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2013 State of the County Address  
DeKalb CEO Burrell Ellis  
1-29-2013

*THE STRUGGLE OF A GREAT COMMUNITY*

To the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, judiciary, constitutional officers, members of the Georgia General Assembly and the United States Congress, Mayors, and all elected officials with us today;

To the Executive Cabinet and other senior members of our administration; to the DeKalb County department heads, managers, supervisors, and employees;

To our business, civic, faith, educational, and community leaders;

And, most important, to the citizens of DeKalb County, it is with great humility and honor that I come before you this morning to discuss the State of our County.

As I look around the room, I see many faces of friends, family, supporters, and partners who have allowed me to undertake this journey with you to transform DeKalb County into a 21st century model of governance and excellence.

Yet, any successes we have enjoyed have occurred through partnerships forged with a fierce commitment to serve our citizens.

For this reason, I would like to recognize my partners in public service, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners. Thank you for your service to our citizens.

I would also like to take a moment of personal privilege to acknowledge my wife, Philippa. Thank you for your unconditional love and support.

Through partnership, we have accomplished some remarkable things:

For example, there's the opening of our Renewable Energy Facility and Compressed Natural Gas Station at the Seminole Landfill. Funded in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy, and constructed in partnership with the private sector, this public works project is the environmental equivalent of taking 30,000 cars off the road each year and reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 17,000 tons.

And then there's the DeKalb County Mobile Career Center, commonly known as the "jobs bus." This innovative workforce development initiative, funded in partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, has visited more than 200 locations across the county, providing assistance with jobs placement, training, skill building, and other services to allow DeKalb County citizens an opportunity to get back to work.

Working in partnership with the state and federal governments, we've witnessed a number of streetscape improvements on our major thoroughfares, including Buford Highway, Candler Road, Memorial Drive, Tucker Main Street, Snapfinger Road, and Emory Village – just to name a few.

We've partnered with the PATH Foundation and expanded our pedestrian walkways and bike paths.

In partnership, we've constructed a state of the art YMCA at Wade Walker Park. And through bond proceeds approved by DeKalb County voters, we have built or renewed 8 libraries in the past 4 years and improved several of our parks.

In partnership, and with funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, we are now in the process of building 2 new senior centers, with another one on the way.

However, our convening today is not merely to recount our successes during one of the worst economic recessions in recent memory. Although we have, by working together, accomplished much.

Our task today is to set a course towards a future that reflects the best of who we are as stakeholders of this great county.

And while, as your CEO, I like to highlight our successes, success alone does not tell our full story. To ignore the struggle that always accompanies success is to discount the truth of what many are now feeling.

A frank discussion of the state of our county must include the struggle that walks alongside success, lest we leave the elephant in the room when we depart.

Our story is "The Struggle of a Great Community."

Frederick Douglass, a leading abolitionist, author and orator of his time, a man born into slavery in 1818 in Talbot County, MD, understood more than most the role that STRUGGLE plays in affecting positive change.

Although remembered most for his brave opposition to American slavery, he also participated in the women's suffrage movement and was recognized for his efforts by being first African American nominated in 1872 for Vice President of the United States.

He also served as U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic and in several other public positions. He was a truly remarkable American.

On August 4, 1857, in Canandaigua, New York, he delivered a speech celebrating the emancipation of the British, West Indies. An excerpt from that speech reads as follows:



If there is no *struggle*, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will.

Here in DeKalb County, we are in fact a great community. Yes, we have our struggles, but our struggles make us stronger. And we have what it takes to withstand challenges and continue forward, and that's why I am encouraged.

Yes, the road is rough, the going gets tough and the hills are hard to climb; but look how far we've come. And our vision going forward is laser focused and inclusive.

### **2013 County Budget**

For example, I know that the 2013 County Budget will not be adopted until February, but the budget recommendation I presented to the BOC on December 14<sup>th</sup> was unprecedented in its formation. Through the spirit of partnership and collaboration, the Commissioners and I worked together with our staff and external stakeholders to develop a budget that is lean, responsible, and responsive to our constituents' priorities.

I would like to publicly acknowledge Commissioners Lee May, Jeff Rader, and Stan Watson for serving with me on our Budget Development Committee.

DeKalb County has seen a dramatic drop in property values over the last 5 years. While this is not an uncommon reality across the nation, it has had a tremendous impact on the work of local governments in balancing their budgets.

In DeKalb, we have seen a 25% county-wide decline in property values. In unincorporated DeKalb, that decline has fallen by 50%.

An easy way to balance a budget under such fiscal adversity would be to simply cut our spending in half, but to do so would deeply impact the quality of life of our citizens and stall our local economy. So instead, we've taken a more strategic approach.

