

State of the City 2017: Biloxi, Proud of it!

Here is the prepared text of Mayor Andrew “FoFo” Gilich’s State of the City address, delivered on Feb. 1, 2017 during a Biloxi Bay Chamber of Commerce luncheon at the Beau Rivage Resort & Casino.

(Opening remarks from podium)

Good afternoon.

Thank all of you for being here for the State of City of Biloxi. Thanks to the Biloxi Bay Area Chamber of Commerce for hosting this affair again this year.

I would also like to offer special thanks to the members of the City Council for working with me and give them credit for what we have been to accomplish over the last 20 months.

I’ve been asked, what is it like to be mayor?

It has been non-stop. A surprise a day.

Like being the CEO of a holding company with eight multi-million dollar businesses.

Another comparable. It’s like a computer operating system.

Again, thank you for your interest in the City we all love so much.

Biloxi is unlike any other city in this country. You all know about that BILOXI THING.

Some are born with it, some catch it, when you get it, wherever you may be, it never leaves. It is as undeniable as a fingerprint and recognizable in a nanosecond.

Biloxi is many things, almost all good and many of them great. Our goal is to make them greater, and keep it SAFE, FRIENDLY AND BEAUTIFUL.

Today we’re going to show you the major initiatives that we have underway and in the works to enhance this city that has such a long and colorful past and such a bright future.

Before we go on, I want to stop and recognize Mike Leonard. About five months ago, I talked him and his wife Chalmer, into coming back home to become Biloxi’s Chief Administrative Officer. He has been a life friend to me.

Mike, are we having fun yet?

Thanks again to everyone on OUR TEAM BILOXI. The cast is assembled and we have our act together.

And now, let me show you what I mean.

(Video presentation begins)

You merely have to look back at our past... to appreciate the opportunities that we have before us today.

We were a struggling city... in the '70s and '80s. Tourism was down. Initially because of Hurricane Camille, and later because I-10 opened all the way to Destin, leading many tourists to by-pass Biloxi. Many of our hotel and amusement properties were old and were in a state of disrepair.

So to revive tourism, the city and business leadership developed the Biloxi Waterfront Master Plan. In 1988, the Point Cadet Marina was completed, the Europa Star landed, and Biloxi’s journey to economic recovery slowly began. That modest gaming vessel that traveled 12 miles out on its cruises to nowhere was the origin of what we have today, a multi-billion dollar casino resort industry. It employs thousands and attracts millions of visitors to our city. In fact, 5.7 million visitors per year and we intend for that number to grow.

Biloxi has enjoyed 25 years of success and economic vitality and now is a major gaming destination. We are on the threshold of even greater things to boldly move forward. Compelling initiatives are on the table that will insure continued economic vitality, growth and quality of life improvements not only for us but also for generations to come.

Some major initiatives are already in play and within reach:

- Build waterfront boardwalks and amenities from one end of our city to the other
- Make ultra-high speed internet available and affordable for all

- Construct a new main gate at Keesler AFB and boulevard leading to it
- Complete infrastructure re-build projects, roads and drainage in all parts of our city
- Daily Amtrak service

These are some of the next steps to catapult Biloxi to the next level.

The next level is an attainable goal. However, everything takes time and money. Our grant team is comprised of representatives from each city department. It meets weekly to effectively identify and pursue local, state and federal funding opportunities for many projects. It continues to be very successful in the development of grant applications, and landing numerous grants. This year, in a project using city and county Tidelands money from the 2016 Legislature, we will begin construction of the West Biloxi boardwalk, along the seawall, behind restaurant row. But this is only one step.

I envision a day when we have boardwalks from DeBuys Road all the way to Point Cadet and around to the Back Bay, with access to municipal piers for excursion boats like the Pan American Clipper to take visitors to barrier islands or Deer Island or just site seeing. I see walkers, runners, cyclists and boaters enjoying an array of waterfront recreation and restaurants serving up our fresh local seafood dishes against a backdrop of our beautiful beaches and sunsets.

We are part of the Gulf Coast Rail Work Group established by Congress. With help from Senator Roger Wicker, it has been recommended to Congress that we restore passenger rail service from New Orleans to Orlando. Biloxi has secured \$250,000 from the Southern Rail Commission to help build a new platform to accommodate the new service. Note that Biloxi, through the Coast Transit Authority, is the ONLY city between New Orleans and Orlando that already has a multi-modal transit station in place and ready to go. We have the buses, the cabs, the buildings and the rail. All we need are the trains.

