

---

## The State of the City 2018: Happening now

---

**Here is the prepared text of Mayor Andrew “FoFo” Gilich’s State of the City address, delivered on Jan. 30, 2018 during a Biloxi Bay Chamber of Commerce luncheon at the Beau Rivage Resort & Casino.**

(Opening remarks from podium)

It’s great to see the tremendous interest in our City. Thanks again.

We’ve already acknowledged and recognized many of our Biloxi team members, partners and special guests with us today. I thank them all as well.

But before I go on, I have to express my appreciation to few more.

First, to my wife Serena and my whole family for putting up me, helping me in more ways than I explain, to be the Mayor of Biloxi. It is my dream come true. Thank you so very much. September 1 of this year will be our 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. You know she’s got to be a Saint, right? She’s not with us here today. She’s home recovering from ankle surgery a couple of weeks ago. For the cameras- I love you Serena.

Next, to the Biloxi City Council. Under our form of government, the Mayor is the only citywide elected official. He leads and runs the day-to-day operations of the city. But, a Mayor needs the support of the City Council to be successful.

That means I need the support of at least four out of seven councilmembers. I’m proud to say that on many occasions, well, some occasions, I have the support of all seven. But I want each one of them to know, that I appreciate the work that they do every day in making things happen in Biloxi. Thank you again.

A little over six months ago, I was elected to my first full term as Mayor. We embarked on planning major, ambitious initiatives to transform and improve the quality of life in our city and make Biloxi an even more special place than it is today.

So, enough talk. Get comfortable for a 24 minute video that will show you, as you would say in Spanish “que paso”...what’s happening, and like it’s said in the Irish Channel – “where we’ at.”

(Video presentation begins)

Make no mistake: you’ll see big things happening in 2018 in all areas of our city. It’s happening now.

Downtown Biloxi has been dormant since that failed experiment known as urban renewal brought us

the Vieux Marche. Let the word go forth today there is no Vieux Marche. There is Howard Avenue.

In February we’ll open bids to bring two-way traffic on Howard Avenue, with on-street parking, authentic facades and a street that will be an attraction. Something we can all be proud of.

The restored Howard Avenue will invite residents and visitors to new restaurants like the \$4-million Mugshots that opened on Main Street. Or the Le Café Beignet shop in the old Biloxi Public Library. Or the South Port Line restaurant in a restored home on Howard Avenue.

Think about walking into “a happening” downtown area after a Shuckers game, or a show at the Beau Rivage or Hard Rock, or after seeing a production in the Saenger. YES, the Saenger Theater is going to be a huge part of our downtown restoration. It’s a gem, not only for Biloxi but for the entire Coast. AND we WILL find the money, and restoration will begin this summer.

The beauty of the Barq building at Reynoir and Howard was covered up in the ’70s and is mostly vacant now. We’re seeking partners to restore its beautiful façade, create new ground floor retail/office spaces along with residential on second and third levels.

For years, there has been talk of finding a way to attract visitors from the thousands of hotels rooms south of HWY 90 to our downtown area. But first, we had to give them more to see and do, and I think we’re doing that with our restoration efforts.

Then, we had to give them an easier way to explore north HWY 90. You’ll see construction begin on two new pedestrian crosswalks. The first one will be built at MGM Park and HWY 90 west of Caillavet Street. Where work will begin in the next couple months and be complete by the end of the year. The second, currently under design, will be built north of the Small Craft Harbor and HWY 90. And should begin by the end of the year.

You have to go back 25 years, to the arrival of casino gaming, to find the last time that we had three major hotels under construction at the same time. That's happening now.

The Hilton Garden Inn, northeast of the small craft harbor, will open its 100 rooms late this summer. And just next door, The Watermark will transform the dormant Santa Maria into a beautiful 154 all-suites hotel about the same time.

Further down the street, next to the Doubletree, site work is underway for the La Quinta Inn and Suites, a four-story, 66-room hotel.

Obviously developers see the opportunity in Biloxi. They saw the 7 percent growth in sales tax last year and the 5.7 million visitors.

