



Mayor Steve Williams
City of Huntington

2018 State of the City Address

Mr. Chairman and members of City Council, this message and the accompanying budget are submitted to you in accordance with Article 10, Section 10.2 of the Charter of the City of Huntington, WV.

Our past year is best described in a passage written by Charles Dickens in “A Tale of Two Cities:”

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...”

The adage proclaimed by Speaker Tip O’Neill that “all politics are local” rings true in Huntington now more than ever. We are the embodiment of what is happening throughout every municipality in our nation. All of our communities are dealing with the same issues – crumbling infrastructure, social unrest, economic uncertainty, and expectations to solve the problems of yesterday. The only difference among Huntington and Louisville, Pittsburgh, or even New York City is in zeroes. Whether we are a city of a population of 5,000, 50,000, 500,000 or 5,000,000 – we all must address these same issues.

2017 began with us facing an unexpected projected budget deficit. We addressed this crisis by making unpopular but necessary decisions. We did not waver in our resolve. As a result, the projected \$6.1 million deficit was avoided and we completed our fiscal year accomplishing the unthinkable. We finished the year in the black, without raising fees or taxes, without depleting our reserve funds, with a surplus, and by offering every professional employee who lost their job the opportunity to return.

Our organization was put through a stress test and we came through stronger and prepared to take on future challenges. However, we do not have time to celebrate this newfound resolve. We must move forward confidently as we face bigger challenges to become a greater economic and social participant on the world stage.

As soon as we began to emerge out of the chaos of the financial crisis, our city was rewarded for its vision in the America’s Best Communities competition. Huntington presented a revitalization plan on a national stage that sought to demonstrate that a small community of engaged citizens, businesses, and institutions could collaborate to form a foundation of trust, create hope and transform a region. Despite those who didn’t believe, Huntington emerged as the winner out of 352 communities of similar size.

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Huntington learned that it could successfully compete on the national stage. The \$3 million prize was an indication of what our community could accomplish if it allowed itself to aspire, believe, and commit to a bold, forward-leaning vision that is necessary to compete in a worldwide marketplace.

The best of times and the worst of times - interestingly two sides of the same coin.

A growing community learns how to embrace economic advancement while aggressively addressing issues that threaten its economic stability.

The manner in which we have faced our financial issues and our revitalization plans is quite revealing. In each instance, we have acknowledged brutal facts and have addressed them head on with an unending faith in our ability to prevail.

In addressing our financial issues, we have acknowledged systemic flaws in our city operations. Unattended, the flaws would lead to financial ruin. Necessary steps have been taken, allowing capital to become available to address our day-to-day needs. As a result, the fiscal year 2019 budget is allocating the largest budgets to ever be expended by the Police, Fire, and Public Works departments.

We affirmed that we had an expense problem, not a revenue problem. The realization was highly instructive. When we control our expenses, we control our destiny.

Our city is financially healthier than we were when I assumed the position of mayor five years ago.

Investment is occurring in Huntington at a rate that is unmatched in the past 50 years.

As an example, Fuchs Lubricants has invested \$625,000 in upgrades to its facility on 13th Street West since this past fall.

Our downtown is the most vibrant business core in a 100-mile radius.

In addition to an established, eclectic mix of locally-owned retail shops and restaurants, The Market in the 800 block of 3rd Avenue is a \$7 million, open-space retail facility that will be completed in the next few weeks. This will finalize the transformation of a once-vacant street corner into one of the downtown's liveliest blocks and, in turn, will enhance our trendy downtown marketplace.

The Big Sandy Superstore Arena celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2017 by reporting its highest-grossing year in venue history. Events at the arena generated ticket sales valued at more than \$3.6 million during fiscal year 2017, shattering the previous record of \$2.8 million in 2012. The arena continues to improve the quality of life in our region and adds a tremendous economic boost to our downtown.



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All of this progress fuels the need for updated hotel accommodations. Recently, Regal Hospitality of Columbus started a \$10-12 million renovation of the Pullman Plaza Hotel into a DoubleTree by Hilton.

