



GWINNETT PLACE COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

## **SPECIAL OP-ED**

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### **Diversity must drive change in Gwinnett's infrastructure**

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The days of a monochromatic suburb have come and gone, particularly in Gwinnett County. Atlanta's largest suburban neighbor boasts the most diverse populace of any county in the entire Southeast United States. What a phenomenal asset that is for a community striving to have a global reach. Cultural experiences that can be found nowhere else can be found right here in Gwinnett. People from all over the globe have chosen to call this county their home. This in turn, if harnessed, can offer unique levels of access to international markets and foreign capital. As is often the case, policy decisions and public investment strategies lag behind private trends, but will be forced to catch up if Gwinnett is to truly capitalize on its unique position.

A recent study done by the Georgia Tech, School of City and Regional Planning highlighted how much Gwinnett has truly changed. Most everyone knows that Gwinnett is now a majority minority county. This study dug a little deeper beyond simple census data and evaluated the integration of the immigrant community by conducting interviews and focus groups with foreign-born citizens and business owners. One of the interesting takeaways from the report, in terms of economic development, was the contrast between the immigrant population's priorities and the infrastructure investments currently being made in the Gwinnett County.

On the question “how important is improved infrastructure to the future success of your business?”, 17% of the non-immigrant respondents said it was VERY important and 50% said it was important, where as 62% of the immigrant respondents said it was VERY important and 11 % said it was important. Also, transit was repeatedly mentioned as a top priority, a common theme in discussions around the County.

It would be easy for someone to say "Well, get out and vote if you want to change the process," but that is often easier said than done for many in these immigrant communities. For some, it may be that they come from countries where individual participation in the civic process is not as valued or effectual and therefore is not engrained as a right or responsibility. For those whose first language is not English, it is also difficult to find and digest information on policy decisions that may have an impact on their community. These are not just excuses; they are real barriers that impede full participation of foreign-born citizens in the civic process. If left unaddressed, these challenges make it difficult if not impossible for their voice to have the same weight as segments of the population that were born and raised in the U.S.

If the goal is to have policy informed by all of Gwinnett's citizens, we have to do a better job of engaging citizens whose voices are not always heard. This should not be an expectation of the County government alone. We all bear a responsibility in working to create a more seamless community where we understand that our needs may not be the same as someone else's, but understand that public investment has to serve all that call Gwinnett home. We must engage in dialogues across the different communities and learn to view issues and problems from different angles than we are used to.

For a county as geographically vast as Gwinnett, strategic investments have to also differ from one end of the county to the other. The infrastructure investments that make sense for urbanized areas like Norcross, Peachtree Corners, Duluth, etc. should differ greatly from the strategies utilized in areas like Dacula and Grayson. If the county is going to thrive in decades to come, the transportation network will need to diversify along with its population.

As the face of Gwinnett has changed and various areas of the County are developing in each unique ways, so must the approach to infrastructure investment. A community that has changed so much over

the past couple of decades has to also evolve alongside its members when it comes to its public investment strategy and cannot rely on the same solutions that were used in decades past. For that reason, I am supporting The Great Exchange, a grassroots effort in Gwinnett bringing people together to discuss one of the most pressing issues facing our community today, transportation. I invite you to be a part of the conversation by texting “join” to 74029 so that we will have a chance to let our community speak for itself.