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Relaxed chairman gives more polished speech

By [BEN SMITH](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 01/26/07

This time, Charles Bannister didn't have laryngitis. He didn't sound nervous, either.

For his third State of the County address, Gwinnett's commission chairman seemed more relaxed than he did two years ago. His delivery Thursday also was more polished than it was in 2006, when his lost voice rendered his speech almost unlistenable for some.

Perhaps it helped that he now has had two years to grow into his role as Gwinnett's top elected official. Maybe it's also because Bannister was on his third attempt to perfect what, in some respects, has been the same speech.

"It pretty much sounded the same," said Mark Williams, board chairman of the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District. "The county is looking pretty good right now. It was good to get the report and hear what's going on."

This year, as in previous years, Bannister talked about how many police officers the county had hired, how many miles of roads it had resurfaced, the need for keeping up Gwinnett's rapid growth and the need to embrace the county's emerging ethnic diversity. And, once again, he paused his chat for a video presentation.

But subtle differences emerged in Bannister's 2007 version of the state of Gwinnett. The most notable was its focus.

Although Bannister uttered the word "future" six times in this year's speech, twice as often than he did in 2006, the commission chairman spent more time talking about his administration's accomplishments than the county's future.

On fulfilling the county's

responsibility to provide utility service and public safety, Bannister stated, "We must — and we will — efficiently and effectively meet the needs of our resident population."

On keeping the county's economic growth engine running, Bannister said, "We must all work together with a common vision."

"By keeping all parts of the county attractive and up-to-date, we can control our own destiny." Bannister said. "We can attract new employers and corporate headquarters with high-paying jobs. We can build on the strength of our diversity and offer a multitude of new shopping, dining and entertainment opportunities."

In his 2005 and 2006 addresses, Bannister warned that the county's economic stability could be threatened by its escalating dependence on residential property taxes and the resulting imbalance between residential revenue collections and commercial property tax collections.

In 2005, Bannister proposed that the county aim for a 50-50 split in residential and commercial tax collections.

"I didn't hear him set out any goals," Snellville Mayor Jerry Oberholtzer said. "I don't think he mentioned anything about having any problems and what we need to do to correct them. In Charles's defense, it's hard to set out goals when you don't have the support of your commissioners."

But Oberholtzer called Bannister's third State of the County address "his best delivery so far."

"He's not a great orator," Oberholtzer said. "Neither am I. Trying to give a speech like that is tough."

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