

ENGAGE GWINNETT
COMMUNITY SERVICES REPORT

Status Quo

Appreciation to Community Services and Library Staff

We are deeply grateful for the time dedicated by the Community Services and Library staff to the Engage Gwinnett process. Without their assistance and responsiveness to our numerous inquiries, our work would have been impossible. In particular, we appreciate the contributions of Phil Hoskins, Tina Fleming, Nancy Stanbery-Kellam, and Liz Forster. We recognize their attendance at our meetings and their responses to our many questions required significant hours above and beyond their regular duties.

Approach to Examination of Community Services

We began our work with an overview of Gwinnett County's Community Services Department which includes: Environmental & Heritage Center, Elections, Extension Service, Health and Human Services, and Parks & Recreation. These areas fall under the leadership structure of the Board of Commissioners. Based on the information we received, we recognized quickly that there are areas where our work group could have little impact. We have listed these below:

1. Elections – The Community Services department manages the elections process for all elections within the county: national, state and local. This area is modestly staffed and the budget ebbs and flows according to the election cycles. Given this area is essential to the continued functioning of our democracy and is not subject to discretionary decisions regarding the level of desired service, we determined not to spend any of our time investigating this area.
2. Extension Service – Our workgroup noted very early that this was a relatively small portion of the Community Services department budget. In addition, we noted that the division staff has highly leveraged the county budget through a network of public-private partnerships that multiple every county tax dollar invested in these endeavors. We commend the division staff in this regard and encourage their continued parsimonious efforts.

Following these two determinations and recognition of the relative budgets, we decided to focus our efforts for Community Services on Parks & Recreation and Health and Human Services. It is important to note that the Parks & Recreation operations are funded by the Recreation Fund property tax that stands outside of the General Fund property tax. This Recreation Fund was passed by voter referendum and is capped at 1.0 mil. Historically, it has been as low as 0.79 mil and currently stands at the authorized maximum of 1.0 mil.

With regard to Health & Human Services, we note that the county staff in this division primarily administers county grants, contributions to other organizations, and service centers that house community organizations. The division partners with the community to provide senior citizens, families and individual s with opportunities to participate in quality services to improve their health and well-being. Most of the budget for HHS is comprised of grants to Gwinnett government and non-profit social service agencies, e.g., Gwinnett Hospital System.

Finally, the Library was also included in our review. It must be noted that the Library is governed by its own board of directors. These directors are appointed by the county commissioners. The Board of Commissioners establishes the annual county contribution to the Library budget, but does not control its appropriation within the Library system.

Observations

Health & Human Services

HHS provides a vital safety net for those most at risk and vulnerable in the county. Their services, and those of the agencies they subsidize, provide important information, education and awareness for a broad array of issues. From the Public Health services on awareness and prevention of seasonal and pandemic flus to the senior services to advise and ensure proper nutrition for the elderly, these services are an important safety net for the most vulnerable among us.

HHS staff use a variety of research and data source to prioritize and focus on a variety of needs in the county. Decennial census, needs studies, and community surveys are common tools employed by the HHS staff to understand and assess needs within the community. Rapid demographic changes over the last 10 years are driving significant changes in the HHS needs for the county.

For example, we learned that Gwinnett County has a rapidly aging population. Given that senior services funding from state and federal sources is based on the decennial census, rapid changes create situations where needs far outstrip funding. Gwinnett County is currently in that situation. Most of the services provided for seniors focus on the 80+ population. There are few services for the 60-80 age range. The Work Group is concerned that the current funding level for senior services is inadequate to meet the current or anticipated growth in need over the next 10 years. We anticipate there will be significant tension for policy makers and service providers as a rapidly aging population expects increased service levels while funding for those service levels is insufficient to meet the demand. Further, we note that this tension will extend beyond HHS and require county government across all departments and service areas to consider how it will best serve an aging population.

In addition, we appreciate the contribution of Ellen Gerstein, Executive Director of the Gwinnett Coalition for Health & Human Services. The Coalition is a community non-profit organization that coordinates the community service work of hundreds of non-profit, government and faith-based organizations. As one of their services, the Coalition monitors a variety of health and well-being indicators across the county. We observe that many of these indicators are declining, in particular as they relate to the health and well-being of children. We are concerned that these trends need coordinated attention to reverse, yet there appears to be inadequate funding directed toward their arrest.

