



## Public Forum Report

### Sept. 9, 2009

Engage Gwinnett, the citizen committee on the future of Gwinnett County, held a public forum on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2009, at the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center in Lawrenceville. The forum lasted about two hours and was the first of a number of forums the Engage Gwinnett committee will host in the next six months to listen and to bring the citizens into its work.

This forum was held before the Engage Gwinnett committee itself has met, and co-chairs Mike Levensgood and Bill McCargo told the 150 or so attendees that was intentional – that Engage Gwinnett represents the 800,000 residents of Gwinnett County and wants to begin by listening to the citizens first.

There were three parts to the Engage Gwinnett forum:

- Citizens met in an auditorium to hear about Engage Gwinnett's mission and what its 42 members would be doing in their work.
- They moved to a nearby hallway where they met in circles of 10 to advise Engage Gwinnett on how it should go about its work and assure the public that its recommendations are reasonable and fair.
- Finally, they selected 10 members and 12 alternate members to serve on the Engage Gwinnett committee.

### Major themes in the advice

When they met in circles, citizens were asked to discuss and write on flip charts answers to two questions:

1. What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?
2. What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

All of the suggestions are presented in this report, but there were some general themes that ran through the answers.

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In answering the first question, "What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?", citizens suggested these actions.

In **gathering information**, they said, the committee should:

- Listen widely and reach out to the usually quiet citizens, not just the more vocal ones.
- Get the facts.
- Be open to new ideas ("there are no 'bad' ideas," one group said).
- Look at what other places have done (that is, seek "best practices" from other communities/counties).
- "Revisit what brought us here – what made us great – learn from mistakes."

In **making decisions**, they said, the committee should:

- Be fair.
- Prioritize.
- Look ahead.
- Consider new ways of providing services (e.g., "private providers").
- Be careful to separate operating from capital costs.

In **keeping citizens informed of its work**, they said, the committee should:

- Share the information you're receiving.
- Involve the public.
- Frame the choices that will be made clearly ("how much money, what services will we lose?").
- Give us choices – "cafeteria style."

In **conducting itself**, they said, the committee should:

- Be careful about not just being fair but appearing fair ("perceptions is just as important as fact").
- Stay away from personal or political agendas.
- Stay focused on the goal of making good recommendations to the county commission ("don't get bogged down in controversies").

In answering the second question, "What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?", citizens also suggested specific actions.

They said that the recommendations should be **presented in the right way**:

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- The committee should make the case for change.
- It should be straight with the citizens.
- It should explain Engage Gwinnett's mission and processes for arriving at the decisions.
- It should include a timeline ("when it's going to happen").

They said the recommendations should be **arrived at fairly and openly**:

- The committee should show how opinions were sought and listened to.
- It should be open and inviting.
- It should tell us what questions were asked.
- It should show that Engage Gwinnett was citizen-driven and not politically-driven.
- It should demonstrate that the committee used reliable information.
- It should show that it was impartial in its recommendations.

They said the committee should **communicate its processes and recommendations well**:

- It should stay in touch with those who don't have Internet access or email.
- It should communicate in many ways ("Web, water bills, newspaper, library," etc.).

### Detailed advice and committee member selection

Citizens were seated in circles of 10 and these circles were grouped by geography. That is, residents of Southwest Gwinnett sat in three circles that were near each other, residents in Central Gwinnett sat in three circles near each other, and so on. When the circles had answered the two questions advising Engage Gwinnett about its work, they combined the circles in order to select members of the Engage Gwinnett committee. Each of the five geographic areas (Southwest, Central, Southwest, Northwest and Northeast) was asked to select two regular members and two alternates. (Two of the groups had tie votes for alternates, so they selected three alternates.)

Those wishing to be selected wrote their names on flip charts and made brief remarks about their involvement in the community and why they would like to serve on the Engage Gwinnett committee. Each person in the regional group was given four colored dots to use in voting. The voting was done in public and the dots were counted.

What follows are the comments that were written on flip charts by the groups, along with the names of those who offered themselves as candidates for the Engage Gwinnett committee and the votes they received.

**Group A: Southwest Gwinnett**

***Including ZIP Codes 30092, 30360, 30097, 30340, 30091, 30071***

**Group A, Circle 1**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Public safety
- Quality of education
- Support local business people – brings in revenue
- Process is fair and transparent
- All groups need to be heard
- All options considered
- Need alternatives
- Message resonates for average person
- Big picture – what assets? Business, infrastructure

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Why are we doing this?
- Most of the time we agree.
- Facing funding constraints. Why?
- Benchmarking/Practice
- Government out of hand, self-centered.
- Do as much as we can for Gwinnett.
- Effective and efficient use of resources.
- Assist commissioners in making tough choices.

