

2017 State of the City :: VBgov.com

Mayor William D. Sessoms, Jr.

2017 State of the City Address

"Virginia Beach Locals for Life"

Virginia Beach Convention Center

Wednesday, March 15, 2017

Thanks, Morgan, for your kind words.

It's hard to believe this is my ninth time reporting to this community on the state of our city. When I think back to that first year, I can really see just how far we've come. And looking forward, I see so much opportunity still ahead.

To everyone here today, I offer my deepest gratitude for the trust you continue to place in me. I do not take your vote of confidence for granted. Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to serve for another four years.

I couldn't do this without all the support and encouragement I get from The Sessoms Family. Behind every successful man is a strong woman. I am lucky to have several strong women in my life. They are the reason I can stand before you today, starting with my wonderful wife, Bev; our three daughters, Mollie, Kate and Anne Douglas; our grandchildren, Madie, Willie and Walker; my Mother; my sister, Barbara... along with her husband, Jeff; and my sons-in-law, Kyle, Fred and Chad. Thank you for your support and love. You mean everything to me.

I started to think about this event shortly after the last election, and it was with the election fresh on my mind that I decided to approach this year's report a little differently. This is, after all, the state of the city report. Trust me when I tell you, I hear from people — quite often — about how they view the state of this great city. They tell me what they like, what they don't like, and what they want to see improved.

Here's what I take away from these exchanges: people care about our community, and they care deeply. So I thought, what better way to help tell the story of the state of our city than involving the people who call Virginia Beach home. Our video crew fanned out to locations around the community to find out what's on their minds and what they hope for the future. As you can imagine, we got an earful. I'll kick things off today with a summary of what folks said when we asked them to describe Virginia Beach in one word:

[VIDEO CLIP]

Effervescent.... Fun.... Fabulous.... Beautiful.... Adventurous.... Amazing.... Home. They're all pretty great words that describe Virginia Beach. They also help tell the story of what we accomplished last year.

For example, speaking of home... we broke ground on the \$28 million dollar [Housing Resource Center](#). I can't tell you how much this initiative means to me, and what it will mean for the most vulnerable among us. No one should live without a roof over their head, and when it opens next year, the Center will provide efficiency apartments, family and single shelters, supportive services and other community resources like health care and education programs in one facility — making it the first of its kind in Virginia and a model for best practices nationwide. We also celebrated the openings of two apartment complexes that provide housing for previously homeless residents with a focus on veterans and people with disabilities.

No one who has proudly and bravely served our country should be forced to sleep on the streets. When we find homeless veterans, our goal is to quickly get them shelter and housing.

Amazing describes what we did last September when we "blessed the land" at the proposed African American Cultural Center that will showcase Virginia Beach's 12 historically Black neighborhoods, along with collections and artifacts, and bring people from every culture and background together for events and activities.

These projects alone give us reasons to be proud. They show that Virginia Beach has a heart. And apparently, that's not a secret because Virginia Beach is named one of the top caring cities in the United States. It's this caring that helped us respond to some very difficult situations last year. Hurricane Matthew was one of them.

While I pray we never see that level of havoc and destruction again, the storm highlighted the increasing urgency we have to deal with our flood control issues. We had numerous stormwater projects underway when the storm hit, and I want you to know that it's a Council priority to expedite plans to address these issues.

Our recognition as a caring city was strengthened even more when Virginia Beach was selected as the location for a new 120-bed Veterans Care Center — the first-of-its-kind in the region that will be built on 26 acres of City property. It will give Hampton Roads veterans and their families MUCH greater access and convenience. I want to thank Governor McAuliffe, Admiral Harvey and our legislators for helping us cross the finish line on this important project.

Hampton Roads has the highest concentration of military members outside of the Pentagon. We're home to more than 200,000 veterans, and every year, about 12,000 active-duty personnel exit the military in this region. We are honored to have such a diversity of military commands in Virginia Beach and Coastal Virginia. They take care of us each and every day by making our country safe and keeping it free. The Veterans Care Center will allow us to take care of them. Will the following members of the United States Armed Forces please stand:

Vice Admiral Rick Breckenridge, Deputy Commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command;

Captain Joey Frantzen, Commanding Officer of Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story;

Captain Rich Meadows, Commanding Officer of NAS Oceana; and

Colonel Timothy Pillion [PILL-leon], Commander of Camp Pendleton.

Will all military members — both active and prior-service — please stand and let us salute you.

Phase Six of [Town Center](#) is under construction. It will bring more retail, more restaurants, more apartments, and a new public plaza that will create a great new space for the community. It will also bring the new Zeiders American Dream Theater, which will provide young and emerging artists a place to perform for up to 300 people at a time. This current phase represents a private investment of more than 48 million dollars. The public investment of 3.9 million dollars represents a 12-to-1 private-to-public investment ratio — the best-ever devoted to a Town Center project!

