them accountable for delivering the services that are needed. An example of an outside group, the group said, was the Gwinnett Coalition for Health and Human Services, a non-profit organization that helps human services organizations plan effectively as they address the county's social needs.

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The Work Group urged the county not to reduce its level of funding for health and human services and to maintain the current level of services provided to senior citizens. In time, this may cause an increase in expenditures for seniors, since that part of the population is growing rapidly in Gwinnett.

The Work Group has not been as successful yet in coming to consensus on its parks and recreation recommendation. One sticking point is the suggestion by some members that the county begin charging for parking at county recreational facilities. Other members thought this would not be fair or practical. The group will focus at its next session, on Feb. 3, on parks and recreation.

Development and Infrastructure

The Development and Infrastructure Work Group continued drafting lists of observations, considerations and recommendations that should be considered for the final report. Some of these observations, considerations and recommendations were based on the field trip the Work Group took to the DOT's traffic control center. The Work Group focused on drafting these lists for the DOT.

The group was impressed by the cost-cutting measures taken by the DOT that have made the department run more efficiently. One member expressed surprise at the level of detail the DOT used in executing these measures, and felt that the DOT was acting as a good steward of public money.

At the same time, the Work Group was also concerned that the DOT was operating "inside the box" and that the cost-cutting measures simply made "the box" more efficient. One member commented that the DOT has 21st century technology available in-house but is handling traffic control in a 20th century way. The committee felt that the DOT could be more effective by ensuring its staff is trained in using the technology that is available, and by making sure the department develops a strategic plan that takes this technology into account.

The Work Group also discussed the county's transit system. One member said the transit system serves only 0.5% of the county's population and felt it should operate only at the bare minimum needed for the county to remain in compliance with the federal Clean Air Act. Others pointed out that the county's buses were purchased with federal grant money, and that the money would have to be returned if the buses go unused. Still other members wanted to urge the transit system to do a better job of marketing its transit services.

The Work Group also took some time to brainstorm ideas on how to continue formulating recommendations. The group came up with five criteria, relating to cost, quality, long-term impact, unintended consequences and sustainability.

Fire and Emergency Services

The Fire and Emergency Services Work Group began drafting lists of observations, considerations and recommendations that should be considered for the final report. The group shared some concern over the possibility that the budget situation could worsen. In response, the Work Group considered splitting its recommendations into three tiers: one for immediate consideration, and the others for three- and five-year budget planning.

The group acknowledged the cost-cutting measures that the county's fire and emergency services have already taken. Among the group's primary concerns was a desire to do no harm. While the county works to meet and exceed national standards for fire and emergency services, response times already fall behind these standards. The Work Group was also concerned about whether the county is adequately prepared for coming demographic shifts and changes in land development patterns.

In drafting possible recommendations, the group discussed prevention measures through education programs and stronger fire codes. It also weighed the relationship between the county's ISO rating and insurance costs.

Law Enforcement and Judiciary

The Law Enforcement and Judiciary Work Group continued drafting lists of observations, considerations and recommendations that should be considered for the final report. The group developed a list that included the following discussion items:

- Does the county have an innovation officer?
- It appears that county agencies operate in silos
- Could the county rent its training facilities to other governments?
- Fees – can we have a different rate for metro area?
- Look at cutting pay
- Citizens need access to crime statistics
- Study using kiosks for easy payment.

Work Group Information Requests

During their discussions, the four Work Groups listed what information they would need to move forward. The following is a transcript of the requests for information.

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Questions for Mac Holladay

Mac Holladay, an economic development consultant, will make a presentation at the Feb. 3 Engage Gwinnett meeting on how counties remain competitive. Here are some topics the members would like him to address.

- What is the role of tax incentives in attracting businesses, and what are the implications of offering these incentives?
- What role does quality of life play in attracting talent, and in economic development in general?
- What is the difference between focusing on attracting businesses, vs focusing on the tax digest?
- How are the different economic sectors in Gwinnett County doing, compared to other communities?

