



CITY OF COLUMBIA
SOUTH CAROLINA
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

2018 State of the City Address
As prepared for delivery
Mayor Steve Benjamin
January 30, 2018 – Columbia, SC
“The Smarter City”

Good evening, members of City Council, City Manager, neighborhood & business leaders, staff, other elected officials.

Mom & Dad, Dee,

Bethany and Jordan Grace, our hearts.

The embodiment of all that is right & good and true in this world.

Tonight, I promise to be brief so that you walk out of here like this...instead of like this.

[SLIDES OF EMOJIS]

I am the father of two beautiful daughters and since the day they were born, their mother and I have done everything in our power to engage and encourage them, to show them a world in which anything is possible, protect them from the darkness and prepare them to protect themselves.

Unfortunately, as parents, there's only so much we can do, and as I look at a nation where 60% of women can expect to be victims of sexual harassment and one in four women will be assaulted in their lifetimes, that is unacceptable.

As parents, there's only so much we can do. We can teach them to protect themselves and give them the self-confidence and unquestioned support to stand up to would-be abusers and report those who cross the line even when it's their boss. And, most importantly, we can make sure they know that we love them absolutely, every day, no matter what.

Let's be clear. Whether it's in the workplace, on campus, at a bar or just on the street, this kind of behavior is absolutely unacceptable. If you have been a victim of harassment or assault, I want you to know that we stand with you, and we fight with you against any and all oppressors.

[PAUSE]

Thank you, Dr. Moore, for welcoming us to Columbia College.

Now you may not know it, but my friend Ben Rex and I teach a class here at Columbia College. And in preparation for tonight, we asked our students what they wanted the world to know about this institution and what it means to be a koala.

They told us, and we absolutely agree, that Columbia College is one of our city's best kept secrets, that her graduates are change agents, that – true to their Methodist roots – they care passionately about social justice and that the Columbia College experience empowers the individual and celebrates the success of every woman.

Perhaps most importantly, they told us that Columbia College teaches them to live in the “how” - how they can change things vs. the why - why things are the way they are.

They are absolutely right, and we couldn't be more thankful for this institution, and the unparalleled tradition of leadership and service instilled in every one of her students.

So to every Koala here tonight and across the world, allow me to say thank you for bringing us here tonight and for all that you do.

[PAUSE]

Yes, we are proud to stand here today both to highlight Columbia College and showcase its students, faculty and programming, but also to recognize the remarkable explosion of activity and growth going on right now in North Columbia.

From the \$50 million investment in North Main and major improvements for Hyatt and Greenview Parks to the Busby Street Community Resource & Training Center unifying community partnership and public safety and the landmark Azurest at Heritage Creek project reimagining 80 acres of undeveloped land with residential and retail, a hotel and medical clinic, business offices, boutique shops, restaurants even a co-op grocery store, this community is on the brink of a transformational year.

Look, when The State newspaper calls the North Main corridor the city's up-and-coming hotspot and a hub for small, local business, it's time to recognize that something special is happening here. But just like the rebirth of Downtown, our student housing boom and repeated years of budget surplus, this unprecedented North Columbia renaissance hasn't happened by accident.

Sam & Tameika most prominently—It's the result of years of hard work, planning and investment from streetscaping and park improvements to nearly \$8 million in home improvement loans and a relentless recruitment effort that included roughly \$2 million in small business loans and grants in the North Main corridor alone.

This isn't happening by chance, but by choice.

We choose our seniors by completing the Veranda and Pinehurst senior living developments, which will not only offer housing but will also give our seniors the opportunity to enjoy their golden years independent & in their own neighborhoods.

We choose our young people with South Carolina United's new soccer complex that will bring a wave of excitement in national tournaments and the exciting growth of both the campus and the programming at the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary with Lenoir Rhyne University, Columbia International University and, of course, Columbia College.

In North Columbia and across the city, we choose sustainability by investing more than \$5 million in water/sewer improvements either just completed or currently underway between the Earlewood and Booker Washington Heights Water Quality Projects and millions more in stormwater improvements to Harlem Heights, Randall Ave and Wallace Street.

