



Meeting 1 Report

Oct. 8, 2009

Engage Gwinnett, the citizens committee on the future of Gwinnett County, held its first meeting on Thursday, Oct. 8, 2009, at the Gwinnett Center in Duluth. The forum started promptly at 8:00 a.m. and lasted three and a half hours. It was the first meeting of the Engage Gwinnett committee, which will make recommendations in the next six months on county government services and how they should be funded.

The major work of this session was to introduce the 42 members of Engage Gwinnett to one another and discuss how they would like to work together. They also heard a presentation by Dr. Alfie Meek, director of the county's Economic Analysis Division, and viewed a video about how past decisions have shaped Gwinnett County.

Several themes emerged from the discussions about how Engage Gwinnett committee members would like to go about their work:

- They want to think broadly about county services and how they affect citizens. They want to begin by understanding how the government works and how the services relate to one another. One group of Engage Gwinnett members said it wanted to beware of the “law of unintended consequences,” in which a change in one area causes problems in others.
- They said they wanted to keep citizens involved in their work. Said one small group, Engage Gwinnett should have “good communications to the public (to) increase trust and earn trust.”
- They want to identify choices, and let these choices guide their work and their communications with citizens. One small group said it wanted to “understand what are (mandated) required services vs. what is ‘nice to have.’ ” It added that, in looking at services, it wanted to know what was “essential vs. non-essential.” Another small group said its aspirations were to “be fair, involve the public, give choices and include diversity.”

These themes appeared to match those that citizens offered in a Sept. 9 public meeting, in which they were asked how Engage Gwinnett should go about its work. In that meeting, 150 citizens said they wanted Engage Gwinnett members to think broadly, listen to many different people, “get the facts,” and

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“be open to new ideas.” They also said they wanted to stay involved in Engage Gwinnett’s work and know the choices being considered. As one group said on Sept. 9: “Frame the choices that will be made clearly. How much money, what services will we lose?”

In his presentation, Dr. Meek focused on how much Gwinnett County has changed in the past 29 years (since 1980), and how the current recession has been felt, in the county and in some aspects of county government. Among his points:

- Gwinnett has seen a 400% increase in population since 1980.
- Demographics have shifted dramatically in that period, from a nearly 90% white, non-Hispanic population in 1980 to one that is highly diverse. About half of Gwinnett’s residents today are members of ethnic minority groups.
- Housing construction, which boomed in the middle part of this decade, has collapsed (from more than 8,300 single-family building permits in 2005 to fewer than 500 expected this year), and foreclosures have risen dramatically. There were 140 foreclosures per month in 2000 on average. Today there are nearly 2,000 per month on average.
- The property tax digest, which was roughly equal in value between commercial and residential properties in the late 1990s, is now 59% residential and 41% commercial, meaning that property tax increases are felt far more than before by homeowners.
- Last year, Gwinnett had significant employment losses (2.6% fewer jobs in 2008), the first time Gwinnett has had significant negative job growth in recent history.
- Government growth has been moderate in recent years. Since 1990, Gwinnett County’s operating budget on a per capita basis has grown by 1.7% a year, which is less than the inflation rate of 2.4% a year in the same period. In the same period, the number of county employees has declined from 8 per 1,000 population to 6.

Meeting Process

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

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

Mike and Bill also reminded all that Engage Gwinnett’s recommendations are just that – recommendations – and that the Board of Commissioners may, for good reason, choose not to follow all

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of Engage Gwinnett's suggestions. "Throughout this process," Mike said, "I hope we will be respectful of our role and the Board of Commissioners' responsibilities"

This meeting, Mike and Bill said, would be largely about determining how Engage Gwinnett would go forward. At this point, Mike said, only four things are known for sure:

- Engage Gwinnett has six months in which to do its work.
- It is to focus its work on government services.
- It should involve citizens directly in its deliberations.
- It will do most of its work in smaller Work Groups, meeting occasionally in plenary sessions (where all 42 members come together).