**Group A, Circle 2**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Begin to think outside the box
- Fostering a sense of community building (community stakeholders)
- Prioritize programs that foster community

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Who made these decisions?
- How will these decisions affect me 5 years from now? 10 years?
- How will it benefit me and my family?

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- What will this cost me?
- What county government support will be visible?
- Does the benefit outweigh the cost?
- What populations/areas will see the greatest impact?
- Can they everyday citizen have a voice, too?

**Group A, Circle 3**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Be responsive to citizens. Inform citizens – be transparent.
- Budget process should include all different groups in Gwinnett.
- Do we have all the facts?
- Proposals of spending be made available to public one month before voting.
- Prioritize needs vs. wants: public safety, education, infrastructure, community services.
- What you do today – how will it affect tomorrow's (3 years) budget?
- Look for more creative revenue-generating ideas (not just focus on property tax)?
- Look in-depth into how SPLOST money is spent.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Citizens would like to know/learn the truth, even though it may be hard.
- Sincere, honest and detailed facts.
- Citizens would like to know that all different groups of Gwinnett citizens have been included.
- What is the bottom line for Gwinnett community and individual citizens' wallets?
- Want to know what was included in the report and what was left out.

**Votes for Group A Engage Gwinnett Committee members/alternates**

Dan King	12 votes
Elise Whitworth	11 votes
Keith Shewbert	12 votes
Apurva Shrivastava	8 votes
Ken Klautt	9 votes

## **Group B: Central Gwinnett**

***Including ZIP Codes 30093, 30087, 30012, 30078, 30052, 30039, 30047, 30084***

### **Group B, Circle 1**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- What levels of service can we do without, vs what we need. Look at the money.
- Representative should have knowledge of various areas of service and concern.
- What are the goals for the 6-month period of this group?
- Have members of the Board of Commissioners involved with this group and truly listening.
- Selected representatives from Group B should stay in contact with all members in attendance tonight.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Can other forms of fundraising exist?
- We need to know everything, and the truth.
- Reasons for why Engage Gwinnett is doing what they're doing.
- Everyone wants to have a voice.

### **Group B, Circle 2**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Disclosure of private events.
- Recognize change.
- Listen to all points of view.
- Articulation/fiscal accountability.
- Change the level of complexity.
- Research the issues.
- Engaging all citizen of Gwinnett.
- Needs to look at big picture, and at future needs, crime issues.
- Know and consider that everything costs money – there is no free lunch.
- Needs to be committed to openness in the budget process.
- Keep in mind perception is just as important as fact.
- Needs to keep in mind existence of gangs.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Makeup of committee, especially 32 not disclosed.

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- How committee arrived at decisions.
- Meetings are open and public is invited.
- What decisions are made before the meeting.
- That process was followed, documented and fair.
- What questions were asked to arrive at the answer?
- Their views were heard and were vetted.
- They had opportunity to be heard if they wanted.
- That their issues are as important as the next citizen's.
- Underlying reasons for decisions need to be publicly available and make sense.

**Group B, Circle 3**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Define revenue generators.
- Consider cuts, vs what can we save?
- Choose private vs government providers.
- Consider SPLOST vs operating expense.
- Make tough decisions.
- Need critical mass vs consensus.
- Reduce gang activity.
- No assumptions.
- Respect all opinions.
- Think outside the box.
- There are no "bad" ideas.
- Talk realistically.
- Consider revenue, then service.
- Consider needs vs. wants.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Know this process is citizen-driven, not Board of Commissioners.
- How do recommendations improve quality of life?
- What is the cost to me as a Gwinnettian?
- No conflicts of interest on committee.
- State clear benefits of committee decisions.
- Reduce energy consumption.
- Explain how recommendations tie into county mission and vision.
- Keep website up-to-date.
- Communicate with citizens without computers.
- Do not repeat GC&B public hearing process.

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**Group B, Circle 4**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Ensure neighbor communication.
- Communicate outside the web site.
- Communicate same information on and off the web site.
- Encourage and engage all ideas.
- Include under-represented groups: single mom, non-business owner, non-HOA communities, cops, quality of life, etc.
- Include employees and workers in addition to employers – include all groups.
- How is the agenda set? What is our real role? How will voices really be heard? Use comments and information included.
- Zoning – residential vs commercial. CIDs communication is key. How will it be done? Communicate activity from DDT, CID, Urban Plan.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett’s recommendations?