Right across the boulevard, Pembroke Mall turned 50 and has re-emerged as a high-energy shopping center in the heart of Virginia Beach, and soon, Wegmans will anchor the opposite corner.

So, what if the next big thing for the Town Center area is the relocation of City Hall? Our current building at the Municipal Center is failing — there is asbestos in the floor tiles and above the ceilings, and the mechanical and electrical systems are obsolete. This is the year to make the decision: do we renovate and expand the current City Hall building?... Do we construct a new City Hall at the Municipal Center?... Or do we construct a new City Hall closer to the center of commerce?

The Pembroke area isn't the only thing that grew last year. Last fiscal year alone, Virginia Beach gained nearly 1,600 new jobs through 25 company expansions and 13 new company announcements. It's great to see our businesses becoming more diverse, with everything from new-to-market shops and restaurants to manufacturing.

San Diego-based Green Flash is one of the new businesses that opened its doors recently. In "a minute" it became a "hot spot" on the local scene.

Earlier this month Mythics, a homegrown technology firm that started in 2000, announced that it has outgrown its offices on Great Neck Road and will move to Town Center — occupying the entire top floor and most of the 8th floor of the Clark Nexsen Tower. This 1 billion dollar company is the largest reseller of Oracle applications worldwide. Hats off to Mythics!

More than 20 overseas companies now operate their U.S. or North American headquarters in the City of Virginia Beach, and our longtime corporate partner, Stihl, continues to lead the way. Once again, this German corporation is expanding in Virginia Beach. We deeply appreciate your presence in our community.

Joining Stihl last year was French manufacturer Haulotte North America, a leading global manufacturer of lifting equipment that opened an 84,000-square-foot facility.

We also welcomed SANJO (San-ho) Fineblanking, a family-owned business in Barcelona, Spain that selected Virginia Beach as home for their North American headquarters and will invest more than 17 million dollars in a new advanced manufacturing facility.

While we have much to celebrate, there's always room for improvement. In fact, focusing on improving is what keeps Virginia Beach growing and competitive.

When our video crew went out to talk to Virginia Beach residents about what they thought about the state of our city, we asked them about improvements they'd like to see. While there were a few who said "Everything's pretty good," people gave us a solid list of priorities for the future. Take a listen

[VIDEO CLIP]

Opportunities for jobs. Infrastructure. Resort area parking. More activities. An arena.

If you drew up your own list of improvements, I bet these things would be on it. I tell ya, I was pretty happy to hear this list because the good news is, we're already working on everything on it — and then some!

Together with staff, the members of the [Virginia Beach City Council](#) and I focus on these issues every day. Last month alone, we spent two days discussing more than 100 goals —covering everything from increasing economic investments and revitalizing neighborhoods to supporting community inclusion and expanding our technological infrastructure. From that work came a list of priorities that reflects the areas for improvement many of our residents identified. We are listening — and we will continue to listen and respond to our community's concerns.

An arena was one of the items mentioned in the last video....

Picture March Madness two years from now.... Wouldn't it be amazing to have that happening right across the street at our new [Virginia Beach Arena](#)!

Well, that is a real possibility now because just last night, the City Council struck a deal with United States Management to move ahead with the \$220 million dollar privately funded Arena. GAME ON!!!

This historic enterprise will have debt of no more than \$150 million dollars, and \$70 million dollars in equity. The arena will be managed by AEG, one of the world's leading sports and entertainment promoters.

High-caliber businesses from right here in Virginia Beach are the driving force behind this project....

Will *Virginia Beach Locals for Life* Andrea Kilmer, Valerie Wilkinson, Mike Gelardi, Chris Stone, Steve Ballard, my friend Governor Bob McDonnell, and everyone with the Virginia Beach development team, including The ESG Companies, Clark-Nexsen and S.B. Ballard Construction, please stand and let us congratulate you?

With the arena, we jump-start our expanding entertainment district, which will translate into more jobs, additional amenities for residents and tourists alike, the revitalization of the 19th corridor, and increases to our tax base that help pay for service delivery in neighborhoods from Pungo to Shore Drive and from the Oceanfront to Centerville.

We have great plans for the city's entertainment district — from expanding the [ViBe](#) district to creating a new 10-acre entertainment complex on the old Dome site, and from building a new fieldhouse to developing a convention center hotel. This city is ready for the next level. You know, tourism is our second largest revenue generator, supporting close to 13,000 jobs, and producing local tourism-related taxes of nearly \$55 million dollars, the equivalent of about 10 cents of the real estate property tax rate.