Community Services

- Karen – Arts study
- Phil – Identify mandated senior service
- Does Gwinnett use PINES library management system? Why, or why not?
 - This question was answered during the meeting, as follows: PINES isn't used by large population centers. Primarily involves resource and materials sharing using a courier system. Gwinnett's library materials would be shipped all over the state – it would benefit small towns, but would not benefit Gwinnett
- Quantify the savings with a regional system
 - This question was answered during the meeting, as follows: This was a “soft” proposal to deal with budget cuts. A way to look at providing the most services with reduced funding for staff. Didn't get to the point of solid recommendations and quantifiable savings.

Fire Services

- Number of fire hydrants inspected in a year – what would it take to increase that?
- How will the airport change impact the Fire Department? How will it impact your budget? Staffing, equipment, facility – who bears the cost?
- What have you done to conduct outreach to diversity of communities in Gwinnett County? Do you need or have translators?
- If a call is made regarding a natural death, what is the typical response, and why?
- Over the past year, how many incidences of underperforming/non-working fire hydrants? In what parts of the county does this happen? Is there a pattern or cluster?
- Please break out portion of millage rate that supports Fire/EMS (ref. to Finance Department)
- Does the Fire Department direct fundraisers?
- Why are hydrants silver instead of a more noticeable color?
- What new technology is coming out that we need to know about? New techniques, equipment, etc.?
- Re-request internal services information requested from last meeting (current ratios, pre-cut vs post-cut, overtime trends, comparisons with peer counties, etc.)

Law Enforcement and Judiciary

- If county has “innovation officer,” we would like this person to join us on February 3
- Assignment for group member RM: Training for municipal police
- Assignment for group member KS: Percent of total budget for each department
- Establish context of justice system for final report
- For Mac Holladay: utilization of crime stats in economic development and company relocation
- Question for Fire & Emergency Services Work Group: Consider compensation and benefits cuts for county personnel

Work Group Notes

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

Community Services

Observations – Parks and Recreation

- Eliminated 18 full-time positions in operations and one full-time manager position
- Reduced facilities’ operations hours
- Reduced recreational programs and services, and special events
- Deferred capital projects

Considerations – Parks and Recreation

- Community may benefit from county and Board of Education to work together better: communications, coordination of facilities, planning

Recommendations – Parks and Recreation

- Staff should explore potential financial benefits and other concerns related to charging user fees at parks and report to the Board of Commissioners

Observations – Health and Human Services

- Granting system is not working
- Losing ground on Health and Human Services indicators
- Outsourced in a sense – no personnel costs
- County is mandated to provide senior services – need to identify
- Leverage provided by subsidy funding is important
- Public health money is based on 1970s population
- Cannot afford to lower funding for Health and Human Services
- Senior population growing greatly
- All County Departments need to consider the great senior population increase in planning for future senior services and needs
- Seniors are living longer

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- Approximately 50% of children in school are on free or reduced lunch

Considerations – Health and Human Services

- Want more agencies considered for subsidy funding
- Consider having Coalition (or another existing group – not a new one) assume responsibilities for regranting subsidy funding
 - More efficient
 - Certain subsidies (hospital system and public health) may need to be treated differently from smaller ones

Preliminary Recommendations – Health and Human Services

- Maintain current level of subsidy funding
 - Establish more efficient granting process that meets current needs, without creating a new entity
- Implement 1997 Board of Commissioners resolution empowering Coalition and requiring subsidies to address needs in comprehensive plan and opening the possibility of funding to other non-profits that are addressing pressing needs
- Don't cut senior services – need is greater than we're addressing and is going to increase dramatically
- A study of senior services be commissioned to assess needs and what is already being done (cost)
- Advocate for an increase in public health funding based on current population rather than based on Gwinnett's 1970 population

Preliminary Observations – Library

- Budget has been constant for last three years
- Only change Hamilton Mill branch
- It is a well-run organization
- Current staffing model is very rigid – may be a structural defect that needs to be addressed with need to cut budget
- Quantify savings of regional model – need thoughtful presentation of what it involves (recommendation)
- After several decades of growth in the county tax digest, in 2009 Gwinnett County experienced a decline in the tax digest. 2009 was a wake-up call for the government and the citizens of Gwinnett County. We anticipate further declines in the tax digest before it begins to increase again. We should make recommendations that take this volatility into account while still providing some predictability. If the tax digest declines or increases by more than x% (10?), then the Board of Commissioners should revisit budget recommendations.
- Public library supports pre-kindergarten through 12th grade education – public, private and home schooling