The Finishline Performance Karting track will open in June on Beach Boulevard in west Biloxi. It includes a regulation  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile SODI performance go-kart track along with a 1,120 feet junior track. Another exciting attraction for our regular visitors and will certainly bring new ones

You'll notice these things are all occurring along the waterfront, one of our most important assets. Many communities in the country can and do have casino resorts, but we have the total package — the history and culture, the casinos with great restaurants and top-name entertainment, charter boats for deep sea fishing, a sunset sail on the Seafood Museum schooners, and a growing lineup of family attractions like Margaritaville, all set against the backdrop of our beautiful shoreline.

That's why I'm so excited about the vision of a continuous boardwalk along our front beach. You can see the test piles being driven at the foot of Veterans Avenue, beginning construction of a joint City-County boardwalk that will connect the Coast Transit Center and all of the restaurants between Rodenberg and Veterans, to be completed this summer.

At the Biloxi Lighthouse, we introduced an appealing look to an area in the shadow of our most treasured landmark. New landscaping, newly paved parking and the unsightly barricade that made it hard to access the beach is gone in favor of new decorative bollards.

Working with MEMA and FEMA, the Lighthouse pier — damaged by Hurricane Nate — will be up and running for this summer.

Point Cadet, the same thing, I hope you've heard about the exciting plans we have for this area, which in the early 1900's was the epicenter of the Seafood Capital of the World.

Construction will begin mid-year on boardwalks from the Palace Casino Resort and the Point Cadet Fishing Bridge under the Biloxi Bay Bridge, around the waterfront of the Point Cadet Marina and the Golden Nugget, to Margaritaville and on to Oak Street, making it easier for pedestrians to experience the beauty and excitement of our genuine Biloxi working waterfront.

The Point Cadet waterfront is our golden opportunity for economic development, to enhance tourism and our seafood and maritime industries in authentic but modern ways, embracing the future while honoring the past.

Biloxi will once again become a center for sustainable seafood wild harvesting, as well as new, cutting-edge methods of food production, like oyster aquaculture.

The vacant Point Cadet property offers a beautiful and practical site for this effort. We have asked our legislators to allow the creation of the Point Cadet Waterfront Enterprise, using rents already being collected from the tenants at Point Cadet, to help Biloxi and its State partners begin this new enterprise based on authentic Biloxi waterfront experience.

This is not re-creating the factories of the past. We are learning from and building on our history and natural environment in new ways.

We're planning for an enhanced modern marina, a pavilion for fishing tournaments and festivals, shops and restaurants in a festival seafood marketplace, and a public off-loading dock for fresh oysters. Think about what we already have, the Gulf Coast Billfish Classic Tournament, the Poker Run, the Southern Kingfish Association Nationals. No doubt, there will be more added to the list.

There will be open structures on ground level for parking, and pedestrian access at ground level to an open-air seafood marketplace with kiosks and mobile sidewalk cafes that can be moved before a storm. Second floor structures will be above FEMA flood level and will have restaurants, retail shops and balconies built to post-Katrina codes.

These are visions right now, and with the help from our Legislators and State partners we can make it reality.

Plenty of things are happening now on the Point. Golden Nugget's Saltgrass Steakhouse is under construction on the north side of HWY 90 at Myrtle Street. Opening this summer, the 9,500-square-foot restaurant will provide both indoor

and patio dining.

We're excited about the Betsy Ann, the new paddle wheeler at Point Cadet Marina, offering dinner cruises and eco-tours, complementing harbor tours we have had for years with the popular Sailfish down at the Small Craft Harbor.

Yes, we're expecting to the Ship Island ferry will sail from Biloxi this year.

Once-again, Margaritaville has applied to the Secretary of State to lease the land west of Margaritaville to construct a world-class amusement park!

On Back Bay, we're working with the Department of Marine Resources to build a boardwalk with steps leading down to a living shoreline for those wanting to flounder, soft-shell crab and fish from Forrest Avenue to Kensington Drive.

We're in the permitting phase for some significant improvements at the Sherman Canaan Commercial Dock on Back Bay, where the majority of our shrimping fleet docks.

