

City of St. Petersburg

State of the City Address by Mayor Rick Kriseman

My thanks to Chairwoman Darden Rice for that introduction. Darden has been a tremendous ally as we've executed an ambitious agenda these past few years and I'm looking forward to her leadership in 2017 and beyond.

And my thanks to Darden's colleagues for their presence today and their hard work every day.

My thanks to Deputy Mayor Dr. Kanika Tomalin. Not a day goes by that she doesn't make our entire community better.

I want to thank Grace Cudar, her parents Jen and Darren, and her teachers at Perkins Elementary. And I hope Grace does not run against me for mayor this year.

Finally, before I start, I want to recognize my youth congress and thank them for joining us again this year. Please stand and be recognized.

To the residents and business owners of St. Petersburg, gathered here today or watching online or on TV, to our city council, to our tireless city team, including and especially our St. Petersburg Fire & Rescue and St. Petersburg Police Department - a police department, by the way, that is keeping St. Pete safe as our violent crime rate is currently at a 6-year low.

January 2, 2014 was the day I became your mayor, and the day we began this journey toward our collective vision.

And we have come a long way. But let's take a pause and think back to that day.

We woke up in a city with a shuttered pier, surrounded by an ugly fence.

We woke up in a city stuck in a standoff with its Major League Baseball team and with no vision for the site they call home or how to integrate it with our historic neighborhoods to the south.

We woke up in a city that had given up on building a new police station, unable to secure funding or negotiate with our county partners.

We woke up in a city with too much poverty and no plan in place to address it.

...A city with its central park serving as a bus depot as it had for more than 40 years...a dilapidated, vacant building looming over the corner of one of our most prominent downtown intersections...and a large vacant lot with no future on our historic 22nd Street.

...a city with a financial outlook so negative that Moody's said we will, quote, "remain challenged in the near term to restore structurally balanced operations". Today, Moody's says we have "a healthy operating reserve position and a strong management team that implements conservative budgeting practices." And **TheFiscal Times** just ranked St. Pete as Florida's financially strongest city.

On that January 2 in 2014, we woke up in a city with no second chances for minors... no commitment to creating a healthier St. Pete... no plan for a changing climate or clean energy... no bike share...no high-speed ferry...no curbside

recycling...a city with no Economic Development Corporation to help us compete and Grow Smarter.

That was just three years ago, and look how far we've come. Together.

Each of these strides forward move us closer to being the city we envision...an innovative, creative and competitive community of opportunity.

And, looking back to appreciate, to learn, to take stock is important - but there's so much left to do.

As you know, there are new challenges; challenges unforeseen just three years ago.

I began my remarks last year by calling attention to a spate of gun violence that closed out 2015. I pledged to address the risk factors that affect our children and young adults, to do our very best - given the limitations put on us - to end gun violence; to work with our City Council, our city team, and our community to intervene before a fatal decision is made. And so we launched the 'Not My Son' Campaign, a grassroots community effort specifically designed to protect and encourage our African-American boys and young men and to ensure that the summer of '16 and beyond looked different than 2015. This campaign, an important program in our larger portfolio of Urban Affairs initiatives called 'My Brother's and Sister's Keeper', brought us together the evening of June 30th to simply do more. Parents took a pledge to intimately involve themselves in the defining details of their children's lives.

Faith leaders flocked to help.

Neighbors declared 'Not My Son'.

The young men whose lives we so highly value affirmed their own self worth.

And since that June kickoff, not a single teenager has killed or been killed in the City of St. Petersburg. Not one. And we pray that continues.

The next step in making good on our promise is our Cohort of Champions program, a comprehensive one-year training initiative for up to 100 of St. Petersburg's most vulnerable African American boys and young men.

And we do all of this while executing our larger urban affairs strategy aimed - first and foremost - at eliminating poverty. I am pleased to share with you that our most recent data shows St. Pete's African-American poverty rate decreased 8.5 % in one year, outpacing the nation, the state, the county, and the cities of Jacksonville, Miami, and Tampa.

