

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 our beautiful city.

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.

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

We are often asked by our citizens what is in the future for Wilmington.

What will we look like in the years to come?

Where will all these people work....or what are you going to do about all the traffic?

As our citizens often ask us these questions.... and many more.....we, the city council along with city staff and the city manager, are always trying to create plans and ordinances that address these important issues.

They are not always easy to fix....nor are they inexpensive to complete.....but every council is focused on trying to bring the best solutions forward to address the concerns and wants of our citizens.

For many years, our local governments have been aware that we are a region experiencing a surge with new residents and prospering at a fast rate.

In anticipation of that influx of new citizens, our city as well as our county reached out to our citizens.

Through an extensive number of neighborhood meetings as well as citizen surveys, we were able to create a Comprehensive Plan, a vision for our city. You the citizens told us that your number one priority was to make our city a more walkable and bikeable city.

Specifically, you wanted a more compact and walkable development pattern with residential, retail services, and jobs located more convenient to one and another.

Our job as public servants is to listen to your desires and to create policies that reflect the vision of our citizens.

This Comprehensive Land Use Plan that was created from input from our citizens won the highest award in the State of North Carolina for land use plans.

I encourage you to take a look at these plans as they are a result of the countless hours and community meetings you, the voters in the city, asked for. You told us how you wanted our city to grow and we now have those plans in place.

Those plans are available on the city's website.

We know at times, it may be difficult, and sometimes even painful to watch empty lots develop but know this. We are a Tree City – and we will continue to be a Tree City – an **even better one** than we are today.

I also want to thank our citizens who voted in the last three years for two major bonds – one for transportation totaling \$55 million dollars..... and the other for Parks and Recreation which includes an additional \$38 million dollars.

You the citizens told us that transportation and parks are important and you overwhelmingly showed your support for these bonds.

I am very proud tonight to announce that we will be addressing our citizens most important concern which is traffic.

Our community will experience the largest investment in infrastructure totaling over **600 million dollars** during the next ten years.

These improvements include the five major interchanges in our city, which experience the largest traffic congestion.

They are:

- Kerr Avenue and Martin Luther King Parkway
- Martin Luther King Parkway and College Rd
- Kerr Avenue and Market Street
- Eastwood Road and Military Cutoff
- And College Road and Oleander

These projects have been identified for funding by North Carolina Department of Transportation.

In working with them, the city is beginning the process of implementing these major improvements.

I feel that within the next 10 years, all of these interchanges will be either completed or under construction.

This again is a commitment by the NCDOT working with the city to address the most important issue for our citizens, **TRAFFIC**.

We have also begun to look for other ways for people to travel around town without using their cars. One of these is the Cross City Trail.

In our 2014 bond we allotted 20 million dollars for bike paths, walking trails and pedestrian improvements.

We have witnessed first-hand the popularity of the trails around town and are seeing more and more people using them.

Our vision is not only to interconnect our city with roads it is also to build a trail network which allows us to travel throughout this city without using a car.

A long awaited project which we have also been talking about since the 1970s is a second entrance into the Love Grove neighborhood. This project is currently designed and construction will begin in the coming year.

In addition to the 37 transportation bond projects, we are working on other long-term projects such as....a replacement for the Memorial Bridge.....our proposal to move the railroad out of

the city and directly to the State Ports and across the river.....as well as the extension of Independence Blvd to the MLK Parkway.

All of these projects demonstrate our commitment to working on traffic issues not only for today but for years to come.

The City of Wilmington which was incorporated in 1739 is obviously a very old city. And as a result, we have very old infrastructure that needs to be – and must be – updated and improved.

In 2012, this Council approved a 5 year infrastructure improvement plan dedicating \$41 million dollars to repaving streets, sidewalks and repairing our Riverwalk.

It is now 2017 and I'm happy to say that this plan will be completed this year.

Parks and recreation space is another important item for our citizens.

The parks bond includes funding for much needed fields which will be used by many people for a variety of sports. These include soccer....lacrosse.....football....field hockey and many more.

There will also be new gyms at the Martin Luther King Center and Maides Park and resurfacing our tennis courts at Empie Park.

These improvements and additions will not only enhance the quality of life for our residents, they will also bring people from around the state into our city for tournament play which will help our local businesses and grow our economy.

The renaissance that we continue to witness in downtown Wilmington is breathtaking to say the least. New hotels, shops and restaurants continue to flourish. New business and employers continue to relocate downtown.

It has been an outstanding focus of many city councils in transforming a downtown from boarded up storefronts and no one living there to a vibrant and busy place today.

This was not done overnight or in a few years, but because of a long term focus by the private and public sectors.

With more than \$55 million in private funding combined with the city's public investment, we continue to improve and enhance our historic downtown with the RiverPlace project.

And because of the passing of the parks bond, we will finally have a world class, urban park attached to our Riverwalk located on the Cape Fear River. I want to thank this council, Wilmington Downtown Inc and the businesses and citizens who voted for the bond.

Many of you have asked me the question – will our film industry survive?

Although the last few years have been tough, with the help of our general assembly and our local delegation, we were able to obtain a \$60 million dollar grants for 2 years.

This has allowed us to have two productions here in Wilmington called Good Behavior and Six.