Bill McCargo introduced the facilitator for Engage Gwinnett, Jon Abercrombie, who began the first discussion of the day: What would the members add to the advice citizens gave on Sept. 9? About 150 citizens met a month earlier at the Gwinnett Justice and Administration Center in Lawrenceville to select some members of Engage Gwinnett and advise the members about how to go about their work.

There appeared to be no significant disagreements with what the citizens had advised. As mentioned above, the major themes from Engage Gwinnett members were to think broadly, keep the citizens involved and identify choices that can drive their recommendations. (The notes of these discussions, captured on flip charts, are below.)

A video and presentation by Dr. Meek followed. As described above, he talked about the changes to Gwinnett County in the past 29 years and the impact that the recession has had on Gwinnett's economy and government revenues.

Jon Abercrombie led Engage Gwinnett members through two other discussions: Asking what they wanted from Engage Gwinnett (his question was, "What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?"), and the guidelines for participation and behavior they would like for themselves and fellow members (his question was, "What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?").

The detailed responses to these questions are below. The major themes from the first question ("What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?") were that the recommendations be good ones and be considered seriously by the Board of Commissioners. The major themes from the second question ("What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?") were that members should be civil, open-minded, supportive of the Engage Gwinnett process, represent all the citizens of Gwinnett and participate fully.

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Another facilitator, Otis White, led the group in a discussion of what Engage Gwinnett's "end product" – its recommendations – might look like. Basically, Otis asked, how detailed should the recommendations be? Should they be goals, goals with some suggestions about implementation, detailed recommendations or directives? The general response was that members thought they might do all of these things, starting with broad goals, then moving to detailed recommendations. In some cases, members said, they might offer very specific recommendations, but they generally believed their value would be to make broader recommendations that allowed some discretion in how they might be achieved.

Jon Abercrombie closed the meeting by saying that, at the next meeting on Oct. 22, Engage Gwinnett's leaders would return with a plan for moving forward, based on what members said at this meeting.

Discussion Notes

The 42 Engage Gwinnett committee members were seated at five tables. There were two tables of alternate members, who will serve on the committee if there are vacancies. And there were citizens and observers in the audience. The alternates and observers were invited to discuss and write down their ideas on flip charts along with the committee members. The notes that follow are the ideas and suggestions that were captured on the flip charts, with the five committee tables first, then the alternates and observers.

Committee Table 1

What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Law of unintended consequences – do not cause a problem elsewhere
- Take every group into consideration when making recommendations
- Remain civil
- Recommendations must address overall citizenry
- Avoid creating a legal liability for county
- Utilize social media to obtain citizen input
- How will efforts of Engage Gwinnett be sustained?
- Want detailed explanation and breakdown of budget

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- Recommendations are listened to and acted upon
- No sacred cows (government programs never end)
- Recommendations are based on a set of values
- Clear and specific recommendations

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What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

- Be able to say what you think
- Be an active participant, speaking as well as active listening
- Be civil

Committee Table 2

What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Understand what are (mandated) required services, vs what is “nice to have” (provide committee the list)
- Consider no growth scenario of 2030 unified plan
- Overcome public perception of committee and selection
- Propose a budget that commissioners will adopt
- Focus on budget – essential vs non-essential
- Good communication to public – increase trust and earn trust
- Represent all interests

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- Listen and give all a chance to participate
- Accepted by commissioners and be effective
- Cooperation from the county with requests
- Make all information public
- Two-way street of communication between county and committee
- Long-range impact
- Factual decision
- Prioritize optional services
- Publish recommendations for community
- Recognize volunteer opportunities in county
- Balance scale of county services with growth – increase efficiency

What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

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- Do not monopolize time
- Publicly publish recommendations
- Walk the talk
- Commit to citizens of Gwinnett
- Try to understand government accounting and make it understandable to the citizens
- Transparency of government in a way that is understandable to the citizens
- Respect members and opinions
- Listen