In fact, our overall unemployment rate is also outpacing our nation and our state - which wasn't the case just a few years ago.

And one of my favorite new statistics: Since we began this journey, new business registrations have increased by 105%. Gains have been most robust in South St. Pete, especially within our new Community Redevelopment Area where the number of business registrations have increased by 174%. 174 percent! That's a lot of ribbon cutting.

And, seeds of economic change that we've planted in recent years are sprouting growth throughout our community.

Economic advances propel us toward our goals at an astonishing pace. In addition to a 40% increase in total construction value year over year, our property values continue to rise and the demographics of our population continue to paint a picture of progress. And, while St. Pete's skyline continues to transform, our expert economic development team, led by Alan Delisle, is working hard to make sure our city's growth keeps its distinguishing character in mind...that we honor our past, while we pursue our future.

And, so we highlight this progress, but also as I mentioned, at the top, our challenges.

I'm not sure if this ever made the news, but we've had some big problems - specifically with our sewer system.

And we've had a problem with the management of that system. Too often, we've had a problem communicating the problem.

That can't and won't continue.

But until our planned upgrades are complete, wastewater discharges may continue. And no one is more displeased by that possibility than me.

As such, no one is more dedicated to fixing it than me. No group of people are more dedicated to fixing it than our city council.

That's why we're preparing to spend hundreds of millions of dollars. In fact, work has already begun - with nearly \$14 million spent since October. In addition to the more than 300 million we're spending in the short term on wastewater improvements, we are increasing our storm water rates to pay for shovel-ready projects and to update a storm water master plan that has sat on a shelf for more than 22 years. How a coastal city like ours can have a 22-year old storm water plan is beyond me - but we're going to fix that.

We're adding it to the list.

Because that's why we're here. That's why I'm here.

As I said to our council members following our most recent sewage event, there have been countless reports, studies, votes, actions and inactions - leading up to this moment. None of us were present for all of it, but all of us were present for some of it, and we are all present now.

It is our responsibility. First and foremost, it is my responsibility.

It is up to me to guide us forward and to make sure that we get the future right - that we take good care of a city and an environment that we are borrowing from our children, and their children.

And we must tackle this important work with optimism and gratitude, for I believe we are fortunate to be in this position, at this moment in time; just as we are fortunate for the opportunity to build a pier or a police station, or to eliminate poverty, or to create a Skyway Marina District or an Innovation District, or any number of endeavors. This is another opportunity to fix something and build something that we can be proud of...to get it right in a way that creates a city better than the one we inherited.

It's an opportunity to grow more resilient as the climate changes, seas rise, and the weather grows more severe.

And, it's also a chance to lead. Cities like ours across our nation face comparable infrastructure challenges, including our neighbors throughout the Tampa Bay region and state. And, while this challenge is not one we ever would have elected, it certainly presents an opportunity for us to live our values and invest at a pace and with purpose that sets an emerging standard. For the resilient way I am certain we will emerge from this trying time, I am proud of our city. We have much work ahead, but we are up to the task. And, as I said, we've already started.

With unanimous city council support, the city has allocated funding to create our first-ever Integrated Sustainability Action Plan - or ISAP - and to partner with the County on long-term resiliency planning.

This initial effort with the County will set up a long-term planning tool for the analysis of various climate change scenarios. It will inform decisions for how and where we invest, as well as drive investments in neighborhoods with the most vulnerable populations.

It is important for the whole community to be resilient not just before and after acute weather events, but during the more gradual changes in our environment, as well.

This is not some far-off hypothetical. This is real. We received about as much rain in one month last year as we normally do in six months. And it's that rain - not sewage, not too much development - that overburdened our infrastructure.