Library

The Public Library serves a broad spectrum of the population. It serves as a principal source of reading and research support for the public, private and home-school educational systems. In addition, it serves as a vital resource for those without access to the internet or other job search resources. It also serves as a

community meeting space for many organizations. And, it also serves as a place for recreational readers and lifelong learners.

The Library has received relatively stable funding from the County over the last 3 years. While the new Hamilton Mill library that opens in the spring of 2010 adds new operational costs to the system, the Library has not realized significant cuts to its county funding over the last several years. We do recognize that its receipt of state funding has declined and is expected to continue to decline over the next couple of years.

We also acknowledge the significant public and political turbulence that buffeted the library staff in 2009. We believe there were sincere attempts to re-engineer the delivery of library services in a way that was more efficient and more effective than the current models. In particular, we believe the regional model was slaughtered before it ever had an opportunity to be properly considered. While we are not able to assess its full potential in our work group structure, we do believe that the regional model holds promise to lower costs while delivering high quality library access to all citizens.

Further, it is our observation that while the library system is well administrated, its staffing model appears very rigid. As we understood the staffing model, it appears there may be more flexibility and innovation possible in the types and quantity of personnel that staff a library resulting in lower staff costs. In addition, we believe an aggressive and focused pursuit of volunteers holds the potential to increase volunteer hours by five to ten times the current levels. Such a level of volunteer capacity would yield significant cost savings in the operation of the library system.

Parks & Recreation

We commend the Parks & Recreation staff and administration for developing and administering what truly is a nationally recognized park system. Our parks and recreation system is a crown jewel for Gwinnett.

Since the operation of the Parks & Recreation funding is directly tied to the property tax digest, it is highly sensitive to any changes in the value of property. It is also relatively immune from policy decisions with respect to the allocation of General Fund revenue among various county departments. Given these dynamics, the staff has anticipated the changes in the property tax digest and the impacts on the Parks & Recreation. The staff has already reduced recreational programs, services and special events, eliminated 18 full-time positions and reduced facilities' operating hours. In addition, the staff has deferred additional capital projects. The staff is also exploring innovative use of SPLOST capital dollars to reduce operating expenses.

We also observe that our Parks & Recreation system is supported by a broad coalition of volunteer and community organizations such as the Friends of the Park and Youth Athletic Associations. In particular, essentially all of the recreational programs are administered and delivered through hundreds of volunteers and parent involvement. These programs play a vital role in the health and well-being of youth and could not be delivered without the significant volunteer engagement we enjoy in the county.

Challenges and Considerations

Health and Human Services

1. The level of funding for HHS is insufficient to meet the current service demands within the county. This is particularly true for senior services. Significant service gaps exist for this population.
2. Adverse economic conditions tend to drive increase service demands for health and human services. Unemployed workers and their families, who may have once paid for services through non-governmental service providers, tend to fall into the government safety nets during difficult economic times. We note this is of particular importance given the significant tenures of unemployment now experienced by so many.
3. Any meaningful cost reductions in this area would impact subsidies and grants to institutions such as public health, the hospital and a variety of non-profit agencies. While there may be short-term financial benefits, there is great risk of greater costs long-term.
4. Demographic changes have profound implications for the demand of HHS services. The level and delivery mechanisms of these services must continually evolve to meet the changing needs.
5. The process the county employs to make subsidy decisions appears to be broken and based primarily upon continuation of legacy decisions. We do not see a robust decision process that appropriately considers current and anticipated future needs for the allocation of these subsidies.
6. There needs to be a robust plan for the implications of the aging of the population. The implications of a rising segment of the population 60+ holds are profound both on the revenue and the expense side of government. We see this as a significant challenge for the county over the next 10 years and we do not see appropriate consideration of these implications in the existing budgets.
7. The state funding levels for public health are, by statute, based on the 1970 population of Gwinnett County. Given the significant growth of the county over the last 40 years, this creates a significant challenge. We encourage the county commission and the county legislative delegation to continue their advocacy for statutory change.

