

2019 SOTC – St. Petersburg, FL; 2/23/2019

Good morning!

It is good to be back at the historic Palladium at St. Petersburg College.

I want to thank Chairman Charlie Gerdes for that introduction. This will be Charlie's eighth and final year on the St. Petersburg City Council, making him the longest serving councilman from District 1 since Rev. J.W. Cate left office in 1991.

Charlie has served and led with distinction and I look forward to seeing him in action over the course of this next year. Thank you, Charlie.

And my thanks to each of his colleagues, the members of our great St. Petersburg City Council. Please stand and be recognized.

Thank you, as well, to my Deputy Mayor and City Administrator, Dr. Kanika Tomalin. She not only oversees much of the business of the city and thousands of outstanding public servants, but continues to be a strong and inspiring presence throughout our city in her role as deputy mayor. Thank you, Kanika. And thank you as well to Tom Greene - our Assistant City Administrator.

We really have a first-rate team under us, people that keep the city running without fanfare...people that make us look good, make our city shine. I talk a lot about how people are St. Pete's best asset, and that includes those who work for us.

It especially includes the public servants who keep us safe from harm...the men and women of the St. Petersburg Police Department and St. Pete Fire & Rescue.

It's early in my remarks, but I'm going to go ahead and brag about both of these departments right now.

Thanks to the leadership of both departments, to the men and women who go to work each day and put their lives on the line, and thanks to an engaged and vigilant community, the state of St. Pete is safe.

Overall crime has dropped more than 30 percent over the past five years.

Auto thefts, which have received considerable attention, continue to fall; down nearly 40 percent since I was first elected. The raw numbers paint a clearer picture. Auto thefts peaked in 2006 when nearly 3,000 cars were stolen. Fewer than 750 were stolen last year, which is a record low for us. There's a lot of credit to go around for this decrease, but mostly we want to thank you, the residents, for making it harder for bad guys and misguided teenagers to steal your car. So, please, keep up the good work, keep your keys in your pockets, and keep your doors locked...it helps to keep our city safe in so many ways.

There's another, larger announcement I want to make today. Five years ago, the St. Petersburg Police Department had an interim police chief, a dilapidated headquarters, an even worse training center, and ugly green uniforms and cruisers. There was no community-oriented policing like Park, Walk, and Talk (which our officers spend about 20,000 hours a year doing, creating a strong relationship with the community, which has resulted in a record amount of tips received).

Policies that were not beneficial to our officers or our residents, such as a high-speed chase policy, were in existence because no one had said "enough" - that it was time to err on the side of safety. And, perhaps worst of all, morale was low. Officers were leaving, not coming...and they certainly were not staying.

Since 2014 - when we began to turn this ship around - with our best officers taking the lead - we've hired 259 new officers. More than 200 are still on the force, a nearly 80% retention rate so far. That's a record for us.

Today, progress and stability are all around us, most noticeably at the corner of 1st Avenue N and 13th Street, where an amazing and long overdue police headquarters - complete with our city's largest solar array - will open in less than one month.

St. Pete, I am pleased and proud to stand here today and tell you that the transformation of the St. Petersburg Police Department is complete and that the state of the department has never been better. Chief Holloway and your command staff, Assistant Chiefs Dente, Kovacsev, and Gilliam, please stand and be recognized.

There is work to be done, always, but we couldn't be more proud of how far we've come...how far the outstanding service of our officers has carried us all.

Our St. Petersburg Fire and Rescue department, led by Chief Jim Large, also continues to shine through community engagement and awareness, ensuring our city's people and our many new structures and renovated buildings are safe.

And, I'm especially proud of the ways we are working to make sure our Fire department reflects the diversity of our community, not only today, but for years to come.