The 6 million overnight visitors we welcome each year make tourism a 1.4 billion dollar industry in Virginia Beach. We get to live where other people vacation and as a result, we get the kinds of amenities we might not otherwise have.

Imagine a unique, family-friendly environment with high quality, year-round entertainment, a mix of retail shops and restaurants and ample parking at the Old Dome site instead of a tired... run-down... parking lot. The Virginia Beach City Council and the Development Authority are seeking qualified developers to create a world-class concept that aligns with our vision. The deadline is April 10, and I look forward to seeing who responds to our call.

Wherever you live in Virginia Beach, tourism helps pay for our safe community, our schools, our libraries, our rec centers, our streets, our quality of life.

As we saw in the video clips, transportation is another area that people are concerned about....

The future economic health of our city — and the region — depends on us coming up with a viable transportation plan that incorporates high-capacity public transit.

It takes more than pavement to connect people to the places they want to go....

We must develop solutions for transit connectivity that achieve a community consensus, and we are reaching out to the citizens for information on our next steps. We need a system that provides the necessary frequency and reliability that riders want and need, and new routes to increase choice ridership. Together, these elements will provide critical mobility options for the city and the region.

We are looking at the potential for some incredible, transformative projects that could make Virginia Beach THE test city for technological advances in the area of transportation.

Meanwhile, regional projects worth a total of 5 billion dollars are currently underway, including the widening of I-64 on the Peninsula all the way to Richmond, the widening of the High Rise Bridge, the I-64/I-264 Interchange Improvement Project and the soon-to-be expanded Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel. Smoother travel and improved connectivity to and from Coastal Virginia is going to be the result. Thanks to Governors McAuliffe and McDonnell and our General Assembly delegation for their bold leadership in obtaining the funds for these most-needed projects.

Many locally-funded roadway projects are also underway throughout Virginia Beach. Over the past three years, we allocated more than 156 million dollars. People are enjoying the first span of the new Lesner Bridge, and the second span should be open next year. And now, you can travel Lynnhaven Parkway all the way from Virginia Beach Boulevard to Volvo Parkway in Chesapeake. Next up — we're planning improvements to the Lynnhaven Business Corridor.

Another target area for connectivity that I focused on last year is broadband, a real game-changer that's already jumpstarted our high-tech market capabilities.

Listen to this.... Transatlantic underwater fiber cable — the first in the Mid-Atlantic — is on the way to Virginia Beach! This enormous digital pipe will greatly increase the capacity we need to support advanced technologies necessary for regional interconnectivity and global commerce.

But there's more.... Microsoft, Facebook and Telefonica are investing more than 170 million dollars to bring the fastest, most advanced undersea fiber cable in history from Spain to our shoreline later this year. I'm thrilled to have such powerhouse partners working with us!

And it keeps getting better.... Telefonica will bring a second cable from Rio de Janeiro early next year. Globalinx Data Center is developing a 10-acre, 138-thousand square-foot international carrier-neutral data center. We've long been known for the Port of Virginia. These projects — worth another 35 million dollars — are putting Virginia Beach on the map as a new international digital port. Imagine the many businesses for which a split-second difference in internet speed gives an enormous competitive edge. If you're an investor, you know what I mean. That's the kind of transformational opportunity our new digital port will support.

Corporations around the world are noticing and today, I'm pleased to announce a big deal featuring big data. NxtVn Data Center Parks of the Netherlands will also be establishing a carrier-neutral data center park in Virginia Beach — one that will create a technological eco-system that will attract to Virginia Beach the most prominent and well-respected players in the Cloud Services, Data Analytics and Multi-Carrier markets. Will Khaled Sedrak and Lewis Shadle of NxtVn please stand and let us welcome you to Virginia Beach?

What's one of the industries that needs the ability to move massive amounts of data? Just three years ago at this event, I announced the creation of the Biomedical and Healthcare Task Force. Thanks to our [VABeachBio](#) initiative, the expansion of bioscience in Virginia Beach is becoming a reality.

In [Princess Anne Commons](#), our biomedical corridor, Sentara Princess Anne Hospital is embarking on a \$35 million dollar expansion. That's in addition to Sentara's \$49 million dollar clinical and infrastructure modernization project at Virginia Beach General Hospital, and the recent purchase of a 30,000-square-foot office building at Centre Pointe Park for IT support.

Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters and LifeNet Health are continuing to grow, and Operation Smile is celebrating 35 years of changing and saving lives.

Sanyal Biotechnology relocated its corporate headquarters and research facility from Richmond to the new VABeachBio Accelerator at Tidewater Community College. Most of us know about the global epidemic of obesity and diabetes, and this innovative company is aggressively searching for pharmaceutical breakthroughs — right here in Virginia Beach.

