



Gwinnett praised for acting on input

Year after report, leaders of resident budget group hail cuts, fees, furloughs

By [David Wickert](#)

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In 2009, more than 40 Gwinnett residents began studying the county budget, looking for ways to cut costs and preserve core services. They met every other week for six months, poring over numbers, asking questions and seeking public input.

The result: A year ago this week, Engage Gwinnett issued a report containing more than 100 recommendations. They ranged from sweeping (privatize, sell or outsource operations of select active recreation facilities, such as county pools, or increase fees so they are completely self-supporting) to mundane (rename the "Planning and Development Department" the "Planning and Economic Development Department" to make its responsibilities clearer).

Generally, Engage Gwinnett emphasized preserving core services, such as police, fire and courts, while rethinking other services, such as parks, libraries and funding for nonprofits. It recommended collecting more revenue through user fees and — as a last resort — raising property taxes.

Citing the report, county officials have cut library funding and furloughed employees. They've raised ambulance fees and charged youth athletic associations for lighting ball fields. They continue to study employee pay and benefits and outsourcing some services.

A new county report claims Gwinnett has completed 65 of 108 recommendations. County officials say almost all of the others are in progress. The co-chairmen of Engage Gwinnett, Mike Levensgood and Bill McCargo, question some of the items the county considers "complete." But they generally give Gwinnett high marks for following up on the committee's work.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution spoke with Levensgood and McCargo about Engage Gwinnett:

How would you grade the county on its response to Engage Gwinnett?

McCargo: I was blown away with what they have looked at, what they have completed and the progress of those things not completed. When you throw more than 100 things at a county government that's already running at a pretty good efficiency, I think it's commendable what they've done.

What are the most significant accomplishments?

Levensgood: We emphasized good stewardship of county facilities. For example, we asked, how much of the cost, if any, should youth athletic associations bear for lighting ballfields? The suggestion was, the cost of lighting the ballfields would be shared by the youth athletic associations and the county. To the extent that the associations want to minimize their share of the cost, they can schedule games to minimize the needs for field lighting. I think the associations have done a good job of minimizing their expense.

What are some key things that haven't been accomplished?

Levensgood: Some of our recommendations had to do with, if you choose to reduce salaries, how might you do it? The fact that they've implemented furloughs is an example of their effort to implement our strategy. We had several more aggressive recommendations (like cutting the pay of employees making 1.5 times the median county salary, which has not been implemented). Whether they have to implement them or not depends on how quickly we can stabilize the tax digest.

McCargo: There's nothing that's gnawing me in the gut to say, boy, we really want them to do that and they didn't do it.

The committee recommended preserving public safety while privatizing county pools or raising fees to make them self-sufficient. Is the public ready for that kind of trade-off?

McCargo: That's where the pain starts affecting the public directly. To go with an exorbitant fee that creates a lot of pain, I think people can take it so much. Where that tipping point is, that's something that has to be tested.

Levensgood: I believe our county parks are a trust for the county. They should be maintained for the public. I'm all in favor of appropriate user fees. But the idea that you're going to privatize one of our parks? I don't think that's the wisest way to implement (our recommendation). You may outsource the staffing of it. They'll still remain county parks.

Will Engage Gwinnett keep track of the county's progress?

McCargo: This is a living process. We're starting to consider, how do we go back at the two-year anniversary and reconstitute the group to get the status of everything that's been done and question those things that haven't been done?

Are there recommendations the county says it has completed that you question?

Levensgood: One of the things they say they've completed that I would suggest further discussion is appropriate would be in the area of health and human services. We recommended the Coalition for Health and Human Services be used to prioritize public funding of nonprofits in the community. Instead, the county just cut these groups 50 percent this year and plans to eliminate funding next year. I will tell you these nonprofits have a very high return on investment. Using the public dollars,

they're able to get dollars from other sources.

In fact, you recommended those agencies not be cut. They were cut.

Levendood: To mark that "complete," that would be a discussion we'd like to have.

McCargo: You can't bat a thousand. We'll go for .600.

REPORT CARD

A look at where the county stands on six major Engage Gwinnett recommendations. For a complete list, visit www.engagegwinnett.com.

Recommendation: Use the Board of Commissioners' influence to urge the library board to adopt a flexible library system, with the target of saving 10 percent, or \$1.8 million, of the county's share of the library's budget.

Status: Complete

Action: In January, commissioners cut library spending by \$2.8 million, or 15 percent. Engage Gwinnett recommended deeper cuts if the tax digests declines significantly.

Recommendation: Recover more of the operating costs for active recreation facilities through additional user fees.

Status: Complete

Action: Gwinnett raised a variety of parks fees and started charging youth athletic associations for part of the cost of lighting ball fields. As a result, the county will reap an extra \$254,125 this year.

Recommendation: Continue salary freezes across all staffing levels in all departments.

Status: Complete

Action: The county gave no raises in 2010 or 2011.

Recommendation: Initiate 10 percent salary reductions for county employees making 1.5 times the median county salary.

Status: Incomplete.

Action: The county has not reduced salaries of top earners. It has imposed four furlough days this year. And a staff committee is studying compensation and benefits in light of declining revenue.

Recommendation: Commission a study for developing the best business model for the transit system. Implement strategies to increase ridership and revenues so the system breaks even or nearly breaks even.

Status: Incomplete.

Action: The transportation department has tried to maximize the efficiency of bus routes and is looking for more revenue from advertising. It's also completing a transit plan.

Recommendation: Law enforcement and justice administration should take maximum advantage of technology to reduce costs and improve efficiency.

Status: Incomplete.

Action: Police have implemented a self-service, paperless way to access accident reports. The sheriff's department uses automated license plate readers in patrol cars. A committee is studying other technology improvements.

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