We have taken a leadership role in establishing the Gulf Coast Broadband Initiative. It currently is comprised of 12 of the 15 city and county governments in the coastal counties. Through the construction of redundant fiber optic ring, the goal is to timely deliver affordable, ultra-high speed internet connectivity 1-Gigabit (upload and download) universally across the coast. The need for this connectivity is there and is required for the next/new generation of business opportunities. That's at home and at work. The Gulf Coast Broadband Initiative has already spurred new fiber construction across the coast. There is some private sector rollout of 1-Gigabit download service but not yet the 1-Gigabit upload, universal and affordable. Our efforts have led to a \$500,000 analysis funded by BP settlement money for this broadband initiative.

One of our initial targets upon taking office was to deliver a new Keesler main gate at Division Street and Forrest Avenue. The new gate will provide easier, more secure access for the thousands of base personnel and visitors, and also will create an economic development corridor from the Division Street exit off I-110 westward to the new gate. The project has already secured \$10 million in funding pledges from the State of Mississippi. Thank you Governor Bryant.

We are also engaged in planning a significant economic development opportunity that would locate two new high-tech industries here in Biloxi, providing hundreds of "new collar" jobs in cyber security, biometric identification and nano-composite high performance materials. This means high-paying jobs.

We are working to establish a homeless servicing center in Biloxi, which will assist people in transitioning to housing. Look for an announcement in the first quarter of this year. We already have myriad agencies helping hundreds of homeless in parts of our city, but to solve this issue, we need to centralize and better coordinate.

The homelessness issue is not exclusive to Biloxi. Every vibrant city in the country is wrestling with how to solve it, but I know we can do it. We have shown that. It's because of the teamwork and dedication of a number of local agencies that my friend Gulfport Mayor Billy Hewes and I were among a handful of leaders recognized by the White House for implementing a process to "virtually end veterans homelessness".

We are pushing to do the same for all, non-veterans, children and families.

Of course, when you mention infrastructure, everyone thinks of one thing – the challenges we have in east Biloxi. The genesis of the problem we inherited is not as important as how we address it.

To relieve the stress, the first thing we did was to get temporary paving on the main thoroughfares in the 55 miles of torn up streets. Next thing, we pushed the contractor to establish milestones that must be met.

Just about all of the new water system is complete. The sewer system is making progress, new storm drains as well. You see permanent pavement going down on the eastern portion of the project now. Today, I stand before you to say that this year you're going to see entire blocks paved at a time. The temporary inconveniences that have become a way of life over the past 24 months are going to

turn into permanent improvements that will be here for generations to come. I drive the same streets you do. I see the problems, and we are taking action.

Some say why don't you just fire the contractor and sue the design engineers because of time-wasting and costly change orders?

It's not that simple. Within the limits of the 2014 contract, we are controlling the things we can control. We are doing the things that we can do, and they are having an impact. We make progress each and every day. You have to remember that this is a federally approved and federally funded project that requires federal approval of any changes.

It's worth explaining to you about how the funding for this \$355 million infrastructure program works. The project involved 13 design firms, 12 contractors and a program management firm. MEMA/FEMA then approved what, where, when, and how things would get done.

According to the contract, each item that the contractor submits for payment is checked by our program management team. Then it moves forward for payment by the city. Then, the application for reimbursement along with the cancelled check, go to MEMA and FEMA where they recheck the contract items. After all of that, we get reimbursed. It is a real process, cash flow intense. Things could get easily clogged up.

In May 2015, when I took office, Biloxi was awaiting about \$16 million for infrastructure work that was performed. We began meeting with MEMA and FEMA, bi-weekly at City Hall. Those face to face meetings were successful. I'm happy to say that today what we are owed is about \$7 million. Now, contractors get paid as they expected.

This is an ongoing process. We have about \$200 million of construction remaining. We continue to meet every other week. I am confident that this project will be completed without the stress to city finances that we had in the past.

What we have done and what we continue to do is set the stage for significant growth. Growth in tourism, jobs and opportunity, and an enhanced quality of life. In the past year, with Margaritaville and the new Hyatt Place leading the way, we've seen nearly 500 new hotel rooms come online in Biloxi. That's an 8 percent increase in one year.

When you look at the others in the works – the LaQuinta, the Hilton Garden Inn, the Watermark and Margaritaville Phase II – we have more than 700 new rooms in the pipeline for opening in the next 18 to 24 months.

That's an 18 percent growth over a two to three year period. This rate of growth of non-casino hotels is unprecedented, actually since the 1984 Worlds Fair in New Orleans.

