



"2019 State of the City Address"

Peter Lear, North Port City Manager

January 17, 2019

***Presented to the North Port Chamber of Commerce's
Annual Meeting and State of the City Address Luncheon***

Hello, and thank you for stopping in to read our 2019 State of the City address. I'm North Port City Manager Peter Lear.

2018 was another busy year for the City and staff. We've been working hard on several big projects which are scheduled to be completed this year. In addition, we cut the ribbon on many smaller but important projects which enhance our City and make it a great place to live, work, and visit.

Before we jump into the details of the projects on the horizon, let's get into the nitty-gritty of numbers. For the fifth year in a row, we have seen an increase in property value. This year, we saw an increase of 12.6 percent. Our fiscal year 2019 budget saw no change in our property tax rate, as it remains at 3.407 mils. We saw no increase in the Road and Drainage assessment or Solid Waste assessment and an 8 percent increase in our fire assessment. For the fourth straight year, we have ensured that we're not using savings to pay for daily expenditures.

Okay, now let's talk baseball. The Atlanta Braves Spring Training Facility, recently named after ME, "Cool Today Park," is projected to celebrate completion by hosting the last spring training game of the upcoming season. March 24th, 2019 marks the spot for baseball and fun in the City. The \$100 million dollar plus project, which is a joint venture with the State of Florida, Sarasota County and the West Villages Improvement District, will help to boost tourism, all while adding roughly 140 jobs to the area. The Cool Today Park complex is projected to bring in \$125 million in capital investment and \$1.7 BILLION in economic impact. That's pretty Cool... any day.

As we work to enhance our City with new and interesting things to do, we continue to focus on those already here. Our **Economic Development** Division saw its first building completed using the Façade Improvement Program. It's a grant program put in place for businesses in a targeted area along U.S. 41. The aim of the program is to create a cohesive and cleaned up look for businesses along our main thoroughfare. Ashley Plaza took advantage of the program, and North Port Center is working toward completion.

The division also went international last year. Partnering with Port Manatee. Economic Development welcomed representatives from Chile, Guatemala, and more for International Trade Hubs. Local business professionals were welcomed to join and find out how to further our reach and make our City an international destination for trade.



Now to quickly pat our own backs, the Florida Economic Development Council presented the City of North Port the 2018 Regional Deal of the Year award for its part in the Atlanta Braves Spring Training Complex deal. That's a... big deal.

Another big deal is the hiring of a new Economic Development Manager! A big North Port welcome goes out to Mel Thomas. Please welcome her as she works to help enhance our City.

The **Finance** Department continued to go above and beyond in 2018. The department has received the "Distinguished Budget Award" from the Government Finance Officers Association every year for the last 11 years, and an Achievement of Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association. The Fiscal Year 2019 budget is roughly 161 million, with large projects like the Braves, aquatic center, and the Price Widening Project contributing. The budget was adopted without using fund balance in the General Fund for recurring expenditures.

Our Finance Director, Charlina Lowrie, retired at the beginning of this year after 12 years of dedicated service to North Port. We thank her for her time and commitment to the City.

2018 saw new leadership for the **North Port Police Department**, with former Chief Kevin Vespiia retiring after 20 years of service to the City of North Port. Chief Todd Garrison is now at the helm, bringing with him 26 years of law enforcement experience. Chris Morales stepped into the Deputy Chief position with 17 years of experience under his belt.

In calendar year 2018, the department assisted with roughly 23,000 calls for service.

The Department achieved re-Accreditation of their Excelsior status by the Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation this year. Excelsior status is only received after more than 15 years of continuous achievement.

It was a year of investment into safety for the police department. To help keep our Special Response Team safe, the department invested in an armored vehicle for tactical use in dangerous situations. At a cost of just under \$300,000, the Bearcat provides bulletproof protection for our men and women and can be used for high-water rescue situations. We also just recently finished the testing phase of Body worn cameras for our patrol officers, to ensure safety and accountability. It's estimated the equipment, storage, and personnel needed to maintain and store records will be around \$225,000 annually, if approved by Commission.

As usual, the police department participated in several events this year, many as an annual tradition. These included Shop with a Cop, Operation Santa Surprise, National Night Out, Coffee with a Cop and more. In 2018, our Facebook page had a reach of more than four million, helping to solve dozens of cases.



Our **Fire Rescue Department** also made it a priority to invest in the Department's future and saw a change in command.