At Hiller Park, a 1400-foot boardwalk and overlook along the north side and the city's third splash pad was completed. Thanks to Harrison County for funding help. We'll be adding more boardwalks and sidewalks in the park this year.

We will be completing dredging operations of the canals in Hiller Park and other canals along the both sides of the Bay, just like we did a Point Cadet, where the slips were deepened from 4.5 to 7.5 feet to accommodate the larger vessels we're seeing. Those boat owners now find Wi-Fi internet access at Point Cadet and the Small Craft Harbor, and we also re-did the boat launch at the Small Craft Harbor.

The Popp's Ferry Causeway Park is a project that's been 35 years in the making. Contractors are racing to an April completion of a thousand-square-foot bait shop, new piers, lighting and waterfront walkways and plenty of parking.

In the past year, 240 more homes and businesses in the Woolmarket area received access to city sewer. But I know we have a ways to go. Nearly 1700 of the 3100 homes and businesses in Woolmarket now have access to city water and/or sewer.

We have completed a comprehensive engineering master plan to guide us in making about \$35 million in improvements needed to bring city-quality services to this area. It's a lot, and we're not going to get there overnight, but we're going to get there.

This year, construction will start on two new fire stations to serve the Woolmarket and Cedar Lake communities.

Construction on a 13,000-square-foot fire command station at Cedar-Popp's will begin this year using a unique form of financing through the South Mississippi Planning and Development District, and we'll also begin construction of a second fire station on property the city acquired on old Highway 67.

I'm also excited about what's going to be called Woolmarket City Center, located on property the city acquired off Kayleigh Cove. It will house a place for community gatherings and a larger, permanent Harrison County public library.

Two significant incidents occurred this past year. Tuesday, March 7, about 2:30 p.m. a CSX freight train collided with a charter bus carrying 50 passengers at the Main Street crossing. And in October, as we had over 800 RVs along our waterfront and thousands of visitors in town for Cruisin' the Coast, Hurricane Nate rolled ashore.

We know when hurricanes are coming, and we know how to prepare. But the train accident, as horrific as it was, demonstrated that we have the best-trained, best-equipped and best-prepared fire and police departments.

Multiple acts of selfless heroism were seen that day, not only from our firefighters and police officers, but from neighboring agencies, clergy and citizens. It was gratifying to see that our thousands of hours of training and the compassion of everyday Biloxi citizens all came together in the aftermath of this tragedy.

Today, we are in the design stage to build connecting streets in order to close rail crossings in east Biloxi, while we are continuing to push CSX to make repairs to the existing crossings in Biloxi.

I said it before the accident and I'll say it again: 29 crossings in an 8 mile stretch is too many. And 21 of those crossings are in a two-mile stretch. That's a recipe for disaster, especially considering that CSX rails have been raised over years to a level that causes issues at many crossings.

Our part is to create the connecting streets to avoid dead-end roads. To do that, we're going to reprogram federal money that HUD said we couldn't use on the Saenger Theater.

Then Nate. It's relatively small size meant we wouldn't have federal funding to engage our debris-removal contract. We did it ourselves, with plenty of help from our garbage and trash contractors, who were only days into their contract when

the storm struck.

Pelican Waste brought in crews from as far away as Louisiana to help pick up debris. Our Public Works and Parks and Recreation departments hauled away more than 250 cubic yards of debris from neighborhoods. Enough to fill more than 20 dump trucks.

Our city workforce of more than 650 employees handle these issues and also provide the day-to-day services that you expect and deserve.

Last year our Community Development issued nearly 3,000 permits, including 391 for commercial buildings and 714 for residential buildings.

We saw the completion of the new Biloxi Junior High School which welcomed more than 1,000 seventh and eighth-graders back in August.

Our Parks and Recreation Department, using a grant, added pickle ball courts at the Popp's Ferry Recreation Complex. They also installed new heating and cooling systems in the dressing and restrooms at the Natatorium, and this year you'll see similar improvements at the Snyder Center.

Our Public Works department processed more than 9,000 work orders, totaling \$3.2 million, used nearly 13,000 tons of asphalt to repair roadways and installed and repaired more than 200 streets and traffic signs. They also maintained more than 50 city buildings, 23 water wells, 127 lift stations and more than 5,000 fire hydrants.