[FOOD CO-OP SLIDE]

And we choose our neighborhoods by working together to ward off a threatening food desert off West Beltline Blvd. with not only a cooperative-model grocery store but also an urban farm and city park, making it one of the most unique co-op developments in the country.

In fact, this will be the first food cooperative in the country that has been initiated by a governmental entity to help its citizens fight food insecurity, with a targeted opening date slated for September 2019. That didn't happen by chance, but by choice.

We choose not to pass our challenges off to the state or federal government but to act, to join together in cooperative growth and, by doing so, to thrive together.

We choose a bold vision of Infrastructure, Innovation and Inclusion. We choose a smart city, a seamless city.

[PAUSE]

- 85.7% of America's population
- 87.7% of total employment
- 87.9% of total income
- and 91.3% of wage income.

America's cities are responsible for nearly 91% of our nation's total GDP and, combined, the nation's 10 highest-producing metro economies generated \$6.2 Trillion in economic value in 2015 alone. That's greater than 37 states.

What's more, our metropolitan areas have historically led the way in developing new technologies and adopting cutting-edge strategies to address issues from public health and sustainability to economic justice and justice reform.

Time and again, America's cities have proven themselves to be the beating heart of progressive change and the sustaining lamplight of a nation built on the promise of liberty and justice for all.

For all our challenges and imperfections, America chooses cities to lead the way in infrastructure, innovation and inclusion.

America chooses us...and we choose one another.

But that choice is an expression of faith...and faith must be earned.

This year, at an event called The Longest Table, residents, elected officials and community partners shared a dinner and discussed the soul of our city.

An invaluable opportunity for input and discussion, what struck me most about this gathering was its inclusivity, which meant not just diversity not just in race and gender but also inclusive in age, education, income, expectation and expertise; the wide variety of our city's experience coming together, choosing each other, not as a patchwork but each unique strand woven together as whole cloth.... a seamless city.

This also is not by accident because we know that to become a truly "smart city" as outlined in our 2036 Council Vision Statement, we must first be a seamless city, interconnected and interdependent, unified at our most fundamental level.

And when we talk about seamlessness, we are talking about creating an environment where improvements to one segment of our community benefit the entire city.

For instance, we know that investing in a vibrant downtown is an expression of value, a symbol of our commitment to the city as a whole. But the practical benefits are even more remarkable because growth in our city center – because it generates new revenues without the corresponding cost in infrastructure and services – allows us to invest across the entire city.

In other words, new private investment Downtown is how we pay for new public investments in Hyatt Park, new small business incentives in the North Main and Farrow Road corridors and new public safety initiatives citywide. What's more, the downtown explosion and growing momentum on Bull Street makes private investment in 29203 much more attractive.

New retail comes to the neighborhood because they see the writing on the wall as momentum moves North. New restaurants open their doors because we're only five minutes from Spirit Communications Park.

Deliberate progress born out of an interconnected and integrated strategy – that is the heart of smart growth. That is what it means to be a seamless city.

And, as we move forward, and our efforts become ever smarter and more seamless, the momentum builds and every community benefits.

The dominos fall in our favor not by chance, but by choice.

But don't take my word for it. Just look back over the past year and what do you see?

[SLIDES]

National Geographic Travel magazine named Columbia one of the Top 30 Best Small U.S. cities.

Thrillist named Columbia one of eight “under-the-radar” American cities to visit “before they're too popular” AND one of the “Great American Cities Where You Can Still Buy a House on a \$50K Salary.”

The City of Columbia was designated as a Bicycle Friendly Community at the Bronze level by the League of American Bicyclists.

Columbia earned a B-plus in a survey by Thumbtack measuring small-business friendliness.

The Richland Library was awarded the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, one of 10 institutions nationwide to receive the award this year – and the only one in South Carolina. The award is given by the federal government to museums and libraries for service to their communities.

