

## State of the City Address

Given Jan. 25, 2018 by Mayor Carolyn Dull

When I reflect on the year 2017, the profound words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. come to mind:

*“That old law about 'an eye for an eye' leaves everybody blind. The time is always right to do the right thing.”*

Sometimes, humanity reverts to *“that old law,”* and we lose our way. But somehow, some way, we find the noble path again.

Here in Staunton, I’m proud to say that our City is filled with many who do the right thing. People who show integrity and compassion. People who stand up for neighbors and friends, families and strangers. People who care.

These characteristics make up a strong community foundation, and they were on full display in our City during the last year. I am pleased to report, that for those reasons, and many more, the state of our City is strong.

### **Economic growth and the unemployment rate are holding steady, and the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in Staunton.**

- Unemployment is currently at 3.4%, which is lower than the current state average and an improvement over the rate at this time last year of 4.1%.
- We issued more than 2,100 business licenses, and 307 businesses opened doors in the City last year.
- Many visitors and residents alike spent leisure time in Staunton last year, providing more than \$4.2 million in revenue from meals and lodging taxes.
- Our financial standing is strong. While we could always use more funding to accomplish multiple important projects, such as new police and fire facilities, we are working with what we’ve got, and managing it well thanks to an exceptional Finance team.

- We adopted a \$110 million budget last April and maintained an Aa2 bond rating from Moody's Investors Service and an AA- rating from Standard and Poor's. These ratings show very strong creditworthiness.
- We continue to save for a rainy day by increasing the percentage of funds placed in reserves.
- And finally, we've been awarded a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association since 1985 for our sound financial standing and practices.

**Some significant and awesome things happened in Staunton last year that made my list of my Top 10 highlights of 2017. Here goes:**

1. City Council voted to fund a vital renovation of Lee High School. We have high hopes for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century, collaborative learning and working environment that will serve students and teachers well when complete.
2. We made great progress at Staunton Crossing and Frontier Center with new roads and infrastructure to support each development, and we're waiting with great anticipation for several new businesses to open in those developments this year.
3. Montgomery Hall Park was named a Virginia Landmark and added to the Virginia register of historic places thanks to the hard work of current and former City staff and area historians. Montgomery Hall was one of very few parks in Virginia that African-Americans could visit during the Jim Crow segregation era, and drew visitors by the busload from all over the Commonwealth.
4. At least 10,000 Potterheads jam-packed our downtown like we've never seen it for Queen City Mischief and Magic last September, bringing even more joy and magic to Staunton and boosting our local economy.

5. The Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation debuted the Virginia Breeze bus in December, providing Staunton with its first intercity bus service in 17 years. The bus stops in Staunton twice a day, every day, and transports travelers from Christiansburg to Washington, D.C., and back.
6. We upgraded to a digital, state-of-the-art E911 system, allowing our public safety departments to receive emergency calls more quickly and stay current with ever-changing technology.
7. City Council raised its collective voice against the Atlantic Coast Pipeline in an effort to protect Gardner Spring, where we get much of our pristine water supply. Council also expressed opposition to a daily fee increase at Shenandoah National Park during peak season in an effort to keep the park accessible to people of all economic abilities.
8. Excited crowds watched the first solar eclipse seen in the U.S. in almost a century from perches all over the City, and at least 600 people filled the lawn of the Staunton Public Library for a Solar Eclipse Viewing Party.
9. We've continued to invest in infrastructure, progressively updating old water lines in our historic city, paving multiple lane miles of City streets and continuing to develop streetscape plans for Central Avenue; and,
10. The city horticulturist was able to restore more dogwoods to our parks after many were destroyed by disease in the late 1970s, thanks to a \$10,000 grant from the Augusta Garden Club.

**Staunton also earned awards and acclaim on a number of coveted lists in 2017 because ... well, let's just admit it: we're cool.**

- *The Huffington Post* said Staunton has one of “The 6 Cutest Main Streets in America.”
- *Country Living Magazine* featured the City as one of “23 Best Small Main Streets in America.”
- We were named among “The 15 Most Beautiful Main Streets Across America” by *Architectural Digest* — and one of “The Next Great Mountain Towns” by *Blue Ridge Outdoors*.
- *Washingtonian* magazine said we were one of “3 Great Small Towns in the Shenandoah Valley That Are Worth the Visit.”
- And finally, *Southern Living* placed Staunton on its list of “20 Charming Mountain Towns to Visit This Fall.”

**Told you we were cool.**

**Almost 30% of the City’s budget is allocated to Staunton City Schools, which we are proud to support.**

- For the 5<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, employees of Staunton City Schools received a raise in an ongoing effort to increase compensation to competitive levels and to recruit and keep skilled teachers, administrators and staff.
- And last, but certainly not least, we joined the Staunton School Board in welcoming new superintendent, Dr. Garrett Smith, to the school division following the retirement of Dr. Linda Reviea. We’re excited about his innovative strategies for the school division, including