About three years ago, a few concerned citizens and former firefighters reached out to Deputy Mayor Tomalin with worry about the impact a rash of retirements would have on diversity within the department. Working with the community, our team created a series of outreach efforts that highlight opportunities for our under-represented neighbors. In addition to mentoring and targeted recruitment campaigns, a cadet program, like we've long had in our police department, now works to offset the costs of training for those who may not otherwise be able to pursue this noble career path due to financial constraints.

And, a partnership with Gibbs High School that exposes and trains students for service after graduating will yield its first class of graduates in 2019! Special thanks to Gibbs

Principal Reuben Hepburn, and all those who are working everyday to expand opportunity with St. Pete Fire and Rescue. Preparing young men and women for a career in the fire service or medical field is one of the most significant ways we are increasing lifelong opportunity in the Sunshine City.

And, thanks to our taxpayers and our St. Petersburg City Council, we were able to finally replace the aging Fossil Park fire station. It opened just a few months ago and it's more than just a beautiful building - as it will help to ensure our firefighters are better equipped to do their jobs.

It's also open to the public, as are all of our fire stations. Please stop by and say hi. The men and women who work there are always happy to receive visitors, happy to welcome kids to the station and inspire them to someday join the department.

After all, everything we do is for the children of this community. We are working to create a city of opportunity now and for the future; for the kids.

I've highlighted the success of our Second Chance program in the past, but because it's such a point of pride and so important to our future, I'll do it again. Since April of 2015, 356 of our community's children have attended our Second Chance program after committing their first misdemeanor. That means instead of being sent to a juvenile assessment center - they were sent to give back to our community. We afforded them a second chance and to their credit, they took advantage of it.

It's a shining example of who we are in St. Pete.

Candidly, I wish we had the power to do even more as it relates to criminal justice.

I wish we could do things like fully decriminalize small amounts of marijuana. But we have a state attorney, and we have state laws, as outdated as they may be.

Because the reality is it probably won't be long before small amounts of recreational marijuana are allowed in Florida. And when that day comes, the State of Florida will be a fairer place to live, especially for African-Americans, who we know are more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession despite federal data showing that black and white Americans use marijuana at about the same rate.

Fortunately, our police department has worked hard and worked smart to redirect residents of our city who commit petty crimes into a diversion program rather than send them to jail. We are big proponents of Pinellas County's Adult Pre-Arrest Diversion Program. We are determined to keep families together, people at work, and records clean.

And on the topic of fairness, I want to touch on the recently successful Amendment 4, which will restore the voting rights of more than 1 million residents with prior felony convictions, including many right here in St. Petersburg. The amendment language was

self-executing, meaning it doesn't require lawmakers to weigh in or implement it. The good news: people are registering every day. It's working. And we don't need the Florida Legislature to touch a single thing.

To me, it's simple. The more people voting, the more people engaged in our democracy and in our government, the better. We cannot do enough to extend opportunity to those re-entering our community, whether it's the opportunity to vote, or the opportunity to work. Our whole community benefits when everyone in it believes their personal prosperity is possible.

A couple of years ago, in his farewell address, President Barack Obama said "It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy...to embrace the joyous task we have been given to continually try to improve this great nation of ours, because for all our outward differences, we in fact all share the same proud type, the most important office in a democracy, citizen."

Now, thankfully, there's a great deal of civic pride and participation here in St. Pete. Your attendance this morning, and the work you do throughout the year to make this city shine, are evidence of that.

But soon, we'll be asking even more of you, and urging the rest of our residents to be as engaged as you are. We are commencing a generational endeavor called Vision 2050.

Some of you may remember we embarked on a similar exercise about 20 years ago, called...wait for it...Vision 2020. City officials, sponsors, hundreds of citizen delegates, steering committee members, and presenters led the way, crafting an impressive document that helped to inform future decisions and guide our growth.

But we want to do even better this time around.

We want to take full advantage of interactive technology and new platforms available to us to create not just a guiding document, but a constructive conversation. We want and need to hear from you.