Columbia earned a 3 in the STAR Community Rating System (STAR), the nation's leading framework and certification program for local sustainability. This makes Columbia the only STAR-rated city in South Carolina.

CALEA® awarded our Columbia Police Department with Advanced Law Enforcement Accreditation.

The Total Solar Eclipse was a major highlight, bringing more than 1 million travelers to South Carolina to view the eclipse, leaving a \$269 million impact.

The Columbia region welcomed 14.7 million visitors in 2016, making tourism a \$2.1 billion industry for this community. This number is up from the 14.5 million visitors in 2014.

10 new businesses came to Main Street, making it a total of nearly 60 new businesses on Main Street since 2010.

Which means we have more bars and restaurants in the central business district and the Vista than all of downtown Greenville.

And we haven't even talked about Five Points.

#ijs.

The Human Rights Campaign granted Columbia a 75 on its Municipal Equality Index scorecard, the highest score in South Carolina.

Wow.

[PAUSE FOR APPLAUSE]

All that and the University of South Carolina women's basketball team was named National Champions. Sure, we can't take credit for that one, but I thought I'd mention it anyway.

The applause for these accomplishments goes to each of you. Without community partners, residents and elected officials, we would not have seen the 2017 we saw, and we would not be looking forward to the 2018 we see before us now.

And even in the midst of these accolades and achievements, we never stop working.

Collaborating with The Aspen Institute and LendUp on Finance Forward, we hosted the first-ever National Summit on Income Volatility and took a deep dive examination on the income volatility threatening too many of Columbia's families.

The reality is that roughly a quarter of American families suffer a major disruption to their income each year. Nearly one in five of those families suffer an income drop of 50 percent or more.

Think of the hourly worker whose hours are slashed when business slows down from one season to the next, the parent who gets hit with an unexpected hospital bill or the Uber driver who has a slow week. Think of all of the "independent contractors" who have no sick leave, no health insurance and no job security.

From the sales employee who works on commission to factory workers who get laid off during slow periods, income instability and volatility devastates too many families including those of some city employees. That's why we're implementing a new Workforce Financial Wellness Program for city employees to strengthen our families by reducing the effects of income volatility.

These workshops, offered during paid work hours for selected departments, will help our employees deal with the burdens of financial stress and adopt good financial behaviors, helping them through the homebuying process, establishing measurable financial goals with realistic plans to achieve them, building and maintaining an emergency fund while repairing and rebuilding their credit.

In addition, these workshops will educate our employees on the unique benefits available to them as City employees including the City's mortgage, individual development accounts (IDA), Bank On and tuition reimbursement programs.

Over time, the expectation and hope is that these behaviors will not only facilitate positive changes in our employees' financial lives but create a model program that can be replicated for the private sector employees across our city and region.

And as we address income volatility, we continue to lead the charge on food insecurity with our first-of-its-kind municipal food policy council.

In addition to our West Beltline food cooperative, this diverse group of passionate food policy advocates, farmers, businesspeople, chefs, social workers and more has identified issues that they'll be able to strategically highlight and address.

From decreasing food waste by collecting food to donate to local non-profit organizations to hosting listening sessions in areas throughout our city, the food policy committee will stand in the gap for the people of our Columbia to bring forth and implement solutions that will drastically change the way we address all things food-related.

We reintroduced our City Serve initiative in October, which provided more than 2,000 volunteer opportunities for a few dozen projects benefiting local non-profit organizations and government entities.

With our partners, we hosted the first First Day Festival at the Fireflies stadium, providing backpacks full of free school supplies, games, the CPD ice cream truck, health screenings and free haircuts to our K-12 students, which – we hope – took a little pressure off of the parents of more than 1,500 students.

We've committed to a 100 percent clean energy goal by 2036, continued to promote alternative energies for our citizens and opened our new water and wastewater administration building, the City's first LEED® Gold level registered complete with the largest green roof in Columbia.

And, on top of all that, we stood up when our state and federal governments refused to act and unanimously passed ordinance 2017-109 banning the use of bump stocks and trigger cranks in the City of Columbia.

