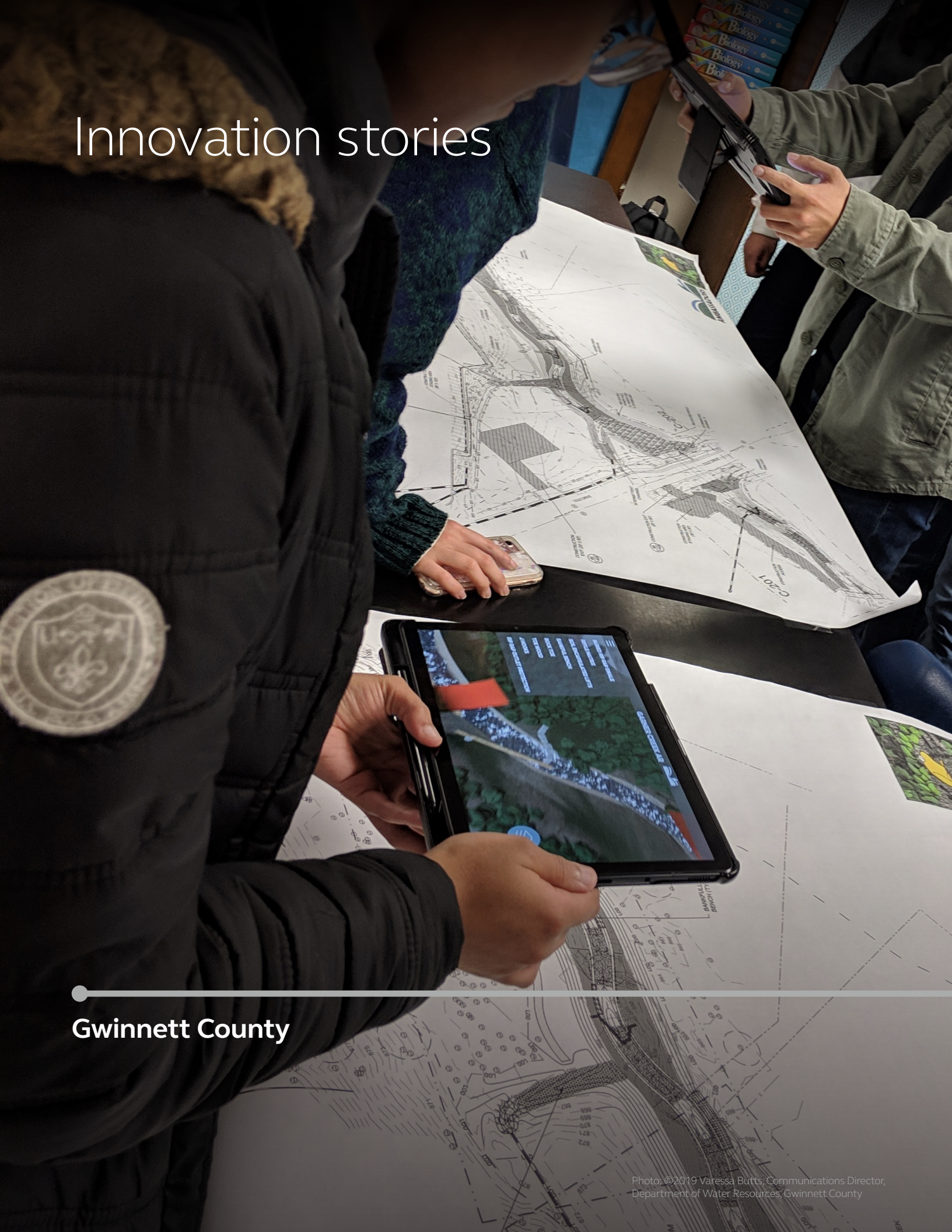


Innovation stories



Gwinnett County

Inspiring and engaging water-focused citizens

Connecting with citizens in a way that inspires them to support your mission can be a challenge. But in Gwinnett County, Georgia, technology is creating new avenues for turning passive consumers into water-focused citizens.

It started with a watershed restoration project at Garner Creek. The creek's proximity to Parkview High School presented a rare opportunity to teach students about the water in their community and give them a hands-on role in the project. With the help of a faculty sponsor and a few pioneering students, the Garner Creek Ambassadors program was born.

According to Watershed Improvement Program Manager Katherine Atteberry, the mission intrigued founding members, but maintaining momentum was key. "Design for projects like [the restoration] takes a long time. To keep motivation up, we used technology to bridge the gap between the current design phase and the construction phase – which is where students will really see progress," she said.

The digitally enabled innovation came in the form of augmented reality. Partnering with a global professional services provider, the organization created a mobile app that uses real-time interactive overlays to bring the project to life. With the ease of snapping a selfie, students could explore project designs and the value they will bring to the creek on location.

Viewing water projects through a real-world lens creates a culture of ownership regarding the water projects in a community. "Most people don't think about water until they have a plumbing problem at home," Atteberry explained. "Animating the science and technology behind a healthy stream or functioning utility with an app can help the public make those real-world connections."

"Students didn't realize they're driving over a stream to school every day," she continued. "We introduced them to a new world that they hadn't considered, which was pretty eye-opening for them."

Construction begins soon. After that, the student group will drive the "grass and trash" maintenance for the project, reducing work levels for county maintenance crews. And while encouraging students to consider a career in the water sector would be a bonus, Atteberry stressed that building a base of water-focused citizens is even more important.

The utility isn't limiting outreach programs to students. It's innovating other ways to draw value from the community it serves as well. One initiative sees the utility partnering with Georgia Adopt-a-Stream and Stroud Water Research Center to help groups build and program their own water quality monitoring stations.

Atteberry hopes the community-built network will be less expensive to maintain while increasing access to accurate and timely water quality data. "We could potentially engage new parts of the community to expand Georgia Adopt-a-Stream monitoring in a new direction that doesn't require monthly tests," she noted.

The data collected could even become a feature for the mobile app. While future uses are in development, the app will release to the public after the Garner Creek Ambassadors beta test. From there, Atteberry explains, the possibilities are endless.

"Augmented reality is whatever you can imagine. We can create infiltration simulations of rainfall events without having to stand out in actual storms. Or we could release educational tools like stormwater best management practices and interactive challenges to locate elements of a stormwater system."

Whatever the future holds, prioritizing community education and engagement will maximize projects' potential. Or, as Atteberry puts it, "If we can create 'water folks,' it helps everyone [in the water sector] do their jobs more easily."