- How much money?
- What services will we lose?
- What current services are provided vs State.
- Will Engage Gwinnett be truly transparent?
- What is the plan for security? Police, etc.
- Crime stats.
- Which services include volunteerism?
- How will citizens know representatives and committee are doing the best they can?
- What is the best end result for the county as it relates to taxes – increase or decrease? Leadership is truly doing the will of the community.
- Can there be more discussion on the percentage increase or decrease, and where taxes go?

**Votes for Group B Engage Gwinnett Committee members/alternates**

Jerry Solamon	9 votes
Michael Person	8 votes
Dottie Megel	6 votes
Paula Krone	13 votes

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Linda Levine	0 votes
Healthier Alvarez	8 votes
Charles Swain	12 votes
Don Robison	8 votes
Beverly Cooper	7 votes
Glen Williams	18 votes
Loylene Shaw	10 votes
Jann Marthaler	6 votes
Harvey Kuykendall	5 votes
Althea Lawton-Thompson	11 votes

**Group C: Southeast Gwinnett**

***Including ZIP Codes 30096, 30044, 30046, 30042, 30045, 30017***

**Group C, Circle 1**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- What problem we are trying to solve.
- Most critical services.
- Importance of maintenance vs building.
- All services: cost and funding.
- Visionary, forward-thinking.
- Needs analysis, value, prioritize.
- Consider outsourcing.
- Citizen voting opportunity on “Cafeteria List” of options, i.e. SPLOST.
- Examine the process for inclusivity – identify groups who still need to be represented.
- Quality of life has an economic value.
- Inclusion of young people’s concerns.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett’s recommendations?

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- How much is it going to cost?
- Clarity of purpose.
- When it's going to happen.
- Level of accountability – follow-up.
- Engage Gwinnett's accessibility.
- That they are represented – the process was fair.
- Where did we secure our information, and how.
- What are the risks and rewards?
- If the Board of Commissioners don't accept the recommendations, we would like to know why and have recourse.
- Be honest and open in communications.
- What are the steps along the way?
- We were impartial and voted on what we thought was best for Gwinnett.

**Group C, Circle 2**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- No personal or political agendas.
- Asking all stakeholders.
- What can Gwinnett do, based on revenues – current and potential.
- Research other new revenue.
- Research government waste.
- Research privatization.
- Look at water, transportation streamlining process.
- What can government do to better serve the disabled?
- Increase private business opportunities.
- Duplication of services.
- Long-term impact of recommendations and unintended consequences.
- Water situation?
- Impact on AAA bond rating.
- Unified Plan, Partnership Gwinnett.
- Best practices – other jurisdictions, even outside Georgia.
- Risks of implementing choices – are they worth taking?
- Environmental impact of decisions.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Identify the participants.
- Transparency.
- How to communicate to those without Internet access.

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- How do you bring the message to everyone? Surveys or questionnaires. On buses.
- How will recommendations affect me?
- Make sure all diverse areas feel included.
- Communicate in other languages.
- Publicize meetings with PSAs, community papers, flyers, HOAs, City events and festivals, Recreation areas.
- Explain the process the group went through to reach conclusions.
- How does the group communicate with commissioners?

**Group C, Circle 3**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Regular input from Board of Commissioners
- Are citizens really involved?
- Use volunteers to get info out to community – include nighttime workers who could attend the meetings. Use the list from tonight to get volunteers.
- Info in water bills, tax bills.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Milestones, accomplishments.
- Genuine transparency.
- Recognize there is some backing for the plan.
- How first members are chosen, descriptions of who they represent. Conduct an assessment – was this representative based on the whole population?
- Recommendations should be very clear and concise.
- Assurance their issue was addressed.
- Areas committee will look at a variety of ways to get information – paper, electronic, etc., links on [gwinnettcountry.com](http://gwinnettcountry.com), library, other public places, kiosks, phone mail box.
- Constant updates.
- Poll on website, etc.
- What is the goal of Engage Gwinnett?

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**Votes for Group C Engage Gwinnett Committee members/alternates**

Edith Kemp	2 votes
Garry Rhodes	7 votes
Chuck Hyder	5 votes
Keith Roche	24 votes
Edgardo Aponte	3 votes
Larry Still	16 votes
Lee Thaubald	1 vote
Ron Weber	2 votes
Brady Miller	4 votes
Beth Gabbett	3 votes
Jon Richards	4 votes
Keith Hogsed	11 votes
Beni Dakar	12 votes
Millicent Crawford	17 votes
Tonya Harris	7 votes
David Jones	10 votes
Ellen Gerstein	12 votes
Mirza Baig	4 votes
Charlene Walsh	7 votes
Ronne Haag	2 votes
Lisa Davis	4 votes