The resiliency planning we're doing is a cross-departmental effort - no more silos - and is being done in collaboration with the many storm and sewer analyses and projects underway. We understand that our city is a connected and dynamic living system where cause and effect are considered, and projects that offer multiple benefits will be prioritized.

To frame this effort, an Urban Land Institute grant brought a technical advisory panel to St. Petersburg just last month. Experts from New Orleans, Miami, Boston, and the Tampa Bay Region worked with community members to discuss their perspectives and needs as it relates to resiliency in the community. A report is expected later this month, and it will offer guidance on how to plan for resiliency in an equitable way that benefits all residents, in every corner of our community.

Now, the funding allocation is not only for planning efforts, but for early implementation projects as well. An energy efficiency analysis for city facilities is underway and will result in projects to reduce our energy consumption. Also underway is a partnership forged with the USF Center for Clean Energy where graduate students will work with the city on energy audits and offer new and innovative insights and solutions on energy efficiency and renewable energy. And we thank USF St. Pete for their continued partnership on this, and so much else.

Finally, at the end of 2016, St. Petersburg became one of only 58 communities in the nation to complete a rigorous STAR certification process. STAR is a nationally recognized community rating system where a third party verifies our measured actions for community-wide sustainability. And I'm proud to announce this morning, for the first time, that we have qualified as a 3-STAR community and are now recognized nationally for sustainability leadership.

There are only four 5-STAR communities in the entire country, and we will aim to join that list over the next 2 to 3 years.

Beyond STAR, we have made bold and challenging commitments to sustainability on behalf of the city. We've signed on to a national campaign to transition to 100% Clean Energy, and we will work with the community, our energy providers, and state leadership to make this shift. Through this commitment, St. Petersburg demonstrates unprecedented vision.

These are ambitious goals, but they will be met with the help of ambitious and talented people and organizations from throughout Tampa Bay, including USF St. Pete, USF Tampa and College of Marine Science, Eckerd College, St. Pete College, the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, the NAACP, the 2020 Task Force, the St. Petersburg Sustainability Council, the Chamber of Commerce, the Sustainable Urban Agriculture Coalition, the Sierra Club, and the Council of Churches.

A shining example of sustainability will be the New St. Pete Pier - which, not only

will be built by the end of next year - but will be built above FEMA's elevation requirements.

It will be built to last.

As it has throughout our history, the new pier and pier district will serve as the most important public space in our city. It will be for everyone. It will serve as a great equalizer by bringing our diverse community together and encouraging interaction with each other and our environment. From walking and biking to kayaking and paddleboarding, it will help our residents develop and maintain healthy lifestyles. It will be a place to discover and learn; a place for people to take it outside. And as a unique extension of our iconic waterfront park system, it will again be an integral part of our advertising arsenal.

It will be worth it, St. Pete.

It will be worth our time and money.

To give some perspective to our journey, look no further than the city across the Bay. It took nearly forty million dollars and forty years to conceive and complete the beautiful Tampa Riverwalk. There were challenges, environmental mishaps, and missed deadlines.

And, judging from media reports during last week's college football championship, the vision has been realized. It's a success.

Dynamic and iconic public spaces make good cities great; great cities grand.

As the **Tampa Bay Times** once wrote, such spaces are, quote, "often criticized by those who dislike the design, cost, or location. The Gateway Arch, Millennium Park, the Space Needle - all were controversial but looked toward the future and created exciting public spaces that will be enjoyed for generations." end quote.

We are creating such a space. It will be enjoyed for generations, by everyone who cares to come...and that makes me proud.

Our focus on public spaces and increasing access and equity in our community is not limited to our downtown or Pier District.

For example, since 2014, we've added approximately 40 acres of green space to our city for recreation and preservation purposes - no easy task in a well-developed city surrounded by water on three sides.

We've also added public transportation options, including Bike Share, which will expand to 30 stations and 300 bikes by the end of this month.

