

HIGH ENERGY JOURNEY



Suzanne Sitherwood already has four job titles, and she'll get a new one when she becomes the first woman to chair the Georgia Chamber of Commerce

Suzanne Sitherwood didn't really have a career goal in mind when she went to the Atlanta Gas Light Co. as a co-op student. Her father, however, had an inkling. He told her she would end up running the company. Sitherwood recalls laughing – laughing really loudly – to his prediction.

Father does, indeed, know best.

Today Sitherwood, 48, runs three companies and also serves as the senior vice president of Southern Operations for AGL Resources. In that capacity she is the president of three of its utilities – Atlanta Gas Light, Chattanooga Gas and Florida City Gas. Her obligations for AGL Resources are mainly governmental, she says. “I spend most of my time making sure that people are in the right places. You can't get a job done without the right people. I have a lot of titles, and when I'm in Georgia, I say 'I'm the president of Atlanta Gas Light,' and in Florida, I say 'I'm president of Florida City Gas.' You can follow where this is going.”

She also will be running an entity that even her father couldn't have foretold. Next year, she will become chairperson of the board of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce. She will be the first woman in the chamber's 95 years to have that position.

Sitherwood's rise to the top was methodical rather than that of a shooting star. She graduated from Southern College of Technology with a bachelor's degree

in industrial engineering technology.

“Engineers were in high demand, particularly women engineers. There were no women in my classes and my grades were decent so I got a four-year-scholarship. I never knew who paid for my college, but I liked Southern Tech because it was less R&D and more pragmatic.”

She considered a military career but Atlanta Gas Light Co., was recruiting women heavily and she came on board more than 25 years ago in the co-op student program in the cathodic protection group. A self-proclaimed military brat (her father was an engineer), she recalls fitting right at home in the early days with the company.

“Joe LaBoon was the CEO, and he was a military man, and he ran the company like a military base,” she says. “There was a definite dress uniform, and the offices even looked like military. The only thing missing was barbed wire. I felt right at home.”

She says being comfortable in the situation must have been “in my DNA. I was comfortable being around military men and men, like my father, who talked a lot of technical things, like machines and guns. A lot of the men in the field wanted me to succeed. They cared about my succeeding and were even protective. Some of those men still work with me.”

She has held a variety of positions including vice president of engineering, environmental and construction, chief

By Mary Welch
Photography by Phillip Vullo







engineer, director of competition planning, director of rates and regulatory affairs, and director of residential markets.

Prior to her current role, Sitherwood served as vice president of gas operations and capacity planning, a position she held since June 2002. As vice president, Sitherwood directed the natural gas distribution infrastructure, gas control, gas measurement, marketer relations, customer-related services, interstate pipeline relationships, asset management, and management of storage facilities.

“I changed jobs every two to three years – just like the military,” she says. “I always adjusted well and loved the new challenges and mental stimulation of getting up to speed quickly. One opportunity led to another. I guess they just ran out of jobs and gave this [the president’s job] to me,” she says with a laugh.

She considers herself “blessed” to work there. “To me, it is all about customer service and providing our customers with the energy they need. We put together a team, and I want all of our individual talents to work together to provide the best customer service. It sounds like a textbook speech, but it’s not that easy to execute.”

As part of her job, she became more involved with the Georgia Chamber of Commerce, which represents business interests statewide, and she took on several leadership roles.

“I have limited time, and I wanted to get involved in groups where I could lend my talents and help business across the state,” she says. “Of course, economic development is very important to our company, and there are bigger issues as well, transportation, education.”

She maintains that she didn’t have her eye on the chamber’s top leadership role, but she did want to take positions where she could make a difference. “It wasn’t about becoming the chairperson of the chamber,” she says. “I was there to learn and get out in the state and learn and listen. If you get out and talk to people and you care about Georgia and know your facts, people will listen. It also allowed me to engage in the political arena. I wanted to do more than write a check.”

Sitherwood’s husband, Guy Griswold, retired from Procter & Gamble where he was in charge of external affairs, and is now with Blue Ridge Strategies, a public affairs firm. The two are political aficionados. In fact, Sitherwood name has been mentioned in some circles as a future political candidate – possibly for the governor’s office.

“I keep hearing people say that,” she says. “I don’t plan on stepping down from this position, and I don’t

know why people would be saying I have political ambitions. Actually, go raise \$10 to \$15 million, and then come see me.”