THAT'S why it's important that we continue to improve our infrastructure – the waterfront infrastructure, the tourism infrastructure, the economic infrastructure and yes, the neighborhood infrastructure — so that we are ready to capitalize on this new wave of prosperity that is within our grasp. That's why it's important that we take a holistic approach to improving drainage and overall city services including the Woolmarket area. Promises were made and I intend to see that they are kept.

Other improvements will come in small doses, like the return of Ship Island excursions, a public bike share program, pedestrian bridges over Highway 90, STEM summer camps to provide alternative routes to success for our children, and a health care industry zone that can stimulate growth downtown.

That's the big picture, but let me tell you what we've been doing on a daily basis to provide those quality of life services that you expect and deserve.

The Biloxi Police Department is comprised of 191 employees, 128 sworn officers. Every day, our men and women in the Biloxi Police Department are working to keep Biloxi a safe and friendly city. In my presentations, especially to our Biloxians, and when our officers are present, I remind them that these officers will literally "lay down their lives for you".

Our pro-active law enforcement meant that last year we saw fewer burglaries, fewer robberies, and fewer assaults and the three homicides committed in our city were all solved.

The Police Department answered 120,000 calls for service last year, with an average response time under three minutes. You call and we are there.

Our officers use the latest imbedded body cameras and other technology to provide an unprecedented level of accountability.

The Biloxi Fire Department is comprised of 179 employees, 168 sworn firefighters. Our Fire Department provides us with the lowest fire insurance rating in the state. It's true. We are one of only three cities in the state with a Level 3 rating. That saves every homeowner and business on their fire insurance premiums.

Last year, the department responded to 6,928 calls for service, which included a 10

percent increase in emergency medical calls. This increase was met by our firefighters either completing or renewing certification as Emergency Medical Technicians, 43 EMTs within the department.

Also this past year, the department hosted the 88th Annual Southeastern Association of Fire Chiefs' Leadership Conference. This was a distinct privilege. It was the first time for the conference to be held on the Gulf Coast and brought over 300 fire chiefs from across the southeast to stay and enjoy Biloxi.

The department also obtained over \$600,000 in grants, which enabled the hiring of 12 new firefighters allowing the department to meet the National Fire Protection Association's recommendation of having 15 firefighters on the scene for every structure fire and fire alarm call.

This year, two new fire stations are being designed which will further strengthen the city's fire protection and response times in the north Biloxi and Woolmarket areas. Safety is vitally important when you consider the growth being seen everywhere in Biloxi.

The Community Development Department issued permits totaling nearly \$80 million last year. That's \$49 million in commercial development and \$30 million in residential.

Last summer, Margaritaville opened its doors at the site of the former Casino Magic. What an attraction: 373 rooms, a host of restaurants, a 450-foot Lazy River, and a family entertainment center that includes a 40-foot, two-story volcano rock-climbing wall, a sky trail ropes course, and the nation's first indoor zip-line roller coaster.

We also saw the opening of the 114 room Hyatt Place Hotel, the Big Play Bowling Lanes featuring a bowling alley, sports bar and arcade, a second Walmart Neighborhood Market, Petco Store, Wentzell's Seafood Restaurant and Patio 44, which, of course should be called Patio FoFo.

Currently, work is underway on the Watermark, a 154-room, all-suites \$12 million investment at the site of the former Santa Maria Del Mar Apartments, and the Blind Tiger and Woody's Roadside Grill are nearing completion on the beach. Golden Nugget is designing its new Saltgrass Restaurant to open on Point Cadet this year.

You will also see the multi-million dollar hotel and amusement park expansion of Margaritaville take place as well as construction of a municipal pier on Point Cadet for the return of the Ship Island excursions back to Biloxi.

Over in the Port Division, we saw the reconstruction of the boardwalk surrounding Point Cadet Marina and the resurfacing of the Biloxi Small Craft Harbor parking lot.

Repairs to Sherman Canaan Back Bay Fishing Dock will begin this year and we'll introduce Wi-Fi at the Small Craft Harbor and Point Cadet Marina.

The Parks and Recreation Department saw growth with the installation of a new playground, boardwalk and kayak launch at Hiller Park as well as a new splash pad at the Sunkist recreation area, a joint effort with Harrison County.

The department hosted the 2016 Mississippi Recreation and Parks Association Conference, which brought in parks and recreational professionals from across the state. Biloxi was chosen by the Association because of its enjoyable atmosphere.

