



## **2016 State of the City Address**

*Presented by City Manager Jonathan Lewis  
North Port Area Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting  
January 21, 2016*

It has been six months since I last stood before you, and I'm happy to report that North Port just ended another year of milestones. We've completed projects that enhance the City's overall quality of life and position us for growth.

Here is a look at some of the accomplishments in 2015 as well as what is to come in 2016.

Our roads directly impact our day-to-day lives. The Road Bond project to fix our sub-standard roads is one of the most significant projects in the City's history. So far phases 1, 2, and 3 have been completed, that is more than 83 miles of roads. Phase 3 alone impacted more than 7,000 homes in the Biscayne Drive area. This month we started on Phases 4, 5, and 6, which brings the project east of Sumter Boulevard and includes a total of 87 miles of roads. By year end, we should have substantially completed 170 out of the original 266 miles of substandard roads throughout our city.

We are underway with the design phase to widen Price to four lanes between Sumter and Toledo Blade. This evening, there will be a community forum at the Morgan Center from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. to allow the public an opportunity to see and provide input during the design. I encourage you to attend if possible. Those who are unable to attend the face-to-face session are encouraged to participate in a live social media chat on both Facebook and Twitter using the hashtag PriceBlvd.

Public Works has been working on expanding our sidewalk network and improving our drainage. Last year, the City completed construction of 19,648 feet of sidewalks, including a pedestrian bridge over the Cocoplum waterway. This year, the City will construct 11,754 feet of sidewalks.

Drainage projects were also completed last year; a \$365,000 project replaced three 72 inch pipes under Hillsborough Boulevard; a \$380,000 project replaced three 72 inch pipes under Cranberry Boulevard near the Commerce Park; several pipes were replaced on Pan American Boulevard, including near the Trott Circle Industrial Park at a cost of approximately \$100,000.

The year 2016 will see even more road and drainage projects. Construction is scheduled to begin on a stormwater project on Pan American next month with a cost of approximately \$250,000. The design of the Spring Haven Drive extension is underway. Additional parking areas on U.S. 41 are under design. Construction will soon be done on a pedestrian walkway lighting project along portions of U.S. 41.

With a median age of 41, this City has been deemed a Playful City USA for six consecutive years. In 2015, there were more than 73,000 visitors to the City's fitness centers and programs. There were about 4,300 visitors to the City's skate park, and there were about 1,500 facility and pavilion rentals at our parks. The City provided a more than 21% increase in new recreational programming. Our North Port Night at the Stonecrabs drew more than 500 North Porters to a ball game.

There have been enhancements to our park system; renovations to the Canine Club dog park; new playgrounds at both LaBrea and Hope parks; a new pickleball court at Highland Ridge Park; and enhancements to the parking and natural landscaping at Oaks Park. Redevelopment of Butler Park is underway to increase the number of fields available to both youth and adult leagues. Enhancements have been made at the City Center Green, hopefully creating a more attractive location for private and public entities to host special events.

Construction of the first phase of the Blueway project is almost done. This project connects four of North Port's parks by waterways. You will be able to traverse 6 miles of waterways from Butler Park to Blue Ridge Park and be able to stop at Dallas White Park and McKibben Park along the way. Our community celebration to recognize this project will take place on Saturday, February 27 from 9 a.m. to noon at McKibben Park. Atwater Park has seen a lot of activity; the new playground has opened and the splash pad will be opened with a celebration on Saturday, February 20. Beginning on Monday, March 14 – the first day of Spring Break – Parks and Recreation will host a series of events at Atwater Park to bring more community members to the park. We hope that the business community, as well as our residents, will join in the celebrations.

In 2016, the Commission will complete a Parks and Recreation Master Plan which will be utilized to meet the recreation desires of the community. Work has continued on the Myakkahatchee Creek Greenway. The Greenway is a stormwater feature which will also create a linear natural park along the creek through the center of the City. This year enhancements include the clearing of invasive plant species along the Creek from Butler Park to the Canine Club dog park.

In 2015 an analysis on the historical flow of the water at Warm Mineral Springs was started and we expect to get that information in the next month. The plan is to use that information as a starting point for what the Commission would like to see happen at the property. Since the City reopened the Springs, gate revenues are at approximately 1.6 million and the operating cost is at approximately 1.0 million.

Construction of a pedestrian, bicycle, and equestrian bridge to connect North Port's Environmental Park to the County's 25,000 acre Carlton Reserve to our north will begin in the next several months. This connection will allow access to these public lands from North Port.

Our Utilities Department is preparing for growth. The pilot water expansion project to bring water lines to neighborhoods is underway. Utilities is closely monitoring growth throughout the City to ensure that agreements that were entered into prior to the recession are achievable today. Water and wastewater plant improvements including lift stations, clarifiers, transfer

pump, injection systems, and filter beds all occurred this year. Our Police Department received 25,526 citizen generated calls for service last calendar year, and, despite a growing population, reported major crimes are down 12 percent from the previous three year average. The department continues its efforts to better serve and protect our growing community. Our Police Department is award winning. In June, it received the EXCELSIOR status of accreditation; this is the highest level an agency can receive. Of the 318 police departments throughout Florida, North Port is one of 18 with this recognition. This is a testament to the efforts of the Commission and all of the members of the Department. Our individuals have been recognized. One of our officers (John Parisi) was recognized by the Southwest Florida Police Chiefs Association as the 2015 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year. Our school resource officers received the National Association of School Resource Officers Model RSO Agency Award.