There will be more on this to come, but starting today, you can visit StPete2050.com to help us begin the discussion.

And there is, as you know, a lot to discuss.

Our city is growing, thankfully. We are on the rise, literally and figuratively. We owe this, in part, to a national economy that rebounded strongly out of the Great Recession. But our success is not the result of larger, external forces. As was highlighted in our recent State of the Economy, St. Pete is outperforming the United States and many of our peer cities.

In the last three years, our median income increased by 20 percent, compared to 12.5 percent for the United States as a whole. Among Florida's five biggest cities, the most recent data shows that our poverty rate is now the lowest. Unemployment is also in decline, outpacing the Tampa Bay region, the State of Florida, and the United States. And it's declined every year since 2015. Property values in our south St. Pete Community Redevelopment Area are up nearly \$260 million dollars in the past four years.

'St. Pete Works', our recent collaboration with community organizations to increase employment in the CRA has already yielded jobs for more than 100 of our residents.

Our progress isn't an accident. It's the result of many factors, including and especially the focus and hard work of your city government, our community partners, and thousands of determined residents, business owners, and young people. That's the spirit of St. Pete; that drive to dream bigger, do better, and be better.

One such example is our Cohort of Champions youth training initiative. One of several initiatives under our 'My Brother's and Sister's Keeper' program, Cohort of Champions is one of our many responses to a string of gun violence among young people that plagued our city more than three years ago. Each year, African-American teenagers and young men are recruited to join the program and better position themselves for college or job placement. They are given career readiness, entrepreneurial, and team-building training and their families receive vital wrap-around services. So far, more than 132 of these young men have become champions.

One of them, 15 year-old Kashif Haynes told us that, quote, "This program impacted me because I've seen there are better ways of life than what I saw. I see kids stealing cars, robbing, and selling drugs...and I saw that it doesn't have to be me. I could be better than that and I could change my community and help others see the same thing I'm trying to see and accomplish."

Kashif is here with us this morning and I'd like for him to stand and be recognized.

Kashif is only one young man of 132 who is rewriting his story! And that number is growing.

Our future economy will be stronger and more diverse because of these young men. Helping them - and their families - realize their possibilities and potential is the least we can do. And, we know that as long as there is need we must do more.

Our economy is also transforming, which is more good news. We will always have our sacred foundations, such as our cultural arts and museums. In fact, our museums (and there are now nearly one dozen of them collectively employing more than 2,000 people) had nearly one and a half millions visitors enter their doors in 2018. It's remarkable.

But we are now building on such foundations.

We are growing up.

We had our renaissance. We had our recession. This is our coming-of-age. If you're looking for St. Pete to be a sleepy retirement town with a hospitality-focused economy - keep looking. It's not who we are, and not who we want to be. When people admire our city's efforts to go green, it has nothing to do with benches. Those days are done.

We are building a city of the future and for the future.

We are leaning on our 'Grow Smarter' strategy to grow and recruit jobs in marine and life sciences, specialized manufacturing, financial services, creative arts and design and data analytics. We've learned these are the most sustainable and rewarding jobs for the residents of our city. The data shows our strategy is working.

Last year alone, our city development administration helped secure nearly 2,000 new jobs for our economy - that's a big number - and most of them were 'Grow Smarter' jobs in one of those five sectors I just named. We are diversifying our economy with more livable wages, good benefits, and more consumer spending power. We have also been focused on retaining and growing anchors in these industries like Jabil, Raymond James, Power Design, L3, and UPC. These important anchors secure a cluster of workforce talent that other companies want to be around.

And while recruiting, securing and growing anchor corporations is a priority, it's not our sole priority. We are as determined as ever to support our small business owners and entrepreneurs. This is evident not just by the myriad of programs and services offered by our Greenhouse, or our marketing department's outstanding showcasing of local businesses, but by a newly proposed ordinance called the Storefront Conservation Corridor plan. This unique overlay is the result of a nearly two-year community conversation and aims to promote independently-owned businesses, maintain a pedestrian-friendly streetscape and promote the conservation of historic assets along Beach Drive and Central Avenue, from the waterfront to 31st Street. This isn't the answer to our growing pains downtown, but it is an answer.