Preliminary Considerations – Library

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- Potentially degraded services
- Hours stay the same, services may be different
- Might promote efficiency and creativity of how to address future funding decline
- Technology changes in five years may be enormous
- Maintain high quality of service with more flexibility
- There is a need for meeting space

Preliminary Recommendations – Library

- Continue with state funding
- Reduce library staffing budget by 5% in 2011 and an additional 5% in 2012. This level should be maintained through 2014. The staffing budget reductions may be absorbed at management's discretion, except that hours of operation should remain at 71 hours per week. We strongly encourage the library board and leadership to explore alternative staffing models, including but not limited to:
 - Aggressively increasing volunteer staff at all libraries
 - Re-engineering the model of maintaining multiple degreed personnel to accomplish tasks that could be completed by non-degreed staff or volunteers
 - Limiting availability of non-core services to certain times or days at some locations
 - Engaging Friends of the Library to muster a volunteer recruitment, training and placement campaign
- Fix five-year budget at 2010 levels – quantify savings on regional/tiered system
- Meeting space should be made available for homework, study, independent team problem solving during afternoons, evening and weekends

Comments/Other

- Require license and revenue to require businesses to enroll in and use eVerify when they hire so they are not providing jobs for illegal immigrants before they can renew/get business licenses (Arizona requires this) – will eventually reduce budget burdens related to illegal immigrants

Development and Infrastructure

Observations – Transportation Field Trip

- Great strides in efficiencies and cost-cutting (maintenance)
- Centralized facility functional and efficient
- Everything stops at the county line – no coordination with the other counties

Considerations – Field Trip

- Will stimulus funds save costs on traffic lights? How much, now and in the future?
- 21st Century traffic control training (more efficient) – need more training
- The department of transportation has managed well within the box – time to consider a new box.
- Do a better job of marketing this service

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- What role would technology play if starting a department from scratch?

Recommendations – Field Trip

- Ensure we're maximizing our use of technology
 - Staff trained and knowledgeable in its use
 - Develop plans and strategies
 - "Smart" technology
- Third party review of county's use of technology and facilitate integration across functions (e.g., traffic lights, public safety)
- Third party facilitation/review of inter-departmental coordination

Observations – Transportation

- Public transportation system serves less than 0.5% of population in Gwinnett
- Roads: SPLOST is capital only, not for operating

Considerations – For the committee, in forming recommendations

- Cost – Affecting overhead? Affecting revenue?
- How does it affect quality – ability to serve, expertise
- What are the long-term impacts of the recommendation
- Unintended consequences?
- Are the recommendations sustainable?

Public meetings

- At the beginning, make a very clear, concise constraining statement of what we are tasked with
- Citizens need to come away from meeting feeling they have contributed
- Topics likely to come up: mass transit, road maintenance, water, SPLOST, storm water, stadium
- Willingness to pay? To reduce your commute? To keep road medians attractive?

Fire and Emergency Services

Observations

- These cuts have already been made:
 - Human resources from 3 to 1.5
 - Reduction in overall headcount – countered by new hires (need exact figures – we have them, and will find them)
 - Consolidation of warehouse (police warehouse added) – centralized inventory
 - Overall reduction in support personnel
 - Consolidated Fire Marshall, etc., in headquarters
 - Plan review has had cuts in Planning and Development
 - General Operating a/c's have had to cut certain percentages – more cuts than capital with personnel – example, fuel costs

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- Gwinnett County has ensured that we have adequate staffing at each site – deliberate cross-training – Fire/EMT
- Interconnection of total system as it relates to service – not just your local station
- Very flexible/dynamic system and process
- Very well trained, professional staff that is well-equipped
- Outsourced some – fire hydrant inspection, EMS billing and collection
- Response time does not meet national standard
- Openness of fire chief and staff – very good attitude
- High morale and team spirit – team-based approach – morale high despite challenges
- Maintain an ongoing process of consistent interpretation of various codes
- Outsourcing was looked at – example: warehousing
- Improvement in relations between fire and hospital system
- Have tried to hire diverse staff – identified current staff and volunteers to promote education