## **Group D: Northwest Gwinnett**

***Including ZIP Codes 30097, 30043, 30024, 30518***

### **Group D, Circle 1**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- No personal agendas.
- Stick to the facts.
- Focus on the greater good.
- Primary goal should be the benefit to the citizens, and then the cost.
- Help manage the ever-changing needs of the County, utilizing risk management.
- A common sense focus.
- County vs. City responsibilities and services.
- Include a forward-looking model.
- Identify and react to trends and the economy with a sense of urgency.
- Keep in mind this is taxpayer money, and they are hurting, too.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Complete transparency of all members – full disclosure, such as bios, employers, age, management experience, community involvement, volunteer work, business affiliations, how they came to be on the committee, etc.
- Monitor and update progress.

### **Group D, Circle 2**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Communicate with the public. How? Minutes/binders at libraries, public broadcast.
- View all of the citizenship.
- No decision-making. Only recommendations.
- Take the long view.
- Overcoming cynicism.
- Transparency from the Board of Commissioners, post-report.
- Engage Gwinnett as liaison, PR.
- Consider government structure in addition to services.
- Review core and non-core services.
- Get an audience with the Board of Commissioners on March 31.

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- Redefine and streamline vs cut services.
- Research tax effects.
- De-politicize the process.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- How the process works.
- Who is behind the recommendations.
- Timelines.
- How can I provide input?
- Pre-published agendas.
- High-level cost-benefit analysis.

**Group D, Circle 3**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Represent the county.
- Benefits to the county.
- Up-to-date technology.
- Transportation issues.
- Futuristic outlook.
- Check and balance system for long-run, vs immediate outcomes.
- Realistic expectations.
- Compromise.
- Strategic vs tactical.
- Committee members reach out to get input from entire community.
- Seek common ground.
- Study success in other governments.
- Do assignments – follow through.
- Understand the political system, recommendations.
- Future/current commissioners.
- Innovative and practical.
- Action steps.
- Represent geography and whole county.
- Finances mesh with each other – private, public, etc.
- Don't get bogged down in controversy.
- Urban complexity.
- Look for duplication, gaps.
- Objectivity.

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**Group D, Circle 4**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Public safety – what are we giving up without 50 +/- officers?
- Priorities: 1: Public safety, 2: Fiscal responsibility, 3: Quality of life.
- Economic development – maintaining a good environment.
- Smart growth – balancing money with impacts (environmental, social, etc.) – zoning abandoned developments, economic incentives and quality of life incentives.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett’s recommendations?

- Define the problem.
- What will the plan do? Return on investment and time.
- Cost-benefit analysis of trade-offs.
- List of services and costs of things they are required to do by law.
- Transparency – simple terms = gain trust. – web, water bill, newspaper, library, blog, Twitter, association newsletters.
- How are costs of services spread among those who rent and don’t own property?

**Votes for Group D Engage Gwinnett Committee members/alternates**

Laurie McClai	18 votes
Eric Johansen	7 votes
Dick Goodman	18 votes
Scott Ferguson	1 vote
Lee Penatzer	4 votes
Taylor Anderson	16 votes
Leigh Powell	7 votes
Marian Morris	8 votes
Terry Katnes	8 votes
Paul Busino	17 votes
Israel Peralta	10 votes

**Group E: Northeast Gwinnett**

***Including ZIP Codes 30519, 30517, 30548, 30019, 30011, 30620***

**Group E, Circle 1**

What should Engage Gwinnett members keep in mind in researching and making their recommendations?

- Budget analysis.
- Remember the small voices (all heard).
- Represent the entire county.
- Have a process for complete input.
- Unbiased.
- Prioritization.
- Revisit what brought us here – what made us great – learn from mistakes.
- No untouchables.
- Future investments.
- Privatization.
- Timeline/deadline.
- Agendas for upcoming meetings.
- Look at applicable previous plans.
- Don't just revitalize. Vitalize.

What will citizens want to know in order to embrace Engage Gwinnett's recommendations?

- Partner with the press.
- Post on website.
- Executive summaries at every meeting.
- Portal on website – user-friendly.
- Make committee members available and identified – who they are.
- Network.
- Partner with schools and churches.

**Votes for Group E Engage Gwinnett Committee members/alternates**

Jimmy Orr	6 votes
Chet Hiale	6 votes
Teresa Cantrell	5 votes
Lisa Allee	4 votes

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Joy Towslee	2 votes
Kip Stokes	10 votes
Ben Archer	4 votes
Cindy Gaskins	6 votes
Jack Mason	9 votes