Library

1. As noted in the Observations, the turmoil of 2009 with regard to Library funding and operations created a difficult climate for thoughtful consideration of reasonable alternatives. We anticipate this will continue to be a challenge.
2. We recognize that any further reduction in the property tax digest will require significant cuts to library services. We anticipate these cuts will only be realized through degraded services, reduced hours and perhaps closed facilities.
3. Technological changes, e.g., e-book readers, and the rapid migration to “free” for digital content has a high likelihood if not certainty of revolutionizing the business model for library services across the nation. We point to the significant business model disruptions in the music and video markets as an illustration of what may be ahead for books and periodicals. We note the significant decline of advertising revenue for newspapers as another indicator that the broad category of information services is in a period of significant disruption. And, that change, holds great promise and great peril for the administration of any library system.

4. The reality of significant capital assets, e.g., library facilities, require significant operating funds to just be maintained, even if they are not open. Maintaining and securing the facilities will be a significant expense even if some are closed.

Parks & Recreation

1. The community may benefit from the Parks and Recreation and the Board of Education working more closely together on the coordination of facilities and planning for new facilities.
2. Requirements for the investment of SPLOST dollars in new facilities will create additional operating expenses for Parks & Recreation.
3. New school clusters create expectations for new recreation facilities that are impossible to open within existing revenue parameters.
4. Changing demographics create demand for non-traditional recreation facilities and options that are not currently provided broadly across the county.

Recommendations

In general, our recommendations below are delivered in the context of the 2010 budget and targeted to the Board of Commissioners. We recognize that in the scope of our work group, there are authorities (e.g., the Library Board) that are separate from the Board of Commissioners and their cooperation for the full implementation of these recommendations cannot be mandated by the Board. We recognize that after several decades of growth in the county tax digest, there is significant potential, if not a likelihood, that further erosion in the county tax digest will be realized in 2010, 2011 and possibly 2012. If this occurs, the Board of Commissioners will need to make decisions that surpass the reach of the recommendations below.

Health and Human Services

1. Protect the level of funding for HHS from further cuts. When possible, HHS should receive priority consideration for budgetary increases.
2. Establish a more efficient granting process that meets the current needs and anticipates near term future needs. This revised process for grant decisions should be results-based and strategic. It should consider appropriate accountability mechanisms, relevant needs assessments, and long-range strategic plans.
3. Commission a study for senior service needs assessments and the appropriate funding levels to meet the anticipated needs.
4. Advocate for state public health funding to be based on current population rather than 1970 population.

Library

1. Defer the construction of any new library facilities for as long as is possible.
2. Use SPLOST funds to renovate existing libraries in ways that result in operational cost savings.
3. Maintain, or reduce, the county contribution to the Library budget. The county contribution to the Library budget should not be increased.
4. Leverage the influence of the Board of Commissioners to encourage the Library Board to:
 - a. Increase user fees (e.g., late returns) to result in an increase to 5% of the total budget.

- b. Muster a volunteer recruitment, training and placement campaign, aggressively increasing volunteer hours at all libraries with a five year target goal of 100,000 volunteer hours per year.
- c. Implement a flexible regional library system targeting a cost savings of 10%, or \$1,800,000.
- d. Maximize new technologies in manners where operational efficiency, not new services, can be realized.
- e. Re-engineer the model of maintaining degreed personnel to accomplish tasks that could be accomplished by non-degreed staff or volunteers.

Parks & Recreation

1. Defer the construction of any new park and recreation facilities for as long as is possible. When new parks must be constructed under SPLOST requirements, engage surrounding communities to cover some or all of the operating expenses associated with these new facilities.
2. Use SPLOST money to renovate parks that will result in future operational cost savings. This may include natural landscaping, artificial turf, and “smart” lighting systems.
3. Recover more of the operating costs for active recreational facilities. This will involve additional user fees for active fields and facilities. Youth Athletic Associations should pay the full variable costs associated with their use of the fields, e.g., electric costs for operation of lights, field maintenance, etc. Other groups, e.g., traveling teams, for-profits, adult athletics, should be charged market rates.
4. Increase coordination with Gwinnett County Public Schools for use of ball fields, pools, etc.
5. Privatize, sell or outsource operations of active recreation facilities (e.g., county pools) or increase user fees so they are completely self-supporting, including future capital costs not covered by SPLOST.
6. Develop and implement a work out strategy for the golf course to alleviate future risk associated with the county’s debt obligation.