Committee Table 3

What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Transparency of this process and of government operations
- Identify problems, prioritize issues, identify core services
- Find "best practices" both inside and outside the state
- The vision thing: what plans exist, and how should they change
- Create benchmarks and bring objectivity to service delivery

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- Seriously considered by commissioners
- Challenge status quo
- Independent of county staff and agendas
- Real problems addressed
- Feel that recommendations put the county on path for future vision

What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

- Participation
- Respect mutually
- Brutal honesty (candor without malice)
- Willingness to compromise
- Willingness to make potentially unpopular decisions
- Support the process (don't undermine)
- Willingness to seek community support for recommendations

Committee Table 4

What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Overcome skepticism
- Build trust
- Be inclusive of all citizens
- Communication is critical – to community by participant, by participant to Engage Gwinnett committee, be transparent with the process
- No distinction of stakeholder groups
- Aspirations: be fair, involve the public, give choices, and include diversity
- Goal/Outcome: To build a better community, and to educate the public regarding the work (agenda and goals)

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- An objective review
- Engagement of commissioners (to observe)
- Get information – accessibility
- Be able to make interim recommendations
- Be able to provide a political “cover” for what the citizens actually want
- Solutions other than to cut services or increase taxes
- Look at placing a moratorium on land purchases

What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

- Stay focused on the charge – have reminders
- Respectful
- Honesty
- Show up
- Be able to reach consensus

Committee Table 5

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What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Fair and objective – based on greater good of county
- Prioritize – a core responsibility
- Focus on our defined tasks
- Identify what is working well, and preserve
- Tap in to existing good work product
- Keep citizens engaged

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- Clear recommendations that are prioritized
- Have recommendations fairly considered
- Set high expectations for this group – achieve
- Full disclosure to the public
- Present “united” recommendations

What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

- Show up, or catch up
- Be honest
- Respect the opinions of others
- Advocate process and results

Alternate Table 1

What would you add to the citizens' advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Alternates need same info as committee members – reports, binders, etc.

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- Board of Commissioners will listen
- Board of Commissioners will follow our lead
- This will not be taken as political cover

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- Written response to “the plan” from Board of Commissioners
- The plan will be taken seriously

What commitments should group members make to each other to make this process productive?

- Openness and honesty
- Respect
- Time commitment – showing up
- Think as a community
- Work outside of meetings to further inform myself

Alternate Table 2

What would you add to the citizens’ advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

- Same materials to look at that “regular” committee members see and have at meeting for discussion purposes
- Liaison between commissioners and citizens
- Open and willing to address issues

What do you want from this process to feel that your work is worthwhile?

- To obtain detailed budget (line items), including cuts and decision making process
- Want to see 2010 preliminary budget info (details included)
- Would like county to act on recommendations (or state why recommendations could not be acted on)
- Would like detailed info on government process – possibly have 1-on-1 meetings with department heads
- Know what will be covered in next meeting
- To have a way to bring citizens issues to the table
- To have a way for citizens to give input electronically into the Engage Gwinnett process
- Inform citizens who are interested – having a better system of communication

Observers

What would you add to the citizens’ advice on how Engage Gwinnett should do its work?

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- Make “binder” information available to citizens prior to meetings so we can follow along
- Look at things from a long-term perspective, not just short-term
- Funding decisions have long-term implications, vs short-term headlines and budget cuts
- Committee needs to understand the “rest of the story” and communicate to citizens
- Make detailed information available to the citizens (the whole county, not just Engage Gwinnett) so we can understand more than the news soundbites
- Have extra copies of handouts on-site for citizen-attendees

What are your aspirations for Engage Gwinnett?

- Elected officials should pay attention to results
- Citizens should understand the “why” of decisions and recommendations made
- Committee members should communicate with the public what they learn and recommend