After years of cost cutting to the tune of over \$100 million, we are now holding the line in most county departments. At the same time, we are continuing to identify innovative ways to be more efficient and increase non-tax sources of revenue so that we can support our strategic plan priorities in 4 critical areas:

First, Public Safety.

In accordance with recommendations from our police department, our 2013 budget funds the realignment of police precincts and the hiring of an additional 25 police officers this year. This proposed increase responds to the county's long range plan to meet national standards.

As a result of the unfortunate shootings last year, during a funeral service at a local church, and the tragic shooting of four year old Marquel Peters three years ago on New Year's Eve, I asked stakeholders from across the region to work collaboratively on addressing the crisis of violence against our young people that is plaguing our county and nation.

This year, we will begin convening and developing a plan of action to protect our children from senseless gun violence, bullying, gang activity, and any other issue that can impede our youth from fulfilling their dreams and potential.

This is the struggle of a great community!

#### Second, Customer Service.

Our 2013 budget recommendation provides funding for additional training of front-line employees and upgraded technology in order to improve customer service. Nowhere is this needed more than in the area of permitting.

In response to the concerns expressed by many, we will undertake a comprehensive overhaul of our permits and licensing operations. Through a business process analysis, we will streamline, reorganize, modernize our technology, and retrain staff. We will put in place a single-stop shop driven by a highly efficient and effective customer service approach. This significant business change effort will support our economic development initiatives and drastically reduce the time it takes to issue permits and business licenses.

#### Third, Animal Services.

In 2012, many concerned citizens asked for improvements to our Department of Animal Services. This is long overdue. We are responding by taking appropriate measures to transform DeKalb County Animal Services into a model for the nation.

We have a new Animal Services Director, and a Citizens Advisory Board to help guide us. But we also need a new Animal Services Facility. Our 2013 budget recommendation provides funding for us to begin the design and construction of a new animal services facility this year.

#### Fourth, Fair Compensation for Our Employees.

Due to budgetary constraints, our county employees have not received a cost-of-living increase in several years. Despite this fact, many of them have assumed additional responsibilities due to down-sizing in the workforce.



My wish would be to offer all of our employees a cost of living increase, especially in light of rising pension and healthcare costs as well as food, gas, and other essential items costing more today than in 2006 when the last increase was issued.

While we are not yet able to adjust salaries for all DeKalb County employees, I am proposing a cost-of-living adjustment of 3% for our lowest paid workers – those making less than a “living wage” as defined by national standards. For the most part, these are our dedicated men and women who work in our Sanitation and Roads and Drainage Departments.

It has been a challenge, but we are working to reduce expenditures and increase revenue with a goal of paying all of our employees what they deserve. They are the backbone of our government. Our ability to effectively serve the over 700,000 residents who live in DeKalb County is only possible due to the professional workforce we have today.

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Now, I am keenly aware that these budget priorities could change. The Board of Commissioners has authority to shift them before final budget adoption. Because cost-savings and revenue enhancements alone are not enough to overcome the decline in our tax digest, my recommendation includes a 1.69 mil increase, which equates to approximately \$48.50 dollars on a \$200,000 home annually, or \$4 per month.

Fortunately, due to our conservative budgeting practices, we have ended our fiscal year with a surplus so we may be able to reduce the amount of that millage increase somewhat while still funding critical priorities.

However, without that modest increase, it will be virtually impossible for us to address all of our critical needs.

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I believe, however, that our joint work in developing the budget has led us to a very responsible outcome that is both realistic and meets the needs of our citizens.

### **Legislative Agenda**

During the past two years, DeKalb County has been forced to take a defensive posture at the Georgia General Assembly. Efforts to incorporate or annex prime real estate have severely hurt our bottom line. A fractured county will not lift us out of the economic recession.

In actuality, it might place us deeper in it.

This is the struggle of a great community!

I say this not harboring any ill will to our city leaders or anti-city sentiment. In fact, my relationship with the mayors in DeKalb County is based on mutual respect, friendship, and a desire to serve our respective constituents as best as we can.

But, unique state law on this issue has allowed revenue shifting from the County to city governments, and that hurts us all, whether we live in incorporated or unincorporated portions of the County.

We have now reached a “tipping point” where continued annexation will hamper the ability of the county to adequately fund essential services – from courts and criminal justice, to libraries and elections – that all of our citizens depend upon.

The Board of Commissioners and I have asked our delegation to amend the state code to require approval by the county for annexation of areas that currently receive county services. We also want their support of legislation providing property owners new rights to weigh in on matters pertaining to annexation.

We believe these steps will protect the interests of all our citizens and allow for greater dialogue between DeKalb County and its cities to develop a strategy that emphasizes collaboration instead of confrontation.

All local governments – cities and counties - face the same challenges of trying to balance our budgets while providing our constituents the frontline services they depend on. I see no reason why we cannot find a solution together.

This is the struggle of a great community!