It's another tool in our tool kit to help keep St. Pete local, to help us keep the vibe alive.

I want to thank every person and organization that provided valuable feedback and helped to shape this ordinance. We brought everyone together on this one. And I mean everyone. It is proof that through patience and persistent public engagement, anything is possible.

And so I look forward to city council's unanimous approval so that we can send a clear message to the world about who we are, what we value, how we want to grow, and what we're capable of when we work together.

I know there are concerns about our growth. Please know that I'm concerned, too.

I'm the proud mayor of St. Pete, but, I'm also a guy that eats lunch up and down Central Avenue, buys his wife Valentine's Day presents at the RockShop, and shops for records at Daddy Kool and olive oil at Kalamazoo. Our small businesses, our craft breweries, our art galleries, our murals, our music, our grittiness - those are the things that make St. Pete, St. Pete. And I'm determined to keep it that way while also ensuring dynamic and much-needed growth - growth that includes height and density.

In a built-out city like St. Pete, height and density are the only options on the table when it comes to growth. It also happens to be a progressive approach. Unlike other cities, we are fortunate that we are not having divisive debates about sprawl and the elimination of green space. In fact, your city government has purchased and protected dozens of acres of green space since 2014. A few years ago, we decided that the property next to Abercrombie Park was worth buying, and that the future expansion of that park gave us an opportunity to better highlight its unique history while advancing our heritage tourism efforts. Working with our residents, we decided town homes adjacent to the Boyd Hill Nature Preserve was a bad idea, and so we bought those 35 acres too. And, as a side note, I am so excited about what's next for Boyd Hill as we will connect the preserve to a public campground and pioneer area accessible through a redesigned 31st Street South entrance. The best is truly yet to come for Boyd Hill.

Growth is good.

It's especially good when you balance it with quality of life initiatives like more parks, more trees, more public transportation, more bikes, more bike lanes, and more bike lanes on Complete Streets.

And yes, more of those are on the way, because public safety and building a walkable, bikeable city is a priority for my administration.

In fact, Complete Streets isn't just about quality of life - it's about life. Because speed kills and our local roads are not meant to serve as miniature interstates.

And that's why Complete Streets are also a priority for the residents who live near them...residents like Jess McCann.

Last year, Ms. McCann sent me a very touching letter. And she gave me permission to share her words with you. She said:

Dear Mayor, "I know that you received significant resistance for the Complete Streets initiative. So, I wanted to write to encourage you. My disabled daughter and I biked on it this morning for the first time. I have a recumbent trike tandem. My husband fitted her wheelchair to the back on the tandem we ride. I put a windsock on the back for visibility. I'm sure we look like a rolling carnival. Nevertheless this Momma was happy this morning! We had enough room in the bike lane. The bike lane was smooth and clear of

debris. All our favorite businesses are on that route. Rollin' Oats will be our stop on the way home. So thank you for the Complete Streets and I hope more are in the offing soon. It is really carving out a bike space out of a car centric universe. The sun was shining on us."

The McCanns and their daughter Kelly couldn't be here today, but they are at home watching.

And Kelly...we wish you were here, but please know that those bike lanes are for you. You've given us the confidence to keep going and to keep doing what's right for the future of our city, for kids just like you.

Please join me in giving the McCanns a round of applause.

This is what I mean by quality of life. We're doing those things. And as long as we do them, as long as we build not just Complete Streets, but a complete city, we can handle growth.

We can handle a tall building...or two...built planfully and according to a code and vision for our city that has served us well so far.