[PAUSE]

I'm proud of these accomplishments, and I'm thankful for the leadership of our City team – our Council, city manager and city staff. But while we celebrate, we have to recognize that these aren't simply singular steps forward, but stitches in our seamless city interconnected into a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

[PAUSE]

Now to what's next.

We ---

[GETS INTERRUPTED BY VICI]

[VICI SLIDES]

VICI: Excuse me, Mayor Benjamin.

VICI, didn't we discuss that we appreciate your help, but we're doing something different this year?

VICI: Yes, sir, I know. But I need you to say it.

Say what?

VICI: You know what I'm talking about.

[SIGHS]

Okay, fine.

The State of our city is strong.

VICI: Thank you.

Excuse us – apparently artificial intelligence technology gets very passionate about things. Who knew?

[SMILE]

Some of you may notice that I'm a little less of a man than I was last year – and I mean that literally.

Leveraging a better diet, more physical activity and downright old school positive peer pressure on social media — weighing in and being teased by Councilmen Rickenmann and Duvall as I remove more and more garments attempting to make weight – I'm 25 pounds lighter than I was this time last year.

Now #MayorWeighsIn needs to become #ColumbiaWeighsIn.

[COLUMBIA WEIGHS IN SLIDE]

With several of our City's health care partners, we will issue a challenge to the citizens of Richland County, Lexington County, Columbia and everyone within the sound of my voice to lose 25,000 pounds between March 1st and June 1st. Not a New Year's resolution or even a long term commitment, but if we can do and repeat our success, then this community can lose 100,000 pounds over the course of a year and lead happier, healthier and longer lives.

As we aim to lead healthier lives, we will launch Columbia's bike share and commit to another major opportunity that faces us.

[BIKE MAP SLIDE]

Connecting in a seamless way all the great work being achieved by Richland County, so many of our non-profit partners, our wonderful staff and our BPAC, this map shows existing, under construction or design, city and penny projects being done by some of our fantastic partners and the vision to connect them all with our existing infrastructure.

Bike boulevards, bike lanes and shared lanes, sharrows and greenways connecting 30 additional miles for cyclists. In 2018, the City will commit to funding to make this a reality for the people of the Midlands.

We also commit to bringing exciting new life in a bold plan for Finlay Park, creating a local, regional and national draw.

[PAUSE]

Now imagine if we took on the challenge of affordable housing, recognizing that all our economic growth and cultural richness doesn't matter if our city is not an affordable place to live.

I believe we can rise to that challenge, and that's why I've committed to championing a new policy that incentivizes builders to produce vibrant mixed used, mixed income housing. We'll also commit to leveraging the new tax revenue generated from student housing to create housing for hardworking tax-paying families in Columbia and for those who have no place to call home.

[60 SECOND PAUSE]

Sixty seconds. Did you notice how uncomfortable that silence was? Imagine that 86,400 times a day. Imagine having no place to go 86,400 times a day. That's the reality of our unsheltered citizens in Columbia who have no home. It's our job – our responsibility – to bring opportunities to underserved communities that lift people up, not exclude them or push them out. This plan of action outlines specific strategies to make this a housing market that works for everyone – so that everyone has their own definition of a home.

I believe we can leverage public-private-philanthropic partnerships and new technologies to enhance quality of life and more aptly engage our citizens. Simply put, we will become a truly smart city.

[SMART CITY SLIDE]

With public safety being one of the most opportune areas for smart technology, our Columbia Police Department is well-positioned to tout active and soon-to-come technologies.

Currently, CPD has online reporting, which allows citizens to submit and print reports for things like lost property, nuisance animals and trespassing. They also host an open, public data portal in compliance with the White House initiative for 21st Century Policing that provides police data statistics for assaults on officers, solvability factor, arrests and field interviews.

An online crime map gives the public access to historical and current crime data both locally and nationally. Users have the ability to set up crime alerts and be automatically notified when there is criminal activity in a designated area.