Today, I'm thrilled to announce that Virginia Beach is partnering to create more than 80 companies and 2,000 knowledge-based jobs by turning federally funded inventions into start-up companies. The Center for Advancing Innovation and Virginia Beach are creating the VABeachBio Veterans Innovation Challenge. This challenge will be the first-of-its-kind in America. Entrepreneurs and inventors will compete to turn some of the most dynamic inventions from research labs into successful start-ups.

This city is committed to supporting the growing biomedical industry, which is why the City Council has established the VABeachBio Innovation Park. The knowledge-based economy is critical to the growth of the American economy, and Virginia Beach has the workforce, the drive, and the assets to become the next great hub for the biosciences.

So many good things are happening, and it's all because of the people who live, work and play here in Virginia Beach. We're succeeding at diversifying our economy and creating jobs so that our young people won't have to go elsewhere.

We can build a great place with bricks and mortar — but without people who

connect, without people who engage, and without people who come together, we don't have community.

We've seen other cities break down. In Virginia Beach, we face our challenges, we work them out, and we come out ahead. THIS is the Virginia Beach way — we all work together to build a brighter future.

That's why we expand our roadways. That's why we modernize and replace our oldest schools and community recreation centers. That's why we will do a full disparity study. That's why we support our men and women in public safety who are doing some of the most important and dangerous work there is — and doing it so well. That's why we are looking to designate a road in honor of Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And that's why we pay attention to our City's financial health.

This is the eighth year in a row that Virginia Beach has been rated triple-A by all three major rating agencies. No other city in Hampton Roads has perfect bond ratings, an achievement that saves millions every year. And for the first time in nearly a decade, the City of Virginia Beach is not facing across-the-board budget cuts.

Think about it.... Without our strong financial standing, we wouldn't have world-class schools, and we wouldn't have safe neighborhoods. Without great schools... without safe neighborhoods... and without great people, we're just another city. So we must keep our eyes on the ball to ensure that our neighborhoods stay safe, and our schools, universities and libraries offer the best possible lifelong learning opportunities.

A successful city must also have strong ties with institutions of higher learning. This year, it's my goal to reach out to every college or university president in our region to seek areas of mutual interest that can benefit students, researchers and our community. Also at this time, I'd like to introduce one of our newest college presidents. Dr. Scott Miller of Virginia Wesleyan College — please stand and let us welcome you to Virginia Beach.

Like those who will cross the finish line at the Yuengling Shamrock Marathon this weekend, we must demonstrate endurance and concentrated effort over the long haul so that we continue to grow and meet the needs of our community.

It takes total determination to be the best we can be, and that's exactly what we do in Virginia Beach — we come together as a community and develop a clear vision to bring home jobs and attract private investments that will strengthen our economy — year after year after year... because let's face it — if we're not growing, we're dying.

Of course, there are hurdles along the way. We anticipate them, and with courage, fortitude, grit and grace, we overcome them. I'll be the first to admit that making progress is not always easy.... But positive things are happening here because we make them happen.

In recent months, we lost three dedicated community giants who had a flair for making good things happen...

Joseph Grimstead, Sr., a founding father of our historic Seatack community who helped create Princess Anne County's only African-American volunteer fire department in 1948....

Dr. Manny Hipol, a radiologist who founded the Council of the United Filipino Organizations of Tidewater and helped lead the fundraising and construction of the Philippine Cultural Center, which is the largest center of its kind in the United States, and the only one fully paid for by its community....

And Sande Dukas, founder and president of CONCOA, who also dedicated himself to a number of causes including animal welfare, education and economic development.

All three gentlemen found their own special ways to contribute to this community and to set examples for the rest of us to follow.

They remind me that wherever we live, we are part of the mosaic that binds us together and makes Virginia Beach a city full of promise. It's what makes me — like the people you're about to see — a Virginia Beach Local for Life....

[VIDEO CLIP]

That little girl sees what I see. And now, hopefully, you see it, too.

My friends, exciting times are upon us. We're on the brink of breaking through to a brighter future in the greatest city in the world. We're adding jobs to strengthen our economy. We're finding engineering solutions to sea level rise and flood control issues. We're growing our housing, transportation, tourism, entertainment and retail choices. We're investing in emerging technologies to keep Virginia Beach on the leading edge of the industry. We're embracing inclusion and celebrating diversity to create the very best place for all people to live, work and raise their families.

So, if you ever wonder what makes Virginia Beach the greatest city in the world, I think the answer is now crystal clear: it's the people who are...Virginia Beach locals for life!

Thank you all so very much.