“Suzanne is very intelligent and extremely capable,” says Lindsay Thomas, who is retiring from AGL Resources as a senior vice president of governmental relations. He also was the president and CEO of the Georgia Chamber of Commerce for seven years. “She has boundless energy and she loves the political world – and she’s very capable in it. Politics request some sensitivity, and she has a natural knack. She gets along in politics, and she loves the political game. She really knows how to get along with the players, and she knows the process and how it works.”

Sitherwood’s political acumen as well as her technical knowledge played out well as she headed the chamber’s Environment & Energy Committee and worked to secure

says. “And I think we were going in the right direction – forming a regional water council. It had to be grass roots, effort and we had to go out and help people understand what it will take to provide water for the state in the future. There is no silver bullet.”

Her work was not easy. “She’s so capable and works well with other people,” says Charles Tarbutton, the past chairperson of the Georgia chamber. “She hit the ground running on the water issue. She knows how to pull people together and leverage their strengths in a team environment. The water bill was our highest priority and with her leadership – with the hundreds of hours she and her team spent crafting a plan that took into consideration the concerns of everyone across the state – it was a complete success and quite an accomplishment.”

Steve Green, chairman of the board of the

situation. And, I think that’s pretty cool.”

As she takes over the leadership of the Georgia Chamber next year, she will help lead it through a variety of issues. “Transportation, the election with a lot of politicians trying to get elected, education,” says Tarbutton. But he believes Sitherwood will do fine leading the state organization.

“She has been very involved with the chamber for several years and with several important programs,” he says. “With her hard work, she set the stage so her becoming chair is normal, a natural progression. She deserves it.”

Sitherwood is “not a shrinking violet,” says Thomas. “She has nerve and guts and connectivity. She can get a group of people together and work things out. She has a lot of gravitas and traction. She’s comfortable in the business-political crowd, and it really was natural her becoming the first female chair. It’ll open the door wide open.”

Sitherwood is targeted on where she puts her energy and talents. “If it’s good for the state, it’ll be good for business,” she says simply. In addition to the Georgia Chamber, she serves on the Governor’s Energy Policy Council and the Metropolitan North Georgia Water Planning District Governing Board.

She also serves on the board of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta and chairs its wellness and legislative board committee. In addition, she is chair of the Atlanta New Century School Advisory Board and The Carter Center Board of Councilors. She was also recently appointed to the new Atlanta Dream Advisory Board.

Sitherwood is a member of the Alexis de Tocqueville Society of United Way and a co-chair for the Atlanta Regional Council (ARC) 50 Forward Program. She also served on the boards of the American Cancer Society, Clean Air Campaign, Emory Hospital Visiting Committee, Atlanta Woman Advisory Board, Livable Communities Coalition, Neighborhood Development Partnership, Inc., Governor’s Task Force on Transportation and AID Atlanta.

For her part, Sitherwood says she is up for the challenges. “I want to take a leadership role,” she says. “I’m high energy, and the cup is always half full. I know my journey has just started.”



“I changed jobs every two to three years – just like the military,” she says. “I always adjusted well and loved the new challenges and mental stimulation of getting up to speed quickly. One opportunity led to another. I guess they just ran out of jobs and gave this [the president’s job] to me.”

passage of Georgia’s first statewide water plan last year. The plan, which was approved by overwhelming bi-partisan, geographically diverse margins in the General Assembly, has as key objectives supporting the state’s growing economy, protecting the health of the state’s citizens, preserving our natural resources, and enhancing our quality of life.

The first step in the plan is the creation of ten regional water councils, each of which will work over the next three years to analyze how much water is currently available in local streams, rivers and other sources, determine how best to manage and conserve those resources, and develop plans that take into consideration how future growth will be accommodated. The General Assembly funded the program this year.

“I wanted to do something about the water situation because, well, we need it,” she

Georgia Ports Authority, has worked with Sitherwood on a number of issues. “She has great insight, both in understanding politics and business. She’s very involved in the state on a number of levels. She has a unique faculty to reach out and be inclusive and let a lot of diverse opinions come together and reach a consensus.”

Sitherwood admitted her work with the water issue was “challenging. We are in the midst of a challenging economy with lay-offs, but we have to keep our eyes focused and feel good and optimistic about our own future. We have to keep our companies healthy and our state healthy. We can’t have our water situation be like our transportation where we knew it was a problem for decades and didn’t do anything. Saying ‘I told you so’ isn’t good. But five years from now we can look with pride at what we accomplished with the water