CPD has and will continue to appropriately address situations that arise in relation to the opioid epidemic that has plagued our nation. The sad reality is that in 2016, 550 deaths occurred in South Carolina from a drug overdose with prescription opioid drugs listed on the certificate, up 7% from 2015.

A smarter city has the resources in place and proper training for officers to prevent as many opioid-related deaths as possible.

In our solid waste department, an online program called ReCollect was introduced in 2015 and has since allowed Columbia residents to sign up for a reminder for waste, even including a search tool that allows residents to search a material they are disposing of and find the proper disposal method, whether it's recycling, garbage, yard trash or other. There's also an interactive game where children – and adults – can learn what materials go where.

We can expand that effort with a mobile application and web portal that interface directly to the City's computerized maintenance management system, known as City Works. Through the app, citizens will be able to report concerns, upload supporting information like pictures and communicate efficiently with our Customer Care team.

Soon to come is the Citizen Self Service portal, which will provide a publicly accessible web portal that allows users to apply for and view permit and plan applications, upload required documents, view and pay invoices and perform various record searches without troubling people with physically visiting a City office or standing in line.

As you can see, we've already taken a number of smart steps, but we look ahead to what's to come in anticipation of changes in culture, technology and infrastructure.

Smart cities in 2020 will see the introduction of small cell networks, delivering 5G wireless technology.

In 2018, we will complete at least one deal that will deliver 21st century fiber and small cell network deployment. 5G will involve 10 to 100 times more antenna locations than 4G or 3G. The small cells – units about the size of a shoe box that will be dispersed throughout the city – will deliver more speed and will support more capacity not just for your cell phones and tablets but also for the new technology to be introduced by our city and other public partner and private companies.

And when you think about 5G, I don't want you to limit yourself to just thinking of better internet speeds when you're at your favorite coffee shop. 5G will prove to have an incredible economic impact in investment, job creation and GDP growth for our city.

Imagine if public lighting dimmed automatically when no pedestrians or vehicles are present. Imagine having smart metering systems that provided real-time information about empty parking spaces. Imagine if police officers were notified immediately when a firearm is discharged, allowing them to respond to a specific location to survey the situation.

Imagine yes — driverless cars. I can't wait to see my wife be the backseat driver

This is the beginning of a technological revolution and, here in Columbia, we're going to lead the way.

Our children must be prepared for this brave new world. Working with this Council, our chairs of Richland County and Richland School District One, we are making a promise to every child in public schools in our city... Columbia's Promise.

If you work hard and finish high school, we believe you will live up to your promise. Our commitment to you is that you'll also be able to go to school.

I believe we can rise to the challenge of higher education, helping ease the staggering costs with a new program modeled after the Kalamazoo Promise which, privately funded, has provided more than \$67 million in college tuition for more than 4,000 Kalamazoo Public School graduates since 2005.

They've done it in Kalamazoo, Seattle, Denver, Pittsburgh and even the state of Tennessee, and we can do it in Columbia.

You will see a true commitment to regional partnership. Stressing that we are all stronger and healthier when each one of us is stronger and healthier.

Unified Fire Service

Amplify - Regional Cultural Plan

Expansion of the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center Exhibit Space to 100,000 Square feet

MBLG - Riverfront Development

We will be a city for all people, particularly for the “experienced class.” In collaboration with AARP, we will host a Senior Summit that will provide resources and facilitate conversations on what's necessary for our aging population.

[SAD FACE EMOJI SLIDE]

And for my millennials in the room, please note that 2042 is the first year that Generation X'ers, Millennials and Baby Boomers will all be collecting social security. So these types of conversations are really not as far off for all of us as we think they are.

[PAUSE]

[POOP EMOJI SLIDE]

With the incredible strength of the port of Charleston and the robust growth of the inland port in Greer, railroads in South Carolina and across America are enjoying a renaissance, and being right in the middle of a statewide problem calls for a statewide solution. Our due diligence and engagements with Norfolk Southern and CSX shows us rail traffic is up 800% with some trains that once were a half mile long now stretching to two-and-a-half miles. The trains come, and the noise comes along with them.