It was announced earlier this year that Good Behavior will be back for another season and we are hopefully optimistic that Six.....if the ratings are good.....will be back also.

I want to thank the members of the film commission and Johnny Griffin who continue to look for ways to bring back this very important industry for our community.

I have in years past mentioned that one of our strongest industries is tourism. With the help of our convention visitor's bureau and the tourism board, under the leadership of Kim Hufham and her staff, we are again seeing another robust tourism season.

Although our area has some of the most beautiful beaches and great attractions like our battleship and aquarium, we have to continue find and look for ways to attract tourists to our area.

When we built the convention center there were many questions asked regarding its viability to attract conventions and conferences here.

Well I'm pleased to announce we had a great year in 2016 with 221 event days generating over 3 million dollars in revenues. And that's without a convention center hotel.

Today, we can see the brand new Embassy Suites hotel being constructed next to our beautiful convention center and I'm also pleased to announce that the private investment of over 60 million dollars in downtown hotel rooms has surpassed the public investment in the convention center.

I have stated many times before that city government can't do it all. That we need partnerships both public and private to achieve the goals of our community.

We have worked with our county commissioners on a number of projects including parks and economic development to move our region forward in past years. I and the entire city council will look for opportunities to cooperate with our county commissioners in this coming year on issues important to our community.

In addition we will continue to work with UNCW as well as Cape Fear Community College in enhancing our community. They have been good partners to work with on a number of issues, from downtown revitalization to community relations.

Your commitment to our city is greatly appreciated and you are a valuable resource for many things our city is working on.

We also look forward to working with the Chamber of Commerce on a marketing plan for the Wells Fargo Golf Tournament.

This is a once in a lifetime event that will bring many visitors to our area and will expose Wilmington and the surrounding region to a national and international audience. This is a great opportunity to recruit new businesses that will be visiting and sponsoring the event.

The City of Wilmington's long-term economic development partner, Wilmington Business Development, continues business recruitment and retention for Greater Wilmington.

Recent Projects that the City of Wilmington partnered with WBD on including Castle Branch, Tek Mountain, nCino, Live Oak Bank and Alcamo are adding committed jobs and investment and creating significant economic investment and jobs in our city.

WBD's focus lends great credibility to our region's long-term economic development success.

One of our major concerns is housing that is accessible and affordable for our citizens. This past year, the City joined with New Hanover County to form a citizen-based committee charged with finding ways to improve affordable housing.

We expect them to have recommendations ready for consideration within the next few months.

From these recommendations we hope to create policies that will produce more affordable housing for our citizens.

Another pressing issue facing our city is one facing the entire nation and something you've probably heard about – the opioid epidemic.

This is a problem in our community and we have been working over the last several months with many partners to help address this issue in an organized, efficient, and focused way.

A person with a drug addiction is devastating to our community. We are **all impacted**.

I'd like to thank the many people including the hospital and non-profit organizations who deal daily with this issue, and also the general assembly members who are considering bills that will address this epidemic.

Keeping a city safe is one of the hallmarks of city government. It is also one of the largest expenses in our city's budget. Yet without a safe city people don't move here and businesses don't invest here.

On the crime prevention and community building side, we have added staffing over the last two years to keep our community centers open longer.....we've focused more funding for our non-profit agencies to support our anti-youth violence initiatives – expanding youth jobs programs, or after school programs.....and continue to look for other ways to reach at risk youth through partnerships with churches and other local agencies.

The new Community Relations Advisory Committee has just started to meet and was formed to create discussions in our diverse community and provide ideas and input to improve not just race relations, but people relations.

And something that will help prevent crime while also helping improve the neighborhood is the Wilmington Police Department and Wilmington Fire Department training center and indoor firing range.

This past summer, the city bought 46 acres on Hurst Drive by Maides Park. The training center is now under design and expected to start construction in early 2018.

We continue to focus on better ways to police and protect our citizens using technology and assets more efficiently.

Again I want to thank Chief Evangelous and the men and women of the Wilmington Police Department for fielding more than 180 thousand calls for service a year and continue to drive our crime rate down.

In closing, we were just voted the most popular city in North Carolina.

The year before the most popular Riverwalk in the country.

We have been identified as one of the best places to open a business and our university is one of the best values for higher education in the nation.

We have beautiful beaches, and a rich history which we are proud to preserve. We have so many amenities that attract many people from around the country to Wilmington. These are some of the many reasons that attract people to our area.

These new residents will continue to relocate here and call Wilmington home. This influx of new residents will not stop....it might ebb and flow.... but it will not stop

In the coming year, we will begin the work of updating the land development code, which has not been updated since the 1980s.

As we all know, Wilmington has changed much since then. We will have a transparent process involving citizens, businesses and experts to draft this important document that will define the future of Wilmington.

You have helped us in the past – with the comprehensive land use plan and we look forward to working with you the citizens in the very near future.

I think we can all agree that Wilmington is a special place.

Our quality of life is our greatest asset and the reason many move here. The challenges for all of us is to embrace our new friends and neighbors and at the same time, protect the very quality of life that draws and keeps us here.

It will be challenging yes but working together with you the citizens, our city staff and our city council we will do it.

Good night. God bless you. And God bless the City of Wilmington, North Carolina