

2019 SOTC – Staunton, VA; 02/14/2019

I'm pleased to be here this evening with my fellow Council members to reflect on a busy 2018 and look forward to what's in store for this year.

All of us here tonight, from Council members to City employees, are proud to serve this community and share some of the accomplishments that we can all take pride in as a community. After all, these are not just the accomplishments of elected officials and City employees.

What you'll hear tonight is a reflection of a collective effort. Ideas shared by our citizens, strategic actions that have been taken by City leaders, and the many resources pooled from local organizations and state and federal agencies to make good things happen.

Tonight, it's all about the "we." We strengthen this community together. We make this City shine together. We thrive together.

And in that spirit, I am pleased to report that the state of the City is thriving.

The unemployment rate continues to decline, our local economy is growing, and entrepreneurship is flourishing in Staunton.

Unemployment in Staunton is currently at 2.6%, which is a significant improvement over the rate at this time last year of 3.4%. It's also lower than the current state average.

We issued nearly 2,400 business licenses in 2018, a 14% increase from the previous year.

Visitors and residents alike enjoyed lots of leisure time in Staunton last year, providing more than \$5.1 million in revenue from meals and lodging taxes. That's up 21% from the previous year.

Our financial standing is strong. While we could always use more funding to accomplish multiple projects, such as new police and fire facilities and a library expansion, we are working with what we've got and managing it well thanks to an outstanding Finance team.

We adopted a \$113 million budget last April and maintained an Aa2 bond rating from Moody's Investors Service and an AA rating from Standard and Poors. These ratings show very strong creditworthiness.

And we continue to save for a rainy day by increasing the percentage of funds placed in reserves.

As I reflect on 2018, several moments and events emerge as highlights of the year:

We were delighted to welcome several new businesses to the promising developments on Richmond Avenue. At Frontier Center, Aldi, Chick-fil-a, Bojangles and McDonald's opened in the first phase of development. And across the street, The Fairfield Inn and Tru Hotel opened at Staunton Crossing.

We're looking forward to more new and exciting growth in both developments in the coming months and years, especially the addition of industries that bring good-paying job opportunities to our community.

We received an \$8.7 million grant from VDOT to further prepare Staunton Crossing for new development with a spine road that runs through the entire development, from the Richmond Avenue gateway to Valley Center Drive on the other side of the property. The construction of the road will be a vital and essential step in attracting investors to Staunton Crossing. Stay tuned: I'll share some

more news about other steps underway to make the development more marketable a little later.

Revitalization of the City's historic treasures continues with the opening of The Blackburn Inn, a boutique hotel that was the former site of Western State Hospital. The hotel has been named an Historic Hotel of America by the National Trust for Historic Preservation for its historical significance. It's dramatic architecture and unique features are charming visitors and residents alike and adding variety to the City's lodging options.

We held our first Staunton Citizen University in the fall, and nearly 20 residents graduated in December. In case you haven't heard, the Citizen University is a 12-week course that gives Staunton residents a behind-the-scenes look at how local government works. From a riding tour of Staunton's parks to an up-close look at our public safety departments, it's a real hands-on learning experience that makes government more accessible to citizens. Stay tuned to our website to find out how to enroll in the 2019 session. I highly recommend it!

The Staunton Innovation Hub opened its doors last year to fuel the City's entrepreneurs and provide a place where creativity and idea makers can thrive. It's already leaving an impression on our community, from the transformation underway at their location in the old News Leader building, to the provision of flexible coworking space that creatives and freelancers can use to work, collaborate and innovate.

The Shenandoah Valley Regional Airport expanded its jet service with direct flights to Washington D.C. and Chicago. This expanded service improves access to our area for businesses and residents and is yet another advantage we can add to the list for prospective companies and entrepreneurs. If you have yet to take a flight from Weyers Cave to Dulles, give it a try and spare yourself the hassle of fighting traffic on a drive to Dulles.

We made yet another improvement to our emergency services with Text-to-911. Staunton residents who are hearing impaired or unable to speak freely in a dangerous situation now have the option to text our emergency 911 center. This is the final feature added as part of a major upgrade to a digital, state-of-the-art E911 system that began in 2017.

Every year, we earn recognition on coveted national lists as a tourist destination, and the past year was no exception. We made seven of those lists last year — most notably, U.S. News and World Report named Staunton among "The 8 Small Southern Towns to Visit in 2018." And it seems we were especially charming in 2018. We received two nods from Reader's Digest, first for being one of the "20 Most Beautiful Main Streets in America," and a second mention on their list of "The Most Charming Small Town in Every State." USA Today also put us on their list of "Charming Main Streets." And MSN agreed that we were charming. In case you doubted it, I think it's official: Staunton is indeed one of the most charming cities on the planet!

Last, but not least, if you made a New Year's resolution to learn to play a musical instrument, there's now a place to get an instrument free of charge. Last year, the library added musical instruments and equipment to its circulating collection. We have a ukulele, mandolin, and effects pedals for electric guitars in the collection, to name just a few. As a singer and a musician, I have to say this ranks pretty high on my list of the many cool things about Staunton.