We have also asked the General Assembly to remove restrictions that limit our ability to increase the sales tax for purposes of capital improvement, economic development, transportation, and infrastructure maintenance. We are at a competitive disadvantage with our neighboring counties who have access to funding to repair roads, build sidewalks, and restore deteriorating infrastructure.

This is good public policy with long-term implications on our economy, environment, and overall quality of life. If adopted, the measure would go before the people for a vote. We can offer greater tax relief through HOST, and rebuild our infrastructure to levels required to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy.

We are actively working with Chairman Howard Mosby and Chairman Emanuel Jones and the respective members of our House and Senate Delegations on these issues.

### **Regional Cooperation**

The Regional Transportation Referendum, while failing at the polls last July, offered us a glimpse into the future with regard to regional cooperation.



Whether or not you agreed with the referendum, most people will agree that a precedent was set. For the first time ever, 21 elected officials representing the metropolitan Atlanta region worked together and unanimously agreed on a common vision.

DeKalb County alone cannot compete with Charlotte, Chattanooga, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Miami-Dade, Denver, and other high profile metropolitan regions for jobs, investments, and federal funding. Our region must move beyond the limitations of political boundaries and recognize that our collective success requires a unity of spirit and action.

We must endear ourselves to the words of former U.S. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who reminds us, "A spirit of harmony can only survive if each of us remembers, when bitterness and self-interest seem to prevail, that we share a common destiny."

The metro Atlanta region shares a common destiny in supporting a regional transit system, funding Grady hospital, protecting the environment, creating jobs, and ensuring every child receives a quality education and every person has access to affordable health care.

I believe we can accomplish these goals if we strive to work together.

This is the struggle of a great community!

### **Federal Partnerships**

Since taking office in 2009, I have enjoyed the privilege of helping to bridge the gap, in an oftentimes partisan political environment, in order to achieve maximum benefits for DeKalb County.

I am honored to have served with our President and his administration, our U.S. Senators, and our U.S. House delegation members, of both parties.

We have received millions of dollars in federal grants and funding for various projects and programs that directly benefits DeKalb County. President Obama in particular, understands how vital it is to support local governments who are the frontline service providers and are key to jumpstarting the economy.

His vision for America is inclusive and transformative. It is our responsibility as elected officials to identify a space where we can contribute when possible, collaborate when appropriate, and criticize when necessary, to guarantee your voice is heard and concerns are adequately addressed.

This is the struggle of a great community!

### **Closing**

Fifty-five years ago, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reminded us of essentially what Frederick Douglass was talking about 100 years earlier:

Success never comes easy. It comes through hard labor and it comes through toil. It comes through hours of despair and disappointment.

And that's the way it goes. There is no crown without a cross. I wish we could get to Easter without going to Good Friday, but history tells us that we got to go by Good Friday before we can get to Easter.

Before we go to Canaan, you've got a Red Sea to confront. You have a hardened heart of a Pharaoh to confront. You have the prodigious hilltops of evil in the wilderness to confront.

And even when you get to the Promised Land, you have giants in the land. The beautiful thing about it is that there are a few people who've been over in the land. They have spied enough to say 'Even though the giants are there, we can possess the land because we got the internal fiber to stand up amid anything that we have to face.'

For DeKalb County, this is the Struggle of a Great Community.

It is the struggle that transforms us.

It is the struggle that makes us great.

It is the struggle that leads us to success.

In the words of Paul Robeson, "We must realize that our future lies chiefly in our own hands."

It is our most difficult challenge that strengthens our survival skills.

It is our greatest fear that deepens our faith.

It is our weakest ability that beckons us to grow.

Anyone and anything can challenge us, but it will not overtake us unless we surrender.

Working together, we can survive any struggle.

And that is the State of DeKalb County; a great community with a strong track record of success.

A great community that continues to succeed even as it struggles, because you cannot have one without the other.

A great community that sees strength in its struggle; because it is that ongoing struggle that assures us a successful future steeped in potential, hope and possibility.



I am excited about what tomorrow holds for DeKalb County. Our past successes, although good, will not be the sole determinate of our legacy. We still have more work to do.

Our vision for DeKalb County is neither audacious nor meek, but a reflection of the values we share as a community. If we remain steadfast to our principles and continue to provide sound leadership, then a bright future will be ours to enjoy.

I ask each and every resident of DeKalb County to join us as we embark on a journey to build a greater DeKalb County. Join us in creating a model of excellence and governance. Join us in uniting the county in restoring faith in public service. Join us in protecting what we cherish most...the legacy of this great county.

Join us, because no one person can do it alone. The CEO cannot do it alone, and the Board of Commissioners cannot do it alone. Other elected officials cannot do it alone. Only through the power of our eternal creator and our working together, as ONE DeKalb, will our collective dreams for this great county come true!

Thank you and God bless you. God bless the United States of America, the State of Georgia and DeKalb County.