We have 26 parks, more than four dozen recreational facilities, including two community centers, a natatorium, the Saenger Theater, and a 68-acre sports complex. The department hosts numerous childrens, seniors and all-inclusive programs including annual dances, parades, sports leagues, senior luncheons and the Farmers Market.

With the help of Harrison County, a splash pad will be added at Hiller Park. A new heater is on the way at the Biloxi Natatorium. The department will continue to work with the Public Works Department in keeping Biloxi beautiful.

When things break and need immediate attention, the Public Works Department responds.

Public Works crews spent thousands of hours removing almost 1,800 yards of sand and debris off U.S. 90, and maintained rights of way double the length of the Mississippi River.

Construction was also seen throughout the department with the reconstruction of the cemetery fountain, park and restrooms at the Old Biloxi Cemetery. We rebuilt the Hiller Park Pavilion and we repaired traffic signals and installed hundreds of LED street lights on so many of our major thoroughfares.

The engineering Department assumed the program management of the city's \$355 million infrastructure program and oversaw the push for progress in the North Contract.

Our infrastructure work will move south of CSX Railway, and, as I have said before, you're not going to see the massive disruption we seen in the past.

In fact, it's going to be more like you saw in the work we did on the final leg of the four-laning of Popp's Ferry Road. Engineering is also continuing to do the leg work on the extension of Popp's Ferry Road to U.S. 90.

Sidewalks along CT Switzer Drive, sewer installation on Woolmarket Road between Shriners Boulevard and Lorraine Road and in the Larkin Subdivision were all complete.

Residents in the Holly Bluff and Cedar Lake areas this year will see the completion of city sewer.

Improvements will begin on the Popp's Ferry Causeway and on sidewalks on Reynoir and Jackson streets.

Overseeing the city's legal tasks is the Legal Department, where Peter Abide replaced Gerald Blessey, who is now helping with key city economic development issues.

In the past year, our legal department secured \$2 million in rent money that had been "inadvertently" withheld by the State, and the economic development division initiated the sale of surplus real property that put an extra \$1.2 million into the General Fund. The department also composed the new ordinances for the "Go-Cups Districts" and the Waterfront Design Standards.

For all of the day to day work of our city departments and divisions, we also rely on a number of successful partnerships to ensure your quality of life.

Kessler Air Force Base, which marked its 75th anniversary this past year, continues to demonstrate why it has been recognized as one of the best bases in the Air Force.

Coast Transit continues to provide affordable and dependable transportation for residents and visitors.

Today, the Biloxi Housing Authority provides safe, decent, affordable housing to over 1,700 families at 10 sites and at subsidized homes across the city. This past year, we saw some leadership changes. Bobby Hensley, who has served us so well as director, retired and Helen Werby stepped in as new executive director. I would be remiss if I failed to note the passing of a longtime housing leader, a community advocate and someone I considered my friend and a friend to our city, Mr. Delmar P. Robinson. I should also point out that right around that same time, we lost another genuine hero, the former Mayor, businessman, philanthropist, Jeremiah O'Keefe.

One of the most important partners is our Biloxi Public Schools system. Construction is on track for our seventh and eighth graders to enter a brand new Biloxi Junior High School this August. This state of the art facility offers 51 classrooms, a fine arts wing and the latest in STEM technology and science labs.

A quality school system is one of the first things prospective new residents and businesses look for.

That's the goal, to enhance and improve the things that Biloxi is known for. Tourism. An affordable and excellent quality of life. Good schools. Good jobs. Safe, friendly and beautiful.

Yes, we do honor the best of the past but the ultimate goal is a better future for all.

(Video presentation ends)

(Closing remarks from podium)

We are making progress but we need to quicken the pace and expand the scope. My job is not done, it has just begun.

It says in the book of Proverbs, "Where there is no vision the people perish".

Either Thomas Edison or Albert Einstein said, "Vision without execution is hallucination."

A few months ago, I heard our Governor Phil Bryant say "Vision without action is delusion".

You all know me and you know that I thrive on ACTION. Be assured, Biloxi will not be delusional.

I stand here humble and so proud that about 20 months ago the people of Biloxi and many of you here today gave me your vote and support and continue to show confidence in my leadership as mayor of the City of Biloxi.

I pledge two you TODAY that:

We will turn the visions for our beloved Biloxi into plans.

We will make those plans a reality.

And all of us will be able to revisit some of those great Biloxi Memories.

Create new ones for our children and their children, to live, experience and remember.

And from near and far, we all can say and proclaim...BILOXI, PROUD OF IT.