Considerations

- Response time does not meet national standard
- Aging population in Gwinnett
- Impact of road system and congestion (response time), density, development types, redevelopment (CID)
- Halt in new development gives Fire Department time to catch up
- Gwinnett County strives to exceed the national standard
- Water delivery system affects ISO rating
- SPLOST must do what was voted on – result: unmanned stations, which must be staffed
- Georgia Gwinnett College's new dorms
- Cultural/language diversity
- Effectiveness and efficiency of 911 affects Fire/EMS
- First, do no harm – don't make it worse

Preliminary Recommendations

- We don't want to do any harm – don't want to go backwards
- Additional emphasis on citizen education and outreach for purposes of risk reduction – consider volunteers (expand CPR to include choking and other first aid)
- Code adjustments – example, residential sprinklers (consideration) cost must be balanced with return (including maintenance costs) – example: dense single-family dwellings pose a different challenge for fire coordination with cities as well for interpretation
- Outdoor burning – education issue vs regulation issue? Tie in to HOAs, insert in water bills?
- Inspect fire hydrants more frequently

What the public needs to know

- Deliberate cross-training of Fire/EMT – why fire for EMS?

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- Importance of ISO rating and how services relate, and direct correlation to homeowners insurance vs property tax
- New fire station openings and its relationship to financial savings to homeowners
- Response time does not meet national standard
- 911 calls – better on land line (shows address) than cell phone
- Impact on economic development – percent of businesses that burn – most don't rebuild or don't rebuild in that area
- Break out of millage rate that supports Fire Department

Background Music – Things for the Work Group to consider

- What if things get worse? What if there is less money? Then what? What services can we live without, or with a reduction?
- What do we want input from the public on? Specific issues? Questions?
- Is this moving toward a budget recommendation? 2011-2015 – main focus

Public Weigh-in

- Is public satisfied with current level of service? What is your minimum expectation?
- Are you interested in additional CPR training, first aid, fire safety training?
- Any ideas for improving?
- Fire hydrant parking rules and regulations
- Would you pay for a decrease in ISO rating if it decreased homeowners insurance? Are you prepared to pay increased homeowners insurance if ISO got worse?
- Response time – how important is it? Current response time is x, whereas the national standard is y. Are you willing to pay for improvements?
- What has been your experience thus far?

Accomplished

- Summarized previous work
- Next meeting – will flesh them out and prioritize
- Focusing on public meetings – helped us to look at this from another perspective – what we want to tell them, and what we want them to tell us
- Beginning to tie in with budget
- Reassured ourselves that we have what we need from Fire/EMS

Law Enforcement and Judiciary

Note: The Law Enforcement and Judiciary Work Group used a numbering system to connect specific observations, considerations and recommendations that are related to one another. The numbers appear in the transcript below, in parenthesis.

Observations

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- Police training facilities may be underutilized with current budgeting constraints
- Information is available online – general public is not aware of resources
- (1) Constitutional fees (not updated) outdated – does not reflect actual costs or cost of living
- (2) Justice system components are complex, interrelated and interdependent
- (3) Justice system could benefit from implementation of new technology

Considerations

- Use of police training facilities (after officers currently authorized by revised budget are trained) for outside agency training as revenue stream
- (1) Analyze and determine potential revenue with updated fee structure
- (2a) Greater efficiencies and client outcomes can be achieved by interdepartmental consultation
- (3a) Expedite implementation of Criminal Justice Information System – recognize investment in Criminal Justice Information System
- (2b) Assess cause/effect relationship between components of justice system
- (3c) Determine cost efficiency of online payment systems

Recommendations

- (1a) Support legislation to update Constitutional fees
- (1b) Recoup court costs
- (2a) Adopt a coordinated and strategic approach to justice system service delivery
- (3a) Expedite implementation of Criminal Justice Information System
- (3b) Explore private/public partnership for self-service or paperless delivery of services
- (3c) Implement online payment systems

Public Input

- “Best Practices” for community building, e.g., COPS program
- Role of animal control – relationships with rescue organizations
- Citizen perception of crime rate
- What cuts in county services impacted you?
- What county services or quality of life issues attracted you to Gwinnett?