Our Fire Department responded to nearly 7500 calls for service, almost a 10 percent increase year to year. Medical emergencies continue to be two-thirds of our calls, we increased training and now have 70 EMTs and four Paramedics. The number of actual house fires was down by 10 last year, to 201.

You're going to see the city put a new 33-foot all-aluminum fire boat in service this year, replacing our 17-year-old 27-foot fire boat.

In the Police Department, we had more than 120,000 calls for service, three-quarters of those calls being generated by pro-active police officers. We gave our police officers new tools to help deal with the panhandling issues that plague our city like so many in the country. In fact, on the panhandling and transient issue, we are awaiting word on our grant application with the Bloomberg Mayors Challenge. We would use the grant to work with local service agencies to establish a Homeless Assessment Center in Biloxi.

We remain a safe city. We had three homicides in all of 2017 and all three resulted in arrests.

When I became mayor, I had a goal of being more proactive with our legal department. We're not afraid to stand up for Biloxi, in court, but I wanted more, and I'm pleased to report to you that last year we recovered more than \$300,000 in money we had been shorted in city leases, and by updating existing leases and creating new ones, mainly for cell towers, the Legal Department has generated another \$700,000.

The Legal Department also worked with the Board of Supervisors to issue a port bond that will be paid by Harrison County, without raising taxes, and producing \$6.5 million to fund those boardwalks and the second Hwy. 90 crossover I mentioned earlier, and to issue a \$1 Million Tax Increment Financing Bond to complete the streets and public infrastructure for the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market on Popp's Ferry Road.

Our Legal Department also obtained \$1 Million in Tidelands grants through the DMR and State Legislature to fund the West Biloxi Boardwalk.

The department is now working on additional sources for funding the Downtown Biloxi restoration plan, Point Cadet Waterfront Marketplace, a neighborhood grocery store that we would like to see on city property at Division and Caillavet, and yes, we are continuing to work with Southern Mississippi Planning and Development District to see new uses for the vacant Walmart site on Pass Road.

This all helped our bottom line. Financially speaking, our major revenues, property taxes, sales tax, and gaming tax remained strong in 2017 and we anticipate this to continue in 2018.

All of these projects at some point work their way through our Engineering Department. We saw the completion of the widening of Popp's Ferry Road. And, of course, I'm happy to report that Coast Transit is now offering expanded service all the way to Pass Road and beyond to service the Santa Maria and other apartments, the library and grocery stores along Popp's Ferry Road.

At the southern end of Popp's Ferry Road, we are continuing final design on connecting Popp's Ferry Road to Hwy. 90. We hope to begin property acquisition later this year.

In 2016, we effectively re-organized the Engineering Department, creating a separate Public Works Department, allowing our engineers and staff to focus on

the many challenges that have to be addressed on a daily basis in our growing city. At the same time, the Program Management Division was created, and now manages the \$355 million Infrastructure Project. This was a heavy decision that was thrust upon us. The third party management plan from 2014 ran out of steam and budget. With help from MEMA and FEMA, it's working.

Engineering has been coordinating another significant project that has been kicked around for the past 15 years. That is the new main gate for Keesler gate at Forrest Avenue and Division. We have finalized agreements on property acquisition for Phase I, which is the area inside the gate. In fact, we are out for bids and expect construction to begin within 60 days.

Design work on phase 2, that is the area on Division Street from Forrest Avenue to the I-110, is still being done.

We're looking to create a four-lane boulevard with a center median, and a streetscape that will be inviting to a variety of new businesses. During this legislative session, we are asking the state legislature for the final element of funding for this important project.

Let me say it again, one of the biggest endeavors that Engineering with the Program Management Division is overseeing is the infrastructure work in east Biloxi, north of the CSX railway.

This is a \$126 million project that covers 55 miles of roadway. Today, I can report to you that more than 30 miles of asphalt has been laid. The train is picking up steam but we're still a ways from the station.

That's little consolation for those homes and businesses still on the 20 miles of milled up roads.

