

Good evening.

On behalf of the Wilmington City Council, I would like to thank those who are watching at home as well as you in the audience tonight. We appreciate your interest in the state of our city.

I come before you tonight not just to take a look back at the past year, but to look forward to the next year. To look at what we have achieved and what the vision is for the future of Wilmington.

First this entire City Council joins me in thanking our families for their support and sacrifice as we serve our community.

We would also like to thank City Manager, Sterling Cheatham, his leadership team, and the 1,000 employees of the City of Wilmington for their continued hard work and dedication.

I would also like to thank the members of our City Council:

- Mayor Pro-tem Margaret Haynes
- Councilman Charlie Rivenbark
- Councilman Kevin O'Grady
- Councilman Neil Anderson
- Councilman Paul Lawler
- And Councilman Clifford Barnett

They are passionate about making our city a great place to live and helping to create policies that move Wilmington forward.

What we have been able to achieve would not be possible without them, or the many volunteers who work together to help make our city a better place.

Fiscally, again this year, we have a balanced budget, a AAA bond rating and are very strong financially.

Over the past several years, we have been planning for our future. Improving infrastructure and facilities, ensuring public safety, addressing transportation, developing economic opportunities and being fiscally responsible to you, the tax payers.

The work that has gone into these projects was not done in a day, a month or even a year.

And they surely weren't done by the city alone. Together, with many partners, we have achieved much.

The Riverwalk is a fine example of a legacy project. This city and its leaders made a commitment many years ago to make the river accessible to the citizens.

Because of the hard work and the perseverance of many councils, the last section of our award winning Riverwalk was completed last year. It will be enjoyed for many generations to come.

City leaders some 10 years ago, made a decision to move forward with a convention center. But part of that project included a full-service, top of the line hotel for our community.

I can assure you that each council was committed to that goal. And today, I am proud to say that the City of Wilmington has a full-service, top of the line Embassy Suites hotel attached to its convention center and it is something that I'm very proud of.

This \$40 million, privately owned development with 186 rooms, will pave the way for larger conventions, bringing more people to Wilmington.

Another legacy project that has been years in the making, is the redevelopment of our Water Street deck.

This redevelopment offers the city the opportunity to

- add housing
- increase its tax base
- build more commercial space
- redevelop an old parking structure
- open up Chestnut Street
- and create a venue that will be one of the most impressive structures in our city's history.

I'm proud to announce tonight that our development partner has closed on his loan and getting ready for construction.

And to keep greenspace in our downtown, we are in the process of designing the Northern Waterfront Park which you the tax payers supported overwhelmingly in the parks bond referendum.

This 6 ½ acr park has been thoughtfully planned as a place to be active, or relax and enjoy the view of the river. The anchor of the park will be a performance venue surrounded by open grassy lawns and well landscaped gardens. It is anticipated that construction will begin this year.

Wilmington Downtown Inc., has reported that the downtown has attracted 45 new businesses last year and added over 300 new jobs. And we continue to see much activity and progress.

Over the past decade, our downtown has transformed into an active, exciting, and safe residential center. I'd like to thank Ed Wolverton, his staff and their board for their leadership.

Transportation is an issue that always receives the most attention in our citizen's survey. We know how important it is to improve mobility in our city and are constantly looking for opportunities, funding, and partnerships.

A project that has been talked about for at least 20 years, is the widening of Kerr Ave and if you drive there today, you will see much activity.

At the completion of Kerr Ave widening, the NCDOT will begin the construction of the overpass at MLK and Kerr Ave. Shortly thereafter, the intersection of Military Cutoff and Eastwood Road will begin.

These 2 overpasses are part of 5 that were identified and funded by NCDOT and will most definitely improve traffic flow in our city. And they can't finish them fast enough.

Another important project is The Love Grove Bridge, identified as a neighborhood concern in the 1970s, is our biggest transportation bond project, and will be completed this spring.