This month, we will reengage the State Infrastructure Bank, the SCDOT and the USDOT to resolve this issue once and for all.

I'm also asking our council and staff to explore the possibility of a voter authorized referendum to raise the funds for our local match to end train traffic disruption and deliver on Quiet Zones.

We understand that changes in our city call for changes in the way things currently are.

[PAUSE]

As many of you know, later this spring, I have the honor of serving Columbia as the President of the United States Conference of Mayors this year.

While I'm excited to serve in this role, I am even more excited about the opportunities for Columbia as we place our city on a national stage. Not that we have to prove ourselves because we know our worth, but we will be able to show the nation and the world that Columbia is not Dallas, not Los Angeles, not Atlanta but uniquely and proudly Columbia.

For this term, we've committed to what we refer to as "i cubed."

Innovation. Infrastructure. Inclusion.

Our desire is to encourage and challenge mayors across the country to identify issues within these three areas and highlight the ways in which we can make strategic changes.

From encouraging engagement with groups like What Works Cities and the continued expansion of 5G to continuing conversations on income volatility, engaging with our friends in Silicon Valley to explore new ways to solve problems and even addressing the topic of net neutrality, the leadership and collaboration of mayors across the country will continue to exhibit the immensity of impact we are able to have at the local level.

We'll push other cities to weigh the benefits of traversing the STAR Community Rating System process and explore the ways in which each city can be smarter with outcomes specific to that city.

In infrastructure, we're excited to share the way that our city has creatively leveraged a student housing tax to aid in the creation of more affordable and mixed income housing. We will highlight the development and expansion of city parks, which have a major impact on the standard of living of our residents.

We'll also continue conversations around increasing mobility in cities, particularly for the construction of bikeways and greenways.

We'll look to increase cases of public, private, philanthropic partnerships so that we are putting forth the most creative and effective use of resources.

Now, with inclusion, it's important that we note that the term is subjective to what you deem an aspect of inclusivity. Like innovation, there is an array of ways in which we can interpret it.

With reentry of returning citizens being such a difficult process for many of our residents, it's critical for us to work with partners to identify the best ways to not only make it a smooth transition back into society for these men and women but also one that best prevents recidivism.

Finally, we hope to bridge the divide among generations and ensure that there are appropriate resources for the "experienced class" in our cities. From Meals on Wheels and things like Senior Resources' new "Señor Resources" food truck to committing to AARP's age-friendly community network, there are a number of ways that we can enhance the quality of living for a generation that has endowed us with so much wisdom and resources.

[PAUSE]

I wanted to make a point in this speech to also address the climate we've found ourselves in after 2017. And I don't mean global warming – though that in itself is worth addressing.

With so many people throwing jabs, there has to be an intentional group of people absorbing those blows and transforming what was meant to divide into what will bear good fruit.

That good fruit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – will manifest the shift in culture and subsequently what we permit to take place in our beloved cities and states and nation. We must be mindful that there is a very real attack on our families, our neighborhoods and on valued cultural institutions. Only when we operate from a place of understanding and proper perspective will we be able to discern what things truly are and respond accordingly.

My years as mayor have proven to be some of the best of my almost 48 years of life. I don't take it lightly that I've been given the privilege to lead the people of this city. But perhaps the most moving part of it all is the love I've encountered by meeting and working with the people of Columbia. And that's what I want to leave with you.

No matter how times change, we know that the glue that will hold us together– without fail – is and always will be love. A seamless love – one that does not divide based on ideology or any other identifying factors but cares for one part the same as another.

[PAUSE]

Ladies and gentlemen, we live in a moment where all things are possible. From the North Columbia renaissance and a citywide wireless infrastructure to affordable housing and affordable higher education.

From abolishing hunger to abolishing sexual assault, the promise and possibility is right there before us. All we need to do is take hold. All we need to do, is choose.

We choose each other.

We choose a smart city, a seamless city, a city of infrastructure, innovation and inclusion.

We choose one city. We choose One Columbia. And we reach for the stars.

May God bless you and keep you.