Core10, a financial technology firm based in Nashville, opened an office in downtown Huntington this past year. The company is hiring 30 data analysts, software developers and engineers, many of whom are graduates of Marshall University's College of Information Technology and Engineering.

Meanwhile, Marshall University has become a nationally-acclaimed research institution. The economic and social challenges facing our community, our region, and our nation can find solutions through the research capabilities at Marshall University.

Our two regional medical centers, which are on the verge of merging, will join the ranks of those in Durham, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh.

Huntington is the home to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Huntington District. Located on 5th Avenue across from City Hall, the USACE Huntington District serves waterway needs across 45,000 square miles in parts of five states. Engineers and subject-matter experts here in Huntington are solving national issues. In fact, employees who live in our community are being deployed to Puerto Rico to aid in the response to Hurricane Maria.

The Port of Huntington Tri-State is the largest inland water port in the nation and possesses a bellwether of opportunity with the changing energy and manufacturing markets.

The Huntington Museum of Art has cultural offerings that are unmatched in other communities our size. Also, Ritter Park has been proclaimed one of the top 10 public spaces in the country.

Our "Open to All" diversity campaign serves as a reminder that everyone is welcome and has a voice in our community. This campaign is receiving national recognition for our efforts in cultural diversity.

Huntington is more than a city with a population just shy of 50,000. We are a nerve center and hub to a metropolitan area of 360,000. When combined with Charleston's metropolitan area, this population surges to almost 700,000.

Partnerships are important.

We have increased our coordination with Charleston. Our two cities have much in common. We need an active, vibrant, coordinated, economic partnership with each other.

An economically vibrant Huntington – Charleston corridor is important for our cities and necessary for the State of West Virginia.

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I have held numerous meetings and discussions with local business leaders and property owners to discuss the actions that should be taken to enhance economic opportunities in Huntington. It has been refreshing to see them come to the table as active partners and take ownership in what they can do to enhance the environment in the downtown. Together, we are in the beginning stages of creating a Business Improvement District (BID), whereby businesses and property owners will tax themselves to pay for activities that will improve customer service and marketing. City Council will be asked to approve the creation of this district when it is completed.

The recent tax reform package passed by the Congress and signed by the President created a federal tax investment program called Opportunity Zones to encourage private investment in our community. We are going to apply to have an Opportunity Zone in our city. In turn, downtown property owners will prepare development proposals to qualify for historic tax credits.

Whether it is the establishment of a Business Improvement District, the designation of an Opportunity Zone, or the rewarding of historic tax credits, these will provide a transformative economic upswing for our community at no additional cost to the city's budget.

We are a significant economic engine to the state, region and nation. We as a community must embrace this fact. We must continue to expect success and respond to challenges with unwavering strength. We do not have time to engage in self-pity and self-doubt.

Safety in our city is and must be a priority. The perception that Huntington is unsafe is unacceptable. Therefore, this budget proposes the hiring of an additional five police officers, bringing the budgeted staffing level to 108.

The citizens of Huntington and all who visit our community can rest assured that every level of government, from city to state to federal, is assisting our efforts to eliminate the crime emanating from the opioid crisis.

The Huntington Police Department has implemented a violent crimes task force. Its focus has been on identifying where violent crimes are likely to be committed. We have begun coordinating our efforts with the assistance of U.S. Attorney Michael Stuart. We expect to strengthen our drug task force efforts with various federal agencies.

West Virginia Secretary of Military Affairs and Public Safety Jeff Sandy and West Virginia National Guard Adjutant General Jim Hoyer have coordinated efforts with our police department since mid-December. The assistance of the West Virginia State Police and the technical assistance of the National Guard have been stellar. Every request for assistance has been met with a quick response.

In short, we cannot and should not ignore the perception that questions Huntington's safety. Downtown Huntington is safe. The students who attend Marshall University are safe. All who visit our town are safe.