And I want to dispel the myth that our growth is a burden on our infrastructure. The truth is, our sewer system can handle more growth. What has challenged us in this past is not toilets flushing, but rainwater entering our aging, pervious sewage pipes and overwhelming our system.

Even the Tampa Bay Times, in a story two years ago, asked, quote, "Is the downtown building boom fueling St. Petersburg's sewage crisis? The answer is no." Those are their words.

So, please, spread the word. Our system is much improved, and we are better prepared to handle future heavy rains, which climate science tells us will only increase in frequency.

Since 2016, we've invested nearly \$200 million in the reduction of rainwater inflow and infiltration that has caused us problems in the past. And, we're building additional capacity. We've lined or replaced about 12,000 feet of stormwater pipes and more than 400,000 linear feet of sewer pipes. We've fortified manholes and increased treatment capacity. None of this would be possible without you, our constituents, our ratepayers, understanding the gravity of the situation. And so I thank you.

Now, I want to touch on a different kind of infrastructure; emotional infrastructure - a term I am borrowing from my friend Peter Kageyama.

The new St. Pete Pier is emotional infrastructure.

We are building a sense of place, a place where memories will be created, where kids will laugh and learn, where couples will fall in love or get married, where so many special occasions will be celebrated.

Now, I know what you're thinking - when does the darn thing open?

The answer is...soon.

The process to replace the pier began about fourteen years ago when I was the chairman of the St. Petersburg City Council.

I am fully aware that it took only eight years to send a man to the moon following President Kennedy's 1961 speech.

There are no politics on the moon, though. Nor are there constituents or a city council. (Sorry, guys).

But, the most important thing about this new pier isn't the budget or the timeline, both of which are subject to so many variables. The most important thing is getting it right, ensuring that residents and visitors, young and old, rich and poor are drawn to it like a beacon; ensuring that the focal point of our city's postcard makes us proud for generations to come. I'm happy to take the heat on the cost of things like construction materials, but I consider that to be largely immaterial to the larger goal.

And today, we take another step toward that goal, not with more brick and mortar, but with the unveiling of our St. Pete Pier logo and the reintroduction of our pier's social media platforms.

The logo, like the pier, is sustainable. It is timeless, not trendy. It is an illustration of our vision for the Pier – sophisticated, yet accessible. It will complement, not compete, with the environment and vibrant colors of the Pier District. And today, everyone in attendance will receive an inaugural promotional item with the new brand identity as you leave the theater.

(I feel like Oprah giving away prizes. You get a car...you get a car...)

Since this is St. Pete, they will be electric cars, of course.

And if you haven't heard, we recently partnered with Duke Energy to bring even more EV charging stations to our city. This is just the latest partnership with Duke that will help to make our city even greener. Our other recent and shared initiatives with Duke include solar power at the St. Pete Pier and our LED street light conversion which we announced early last year, and which is now well underway.

These are just some of the small things we are doing to get us closer to our sustainability and resiliency goals.

By now, you are no doubt familiar with some of the big things we've done or are doing - the work and objectives that brought us recognition and assistance from Bloomberg Philanthropies, like our commitment to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and powering St. Pete with clean energy.

We have a lot of work to do, and given the changing climate, increasing temperatures, and rising tides, not a lot of time to do it. That's the sobering truth.

And the situation we are in becomes even more daunting if we continue to go at it alone. Regionally, we've made some progress. As a state, we've made none. As a nation, we've gone backward under this president. The world community, despite the Paris Agreement, remains off course.

But not us.

Not anymore.

We will do what we can, while being fiscally responsible, to leave this city better and more sustainable and resilient than we found it. As the saying goes, "we did not inherit this earth from our ancestors, we are borrowing it from our children" - and we will do right by them; on this issue, on every issue, every single day.

We will not leave public safety and poverty and sewer pipes and the pier to the next people.

These are our issues to solve.

This is our time to shine.

And working together, I know that we can keep the state of St. Pete sunny, strong, and special for generations to come.

Thank you.