The department has undergone change; they are working to ensure that our Law enforcement officers are both guardians that serve and warriors that protect.

Fire Rescue had a 10% increase in calls for service responding to more than 6,600 emergency incidents in 2015. They also checked and replaced more than 2,200 smoke detector batteries, a free service to residents who need that extra help. During the calendar year, the department participated in 175 community special events or festivals at local schools, clubs, businesses, and city sponsored functions.

One of our firefighter paramedics (Kevin Barnes) was a keynote speaker at the Florida Fallen Firefighter Wall of Honor dedication at the Florida State Capitol Complex in Tallahassee. The dedication included the name of our fallen firefighter, Lt. Jeffery Newland. The National Emergency Management Accreditation Program named our City's emergency manager (Rich Berman) as an Assessment Team Leader. And the City was certified a Storm Ready Community by the National Weather Service. North Port was only the third city in the State of Florida to achieve this designation. 2016 will see construction of a replacement Fire Station 85 at Biscayne and Ponce de Leon. The 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Boots and Badges Blood Drive garnered 319 pints of blood to help the community. And the City's fifth annual Remember the Fallen 5K Memorial Run had more than 750 participants. One of the most important outreach efforts teaches children fire safety. In just the month of October, more than 4,000 pre-school, kindergarten, and first graders heard presentations on fire safety.

The goal of the City's Social Services Division is to help families and individuals in their time of need by linking them to the resources that are available. In 2015, the division received more than 4,500 calls for assistance. This past holiday season, nearly 850 local children were provided toys through the Toys for Tots program, the Holiday Chest program, or the adopt a family program. The Back-to-School Resource Fair provided more than 222 families access to 32 service agencies. 1,000 backpacks filled with school supplies were distributed. The Family Service Center became the location for a "Haven" providing temporary emergency shelter for families.

Our IT Division hosted a Cybersecurity information session for City residents. They installed new networking equipment, upgraded assets to support Sarasota County's new dispatching system, upgraded the network connection speed, created a recovery site for citywide data recovery in the event of a disaster, and added public Wi-Fi to the entire City Center Green.

A City mobile application directly puts City information and resources in the hands of mobile users. Interactive maps have been created to provide access to information. You can now use the Find-a-Park feature to locate parks near your location; request services, such as trash collection or report graffiti; the most popular feature – finding out what new development and commercial businesses are coming to North Port.

We have a new mobile friendly website. The focus is on the simple search feature. It works like Google, allowing keywords to direct you to the information you want.

We are communicating directly with the Community via social media. The City and Police Department Facebook pages now have more than 11,500 followers. We also now have more than 1,600 followers between the two on Twitter.

If you didn't see the Solid Waste Division's version of "All I Want for Christmas is You," thanking our Solid Waste customers, check it out. At last check, the video has had 1.7 million views. Our Police Department's Operation Santa Surprise video has received more than 30 million views and was featured on major news networks across the country.

Ensuring that the Community knows what is going on has been a priority. During events like the Freedom Festival, Trick-or-Treat at City Hall, the Tree Lighting and Poinsettia Festival, and the Poinsettia Parade, there were live and frequent posts using social media. Staff also uses social media to help make emergency announcements, road closures, or other important information.

Financially, the City of North Port celebrated successes this year. North Port's overall bond rating improved this year. Fitch Ratings moved the City from a "stable watch" to a "positive watch," citing the City's return to a structurally balanced budget as the main reason. In September, the Commission approved a structurally balanced budget with no increase in the property tax rate. The City's economic improvement is also a reason for the improved bond rating. The taxable value in North Port increased in the last two years (9.66 percent in 2014 and 8.78 percent in 2015). They also cited a lower level of debt as a reason for the improvement. The City and its Police and Fire unions have also negotiated pension reform that will help ensure the long-term financial stability of the City.

North Port continues to grow in rooftops and commercial space. Fiscal Year 2014 saw 505 new home building permits and in Fiscal Year 2015 758 new home permits were issued. New businesses have opened, to name a few, the Blue Tequila, Strawberry Moon, K-Rico, Astaldi Construction Corporation, Christian Bros Automotive, and - my son's favorite - Dunkin Donuts. Some of our existing businesses grew, including Busy Bee Cabinets which opened a showroom this year. Suncoast Technical College will break ground at Toledo Blade and Cranberry and is scheduled to open in summer of 2017.

In 2016 and 2017, the City will be making important improvements to its planning tools for future development. The Uniform Land Development Code will be updated. This process will allow for public input and I hope residents and our business community get involved.

We know that North Port continues to get accolades as a quality place for residents to live. For instance, Freddie Mac just listed North Port as a top five most improved metro area year-over-year for its housing market. Gallup and Healthways ranked 100 metro areas on five components related to well being and the North Port metro area ranked as number 1 overall. Forbes listed their Top Ten Best Cities for Job Growth in 2015 and North Port made the list.

The improvements in North Port are a testament to the work of our City Commission, our employees, and community members – like you.

Nothing I have mentioned could have been accomplished without the direction of the Commission and the hard work of all the City employees.

I look forward to 2016 as the year of even more improvements.