This year, there's much for us to look forward to and accomplish together. The work we plan to do won't only be accomplished by the seven members of City Council you see here tonight, or the City's employees. Your involvement is critical.

That's why we will be conducting a citywide citizen survey this spring. We want to get a better understanding of your needs and how we're meeting them. Be sure to watch for information on how

to take the survey in upcoming utility bills over the next several months. Your input is valuable and much appreciated.

I want to take a moment to put a few other plans and activities on your radar for the coming weeks and months. These activities will play a vital role in the City's growth and direction over the next year:

City Council is in the process of revisiting and updating its 10-year vision and establishing priorities for the next three years. These guiding documents set the tone for the City's future by providing direction for Council and staff, the framework for policy decisions, and a way to evaluate the City's progress on an ongoing basis. We'll be unveiling the updated vision and priorities in the coming weeks. In the meanwhile, I encourage you to visit City Council's page on the City website to learn more and share your thoughts.

Our Economic Development team is formulating a business strategy to give us the best chance at getting the right types of commercial and industrial businesses on the remaining 275 acres at Staunton Crossing, especially those that offer good-paying jobs. Right now, we're focused on getting the land in prime shape for development. We were just notified by the state that we'll receive a grant for \$431,200 to remove and dispose of hazardous materials on the property, and demolition of the old buildings on site is scheduled to begin in the fall. All of these actions put together are setting us up for the successful development of a prime location.

The school division will break ground on a major renovation of the high school this summer. There will be more new construction than renovated space, which will give students, faculty and staff the accommodations they need and deserve for a modern-day academic experience. City Council voted unanimously to finance the project two years ago. Our public schools are a direct reflection of a community's willingness to invest in its future, and we believe this is one of our most important investments as a Council. We look forward to the project's completion in the fall of 2020 and hope it will serve as a point of pride for our entire community.

We'll continue to maintain and improve City infrastructure this year, including storm drains, water and sewer lines, roads and traffic signals. The bathrooms at Montgomery Hall and Gypsy Hill parks will get a facelift. And the main floor of the library will get some much-needed reconfiguration to meet the expectations of today's patrons, including comfy reading chairs and an improved checkout experience.

We'll begin a flood study on West Beverley Street and gather information that will help reduce the challenges some property owners on the West End encounter with flood insurance premiums. That study is possible thanks to a \$75,000 grant we received last year through the state.

And finally, we're excited about several other downtown buildings that will soon get new life, including the old Joe's Steakhouse on Johnson Street which will become the off-campus site of Mary Baldwin University's School for the Performing Arts; the purchase of the long-empty Mockingbird restaurant on Beverley; the transformation of the old Pullman Restaurant into a banquet, wedding and meeting space called Stelle Rose at Staunton Station; and the rehabilitation of the historic Beverley Hotel at the intersection of New and Johnson streets. They'll add yet more vitality to an already vibrant downtown.

In closing, I want to honor the people who make extraordinary contributions to our City every day:

Volunteers and event organizers like Sarah Lynch, who received the key to the City last year for organizing one of the most magical festivals we've ever had in Queen City Mischief and Magic;

Wilson Fairchild and all the folks who make the Happy Birthday America celebration a success each summer;

The devoted citizens on boards and commissions who volunteer their time to advise City Council, City departments and area agencies;

The 450 dedicated City employees and first responders who keep this city going every day;

The City employees who retired in 2018 after giving a combined 230 years of service;

The departments that have earned the City awards and recognition for their ingenuity and dedication. Among them, our Finance, Parks and Recreation, Police and Public Works departments and staff.

And finally, we honor the memories of those we lost in 2018:

Bob Moody, who shared the joy of music with us for 42 years in the Stonewall Brigade Band;

Former Temple House of Israel Rabbi Lynne Landsberg, a social justice activist who fought fiercely for the rights of all;

Lily Marino of the beloved Marino's Lunch restaurant;

Tom Shields, a respected youth football coach and commissioner of the Staunton Quarterback Club;

and Judy Hatcher, a devoted community volunteer and the wife of our high school's most celebrated basketball coach, Paul Hatcher.

We are grateful for each of their contributions, and may their gifts never be forgotten.

I am encouraged by our future.

With many exciting things on the horizon, and so much accomplished together in the last year, I'm optimistic about all that 2019 has in store.

Most of all, I'm optimistic about the state of the people who call Staunton home. Ultimately, it is we, the people, who make or break this City.

As a community, we have survived differences of opinion and trying times — and more often than not, we come through it with civility and strength. That's what compassionate communities do.

I'm inspired by the civic pride and courage I've seen demonstrated by countless citizens in the last year, and I'm hopeful that Stauntonians of all persuasions and backgrounds will seek to grow closer, stronger and more courageous together in the months ahead.

Thank you for all you contribute to our charming and thriving community.

May Staunton continue to be blessed in 2019.