I appreciate all the work that went into this and especially the citizens' persistence for this bridge to become a reality.

We also continue to work on improving connectivity for pedestrians with the addition of more crosswalks, additional sidewalks and the new South College Road trail which will provide walkability from Holly Tree to 17th Street Extension.

And of course, our Cross City Trail, which now has 15 completed miles. And because of the popularity of the Cross City Trail, we will be adding additional trails with the funds from the bond referendum that you, the citizens, passed.

The concept, of moving freight trains out of our city to across the river, and transitioning the current tracks to a trolley system, began with an idea, much like the concept of a Riverwalk over 20 years ago.

The Wilmington Rail Realignment initiative will take diligence and years of much hard work. But if we persist, our future will benefit from this project.

I'd like to thank Laura Padgett, Glenn Harbeck and the many volunteers who have been part of this visionary plan.

One of the goals of the Wilmington City Council was to create more youth initiatives to build positive relationships and help prevent youth violence. Let me share some examples of what we are doing.

The growing *Police Activities League* is an athletic based program designed to connect police officers with the youth. Our *Super Girls program* challenges female teens to explore new career paths, fitness and sports activities.

Using funding from the parks bond, as well as public/private partnerships, the City is building new gyms at Maides Park, and the MLK Center.

We've completed the Par 3, 9-hole Inland Greens Park complete with a playground and walking trail, and added The First Tee of Greater Wilmington program at the Municipal Golf Course.

And this year, we will select a location for 13-15 new multi-use fields that will be enjoyed by our youth and afford us the opportunity to host soccer, lacrosse and other tournaments.

One of the most important services that the city provides is public safety – fire and police. These men and women answer over 200,000 calls for service per year and continue to do an exemplary job protecting us, the citizens.

Several years ago, city council committed to replacing five of our outdated, aging fire stations and we began that process in 2009 with the groundbreaking of the station at Empie Park.

Today, we are nearing the completion of our promise with the construction of the station at the corner of Carolina Beach Road and Shipyard Blvd.

I want to thank Chief Martinette and the men and women of our Wilmington Fire Department.

In addition, the city made a commitment to construct a public safety training facility to include state of the art simulators for both our fire and police department as well as an indoor firing range for the men and women in our police department.

This training center will provide future public safety personnel the opportunity to stay abreast of the newest technology and training tactics.

As we saw in last year's statistics, I'm happy to report that overall crime in our community continues to fall. It has dropped an additional 8%.

This is OUR success story and is due to the efforts of the men and women of the Wilmington Police Department, Chief Evangelous and the citizens who help us fight crime every day.

It is important to remember that while crime continues to fall, our population continues to increase.

Although much progress has been accomplished in the past several years, there is still more work to do.

In light of our successes, we now have two new significant issues facing our community.

One is the opioid epidemic. It's no secret that opioid abuse is a complex national problem with far-reaching consequences.

It not only impacts the individual that have become addicted but also the families, hospital, non-profits as well as our fire and police officers. Its impact on our city, both in terms of lives lost and the time and resources spent, has been tremendous.

This is a public health issue, not just a criminal issue or police issue. We all have to work together to address this reality now.

It will not be easy nor will we declare victory soon but we are doing our part at the local level to try and stop it.

Our other issue is maintaining a healthy water supply for our citizens. I know how surprised we all were to find out that we had the chemical GenX in our drinking water.

Chemours, which produces this chemical and is almost 100 miles from this city, was able to discharge this into our water supply for years.

The response from

- your local elected officials
- state officials
- federal agencies
- Cape Fear Public Utility Authority
- and most importantly, you the citizens, made the company stop the discharge of this chemical immediately.

The situation we find today is that although levels have dramatically decreased, we as elected officials and you the citizens must ensure that this will never happen again.

I want to thank Chairman White and the New Hanover County Commissioners not only for their response and leadership on GenX, but also on the opioid epidemic.