After seeing mistakes that were mad and the misery it caused, I pushed for temporary paving of the major roadways in the area, which we did. I continue to push the contractor for more work and more progress, and I have promised you that you would never see those types of miscalculations and mistakes on my watch.

We will begin the infrastructure work south of the CSX railway this month. It will cover the area from Seashore Methodist to just east of the I-110. It's an 800-day, \$23 million project, and it is as complicated as the north contract. But you will not see the kind of milling and wholesale destruction of roads and neighborhoods

It will proceed logically and orderly. There are going to be inconveniences because its major work, but this time we have built into the contracts far more city control. Work in an area must be 75 percent complete before the contractor can move to the next area, and only after if the city approves.

I also want to acknowledge and applaud some of our partners that we have with us today.

The Keesler Air Force Base and Team Keesler continues to demonstrate why it is the best bases in the United States Air Force worldwide. Last year Keesler graduated more than 30,000 students from 163 career fields, led the Air Force in cutting-edge training methods, treated more than 800,000 patients through world-class medical care, and the Hurricane Hunters flew more than 800 hours across more than 90 missions into 12 named storms.

The Biloxi Housing Authority this year is celebrating nearly eight decades of providing safe, decent, affordable housing. Today, more than 1,700 families are served and last year finalized its transition to the Rental Assistance Demonstration Program. This allows public housing units to move to a Section 8 platform ensuring that the units remain as permanent affordable housing. Of the 10 developments owned and maintained by the Housing Authority, three are specifically designated for seniors.

The Biloxi Veterans Administration is Biloxi's second largest employer. It's top notch and continues to grow. I want to make note of the tremendous service that continues to be provided at the Biloxi VA, to veterans all along our gulf coast.

Be assured, that Biloxi Public Schools is the best bang for the buck around. The new junior high school along with the newly creation Biloxi Upper Elementary for 5th and 6th graders, are state of the art facilities and their highly qualified staff are preparing our students to compete on a global level in college, career and beyond.

Susan Hunt. How could you have a State of the City address without mentioning Susan Hunt, our beloved career educator, Biloxi's Outstanding Citizen and along with her sister Martha, are matriarchs of Mardi Gras and for Fat Tuesday Susan is designated at Biloxi's Official Street Walker.

Last year, her Biloxi Excel By 5 opened its Family Resource Center and Families First for Mississippi at the Lopez School. Susan, whose love for Biloxi is unrivaled, is a guiding light for parents of children under age 5, the next generation of Biloxians.

Sustaining our quality of life, Biloxi's unique quality of life, is what drives all the things I have discussed with you today. And no doubt, it's for you and me, our

children and grandchildren and those will call it home in the next 300 years.

When you say Biloxi to most anyone in the country, they know what you're talking about. Whether it's through Keesler, or casinos, or Cruisin', or our colorful history. We've stepped it up and as we move forward on this ambitious program of work, we cherish and appreciate our good fortune, the fact that God has given us this beautiful community and its majestic seascape, the water, the islands, the oaks, the miles of living shorelines

This innate beauty is something you cannot build or buy, yet it is a great source of wealth, this Biloxi of ours, not only for its beauty, but for the enjoyment it provides for visitors and locals alike. BILOXI, it is a magical place.

(Video presentation ends)

(Closing remarks from podium)

Thank you, I appreciate that.

You can see that our goal is to transform our VISON into REALITY. This program of work is the result of many months of planning and meetings and building partnership, all of them helping make things happen.

Special appreciation to our many partners from the state, local and federal levels. And also thanks to our local engineers and contactors.

Most importantly, I thank you all my fellow residents and friends of our beloved city. YOU are the people who make Biloxi the very special place that it is.

A piece of tile artwork hangs on one of the walls in my office at City Hall. It proudly spells out "We are Biloxi."

Also, this small banner hangs in the office and it says, "It is in our hands to create a better world for all who live in it."

With focus, with determination, with drive, with your continued support, and with an undying love for our city, we are making great things happen and we're making them happen NOW.

Let the word go forth, "We are Biloxi," and "It is in our hands to create a better world for all who live in it."

Thank you all. God bless you and God bless Biloxi.