In Bike Share's second month, nearly 1,500 trips were taken for a total of 4,500 miles. Our heat map shows that some have traveled from our downtown all the way to Weedon Island. And while Smart Growth America ranks St. Pete's downtown as one of the best for walking and biking - with a score of 91 for each - we still have plans to make St. Pete an even friendlier city for cyclists.

The early returns for our Cross-Bay ferry regional pilot program are also exciting. The ferry had more than 13,000 passengers in its first two months, and the last week of December saw weekday ridership numbers rise to the same level as the popular weekends.

We don't yet know if this pilot program will warrant an attempt at establishing a permanent ferry service, much of that will depend on the demand our community creates. But, we're learning a lot - it's better than any written study - and we're providing our residents and our visitors with an easy, breezy way to travel between St. Pete and Tampa.

So, if you like the idea of a permanent connection, then give this pilot program a try. Visit CrossBayFerry.com to book your trip. And remember, free parking is available adjacent to the ferry, right next to our museum of history.

Or take advantage of our bike share.

Or take an Uber, as I did on my way here this morning.

I want to be clear - I am a proponent of ridesharing. I know our residents and visitors enjoy it, and my position is we must embrace ridesharing technology while helping to ensure public safety - which is my primary responsibility as mayor.

The next ordinance my office proposes to City Council essentially deregulates our vehicle-for-hire industry, creating a level playing field and letting the market, each of you, pick the winners and losers. We will, however, be incentivizing Uber, Lyft and the taxi industry to go through our standard process, but we will not mandate it. Ultimately, each of us will have the freedom to decide whether we want to ride in a vehicle with the city's seal of approval, or without.

Like many innovations, ridesharing technology is disruptive. And disruption is a catalyst for change. And it can be positive change. If this proposed ordinance passes and works, St. Petersburg will be a leader. We will have resolved a complicated matter that many communities and even our state legislature are still wrestling with. If it doesn't work, that's okay too. As I said on that January 2nd morning in 2014, we are not afraid to take bold action or to make mistakes. We will make them and we will learn from them.

Finally, speaking of disruption, I want to conclude with a few thoughts about the defining elections with which we closed 2016. It was a long year - many things were said, more things were felt - a dividing fault line fractured the cohesive feelings that are signature to our nation's culture, and followed a path from the nation's headlines into each of our homes.

As you may know, I've been a little critical of Mr. Trump.

My criticisms of him are not about politics.

I simply disagreed with much of what he says and how he says it. I disagree with most of his ideas and his policy proposals. I believe the things he says and does are hurtful to St. Petersburg and to the diverse and wonderful people who call our city home.

But, as both our current president and next president have said, it is time for our nation to heal. Reconciliation is a demand of our brightest future. And, it requires our attention, each of us, at the most local levels. Donald Trump becomes our president in 6 days. Our nation will wisely continue its longstanding tradition of a peaceful transfer of power. Our federal government's function will roll on.

But it's home where most of our focus should be.

And it's simply impossible to look at the elections of November 2016 and not acknowledge the resounding sound of St. Petersburg's voice. As a city we chose continued progress, values-based leadership, inclusivity and equity. A president was elected, but so were a congressman and a state senator who live in and love St. Pete. We reinforced a strong county commission and sent promising new leadership to Tallahassee. And we gave our strong approval to solar power and medical marijuana.

There is much reconciliation that needs to occur on a national level, but it's important to acknowledge how promising our landscape remains on the local level,

right here in the 'Burg.

And, it's particularly important to remember that the non-partisan positions of mayor and city council will remain focused on policy, not politics...on progress, not party affiliation. Bottom line: you can count on us to continue to pursue what's best for St. Pete, to work together to make our community better. For, by doing that, we are making our country and our world better.

So, let's continue to lift St. Petersburg up...let's continue to be that beacon of progress...that city where the sun shines on all who come to live, work, and play. Let's make St. Pete even greater.

Thank you.