Also, I want to thank our state delegation in Raleigh

- Rep Davis
- Rep Grange
- Rep Butler
- and Senator Lee, for their immediate action on both these issues as well.

Over 30 years ago, Hollywood came to Wilmington. We watched an industry evolve and become a major player in our local economy. We have also witnessed its struggles, yet we remain positive that we will see its return.

I wish to thank our elected leaders in Raleigh who have worked very hard to ensure \$30 million per year for film grants which will continue to support the industry in our area.

In the 1940s and 50s, Wilmington had a slogan – *Wilmington, The Port City of Progress*. And for good reason. While the major employer, the Atlantic Coastline Railroad, was leaving town, our forefathers formulated initiatives to recruit business and industry to the Wilmington region.

In 1956, Wilmington Industrial Development was formed. Known today as Wilmington Business Development, their successes have been many.

In partnership with New Hanover County, Live Oak Bank is headquartered in Wilmington and has plans to double the size of their campus with two new buildings and is expected to result in several hundred new jobs over the next few years.

I wish to thank Scott Satterfield, his staff, as well as the Board of Directors at WBD.

Today, *Choose Cape Fear*, led by the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, is an economic development initiative that markets our region.

I wish to thank the Greater Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, Natalie English and her staff for their continued support of our local economy.

Where we are today just didn't happen. It took planning, insight, commitment, hard work, and yes, time.

Our Riverwalk, convention center, and other facilities have taken time to build. Our crime statistics have taken time to reduce.

But we have remained steadfast in our journey and as a result, we have had a tremendous amount of successes over the years.

It takes vision and ideas that you the citizens and we the government create and the energy and commitment to move them forward. Through steadfast determination, they come to fruition.

With the ups and downs in our economy, the changing political landscape, our commitment has been and continues to be to make Wilmington one of the great cities in America.

Being one of the fastest growing regions in North Carolina is no accident.

Just look around at the number of successes we have today.

New Hanover Regional Medical center, the area's largest employer with more than 6,800 jobs, infuses \$1.95 billion annually into our economy with no government funding.

70 years ago, Wilmington College opened its doors. Today, UNCW, is ranked the #6 best public university in the southeast, plans to have some 20,000 students by 2021 and continues to enhance its campus with more facilities.

ILM, set a record last year handling over 800,000 passengers and announced the addition of more flights. This summer, ILM will offer more flights than ever with 3 network carriers, 8 non-stop destinations, 7 hub airports and 6 international gateways!

Cape Fear Community College continues to grow and now has almost 30,000 students. Partnering with the New Hanover School Board, they began the *Career and Technical Pathway Program* for juniors and seniors from our local high schools which is a new vocational training program.

Just last year, The Port of Wilmington doubled its container services and is expecting unprecedented growth this coming year and has over \$150 million of planned infrastructure improvements over the next few years.

The Visitor's Bureau reported tourism spending and direct tourism employment, experienced its 6th consecutive record-breaking year and provides more than 6,100 jobs in New Hanover County.

And we still have work to do in the coming year.

We will continue to work with New Hanover County looking for ways to increase affordable housing.

With much input from you the citizens, we've completed the recent Comprehensive Land Use Plan and now have to rewrite the Land Development Code, which hasn't been updated since the 1980s.

We've had much discussion regarding Short Term Rentals and will be implementing recommendations soon.

And as always, we will continue to work with partners to grow our local economy so that our children will be able to find good paying jobs right here in Wilmington.

Much like our City Seal.....we have a history of persevering. We have survived much – from hurricanes, economic recessions and even depressions. We've experienced losses and we've experienced unprecedented growth. Yet today the pulse of our City is strong. Wilmington is alive. What we do today is just the beginning of more great things to come.

The future of Wilmington looks bright and we are in a position to continue the process of leaving legacies for the next several generations.

As the Athenian Oath states

We will transmit this city,
not only, not less,
but greater and more beautiful,
than it was transmitted to us.

God Bless and Good night