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We cannot sit idle and allow others to place labels on our city. In doing so, they mischaracterize the way our community has embraced each individual's responsibility to overcome the crime issues that are a result of the drug problem. All aspects of our community - neighborhood groups, businesses, hospitals, schools, universities, labor organizations, and individuals - must determine what their appropriate assignment is in finding a way to overcome this problem.

Some say that Huntington is the epicenter of our nation's drug problem. I disagree. I believe that Huntington is the epicenter of the SOLUTION.

It has been wisely stated that the drug problem in this country is not the disease but a symptom of a greater disease. The disease is hopelessness. Hopelessness comes when there is lack of economic opportunity.

Because we have been aggressive in identifying ways to transform our economy and tackle the drug problem, we are on the front line to find the solution. However, there is much more to do. There is a need for an enormous amount of capital to accomplish this. We must have state and federal partners. If indeed this is as high a priority as our leaders in Charleston and Washington exclaim, then show us the money. We cannot be expected to overcome this by ourselves.

Last year in my budget message, I indicated that we had to collectively answer a question -- "What do you want?"

Your response to "what do you want?" is defined by what you are willing to do.

Everyone has to accept an assignment.

We will continue to seek federal and state partnerships to continue our economic transformation and address these safety concerns.

Our budget proposal for fiscal year 2019 demonstrates that the difficult decisions made last year enable us to use every penny for economic investment and growth and strategic efforts to ensure our city is safe. Police, fire, public works, finance, planning, zoning, and development all have a strategic role.

In addition to the hiring of five additional police officers, we will be seeking the authority to pay bonuses to recruits who meet our standards and are certified police officers. This will enable us to more quickly place officers on the street without having to send them to the State Police Academy for training. Our police department must aggressively recruit to reach this staffing level. Budgeting for an increased staffing level accomplishes nothing if the recruitment and hiring of qualified candidates is not completed.

We are also requesting the authorization of five Police Department vehicles this spring and an additional five vehicles to be purchased next fiscal year.



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In the Public Works Department, we will continue efforts to provide innovative solutions for day-to-day problems. The Public Works team has created a Safe Housing Inspection Program. The program will be a coordinated effort between Public Works, Fire, Police, and the City Attorney's Office. The intent is to streamline inspections to ensure compliance and a quick response to inattentive landlords.

Two additional code enforcement officers are budgeted to bring the total staffing levels of this division to four.

Our capital projects continue to be funded with \$1.6 million for paving, \$750,000 for street repairs, and \$100,000 for our sidewalk program.

The Fire Department will be budgeted for ongoing maintenance that has been in short supply in the six fire stations. The city partnered with the International Association of Firefighters last year to receive a SAFER Grant to hire seven new firefighters. This year, we are again partnering with IAFF for a grant to repair the exhaust fans in our fire stations. We also are budgeting for a contract with Honeywell for ongoing maintenance in the stations. Public Works is budgeting for an additional person in building maintenance to be embedded in the Fire Department for ongoing maintenance issues. Later this spring, we will be recommending that a new fire truck be funded through the Community Development Block Grant budget.

Our medical insurance programs are \$2.8 million less than what was budgeted in fiscal year 2017, providing stability to our finances.

We successfully negotiated agreements with each of our bargaining units. The AFSCME, FOP, and IAFF contracts were confirmed by City Council. These contracts authorized a 2 percent raise for fiscal year 2018 and a 2 percent raise for fiscal year 2019. In turn, we have budgeted a 4 percent raise for all administrative personnel in fiscal year 2019.

We have learned mighty lessons in the past year. We have learned that we can compete with anyone in the nation. We have the expertise and fortitude to set a path of success if we simply dare to have faith in our ability to prevail.

We have learned that even in the shadow of success, dark forces can challenge the veracity of all that is good. By simply holding onto faith in our mission, holding onto the assurance of our aspirations, holding onto the conviction of our vision and by trusting in faith in one another, we will find the strength to prevail.

On this we place our faith, our conviction, and our assurance. We will prevail.