Former Chief Bill Taaffe retired after leading North Port Fire Rescue for 15 years. Chief Scott Titus took the reins, with 25 years of North Port Fire Rescue experience already under his belt. Jody McCord stepped into the Deputy Fire Chief position and has also been with North Port Fire Rescue for 25 years. You can't complain about years of experience when lives are on the line.

As we expand our service to the West Villages area, more personnel are needed to keep that side of town safe. In 2018, we were awarded a federal grant through FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security which enabled the department to hire 21 new firefighters. The Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Services, or SAFER grant, is a match grant over a 3-year period where the federal match is 75 percent for the first two years and 35 percent for the third year. It provides 2.5 million in savings over that 3-year stretch.

The department responded to more than 7,800 incidents in calendar year 2018. In addition to these, North Port crews deployed to the panhandle for two separate missions as a part of an engine strike team in the wake of Hurricane Michael. In total, our personnel spent 12 days there to help in rescue and recovery. The Department is rated as an ISO-1 operation – one of only a handful in the country that has obtained that designation. This helps the insurance rating of every resident and business-owner.

Our **Public Works Department** maintained their top-notch service in the last year. Since the start of the new recycling program in 2017, and with our extensive community outreach, our residents continue to recycle more and more each year. The monthly average of recyclables collected during 2018 was 564 tons, which represents an 8 percent increase in the monthly averages of recyclables collected in 2017. That's a LOT of recyclables... great job North Port!

Now I'm going to hit you with a bunch of impressive numbers. The Department rehabilitated an equivalent of 341 football fields of retention ditches and 801 football fields of roadside swales. Additionally, close to 10,000 linear feet of roadway, culvert and outfall pipes were replaced to provide a positive flow of stormwater. That's the equivalent of about 1,412 Shaquille O'Neals. Okay, I admit, that conversion was a stretch. But still, that's a lot of work!

The road bond referendum passed by voters in 2012 continues. Nearly 500 miles of city streets have either been completely redone or received improvements.

Additionally, Price Boulevard was repaved this year. Bigger improvements are on the way.

Next week marks a big event featuring BIG trucks and BIG fun. The 2019 Public Works Road-E-O is set for January 26 from 10-3, and it's fun for folks of all ages. Join us at the Public Works facility off Chamberlain to check out heavy equipment, vendors, and more.



Our **Utilities** Department has made a splash with what they've achieved this year, and we have some evidence to prove it.

In 2018, 1.1 billion gallons of water was provided to North Port's customers and more than 260,000 meters were read. Additionally, 910 million gallons of wastewater was treated. That's equivalent to about 1,378 Olympic-sized pools filled with wastewater. Just let that soak in.

With the West Villages expansion comes more need for water facilities. The design of the Southwest Wastewater Treatment Facility was completed, and construction began last year. Staff is working with contractors and engineers from the West Villages Improvement District during construction, and it is set to be completed in January 2020.

Utilities had no shortage of awards in 2018. We'll name a few. Outreach staff received the Florida Water Environment Association's Public Education Award in the Campaign category for Ricky the Raindrop.

Additionally, the department received the Water Environment Federation's international 2018 Water Heroes Award for North Port's response and efforts to maintain wastewater system operations during Hurricane Irma.

The **Neighborhood Development Services Department** has been busy doling out permits, completing work orders, and initiating inspections, as usual.

The department found a new leader in Frank Miles, who replaces Scott Williams as Director. Scott retired last year after decades of service to the City.

A big milestone was hit in 2018, as the building division hit 10,000 permits issued. This hasn't been done since 2006. For perspective, Taylor Swift had just put out her first album, and poor Pluto had been demoted from planet status. That includes more than 1,241 new home permits and 60 commercial permits.

Our Property Standards Division gets a bad rep, but the division is there to help keep our City looking its best. Staff performed 5,567 initial inspections, and, by interacting with and educating residents, inspectors closed 93% without taking action by contractor or Hearing Officer. For the 7% of you out there, come on man.

The Planning and Zoning division has done plenty of those two things. Staff have been working with a consultant to begin a rewrite of the Unified Land Development Code. This multi-year joint endeavor between the City Commission, Planning staff, and the consultant is meant to create a better functioning code for the City.

A buzzworthy development in the City is the future hotel coming to North Port, in Tuscola Commons. In addition to temporary accommodations, a new multi-family development has



been approved, bringing 224 apartment units called “Flats at Sundown” along Toledo Blade and Price Boulevards. Much more is on the horizon, so stay tuned!

This year brought some rearranging with our departments, making **Parks and Recreation** its own Department.

Staff continues to work toward the grand opening of the North Port Aquatic Center at Butler Park, set for July 2019. The \$12 million project will include a 25-meter stretch pool, a lazy river, slides, and much more.

2018 saw a ribbon-cutting for a big park project. A brand-new playground was built within the Garden of the Five Senses Park, with the idea to include all kids of all abilities. Boundless Adventures playground features equipment providing fun and play for kids with physical, developmental, cognitive, and sensory disabilities. The \$589,000 project has the best of the best to include ALL kids.

Warm Mineral Springs added “Park” to the end of its name this year, adding to the dozens of official parks in the City. Attendance at the Springs for fiscal year 2017-2018 was a record 110,962 visitors, which is an increase of 18.5 percent from the prior fiscal year. It’s a hot spot! To be specific, it’s an 87-degree mineral-rich water hot spot.

The **Social Services** division was hard at work providing for those who need it most. During their Home for the Holidays program, 113 families and 293 children were adopted! The Community Baby Shower had 356 people and 137 families in attendance. The Back to School Resource Fair in August had 800 people in attendance and 507 backpacks were distributed.

2018 was also the first year for the division’s Senior Giving Tree event. 100 seniors attended to enjoy food, comedy, bingo, and a gift to bring home. It was a wonderful way to include a part of our demographic that is all too often overlooked.

The **Information Technology Division** helped to implement a record retention system of phone text messages for City employees. This helps City employees communicate more quickly when out in the field, all while being held accountable.

IT improved their Geographic Information Systems, or GIS. This will help to improve the access and capabilities of the mapping, which will make for easier use by our residents. Several different types of maps can be found on our website. Including new developments.

Another department which helps our City greatly is the **Human Resources Department**.

160 new employees joined the City of North Port team in 2018. That makes more than 600 employees working for the City.



Giving back to the community was also important for Human Resources as the department implemented a workplace mentoring program for North Port High students. Partnering with Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Suncoast, employees are meeting with students monthly through the end of the school year to provide a glimpse into the world of work.

The **City Attorney's Office** added another Assistant City Attorney to the mix to handle more matters in-house and help meet the growing demand for legal services.

Staff managed litigation involving the City, including working with the North Port Police Department to analyze and implement obligations of the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Act, to help keep our kids in schools safer.

The **City Clerk's Office** received 2,989 public record requests in Fiscal Year 17-18. Up roughly double from the previous year. While receiving the large number of requests, there was a changing of the guard in leadership. Patsy Adkins retired after 15 years of service to North Port. Katy Peto took over the duties last fall. The office is working on implementing a new system for records management, which – among other things – will allow residents to submit requests through an online portal.

In the **City Manager's Office**, we have several new faces who joined the team. Cari Branco and Jason Yarborough are the new Assistant City Managers for North Port. Cari oversees IT, Social Services, Parks and Rec, Finance and Human Resources, while Jason oversees Neighborhood Development Services, Public Works, and Utilities. So, if you're mad at any of those departments, you know which one to contact.

And my favorite Division in the City, because they helped write this, the **Communications Division** has been very busy. Information is the life blood of any good organization and community. We're utilizing the latest in technology to help our residents and visitors stay up to date, in the fastest ways possible. Also, getting info from them.

This year the City of North Port was named #5 in country in the Digital Cities Survey for a City smaller than 75,000 residents. The Center for Digital Government highlights many of our efforts, including websites, social media, apps, podcasts, even utilizing smart speakers.

On social media alone, our platforms had a reach of more than 10-million this past year. We had more than 1.7 million-page visits to our City website. You can now ask your smart speaker to play the "North RePort Podcast" and hear the latest news from the City. Nearly 2,000 listens so far.

We also can't forget those who still like that information in black and white. Every home in the City now gets a printed version of the "North RePort" newsletter, four times a year. More 33,000 copies into mailboxes each edition.



Like we said, we're not only speaking, but listening, and acting. Our North RePort app is making it as easy as ever to report concerns across the City. This past year more than 1,700 issues were sent into us by residents using the app. Communication is a two-way street and it's essential to an educated Community.

While this snapshot of our achievements is impressive, there is much more we have accomplished in the past year and will accomplish in the next calendar year. We can't do it without our people. Both those who work for the City and those we serve. On behalf of the Commission and all the City employees, we'd like to thank our residents for all you do to help make North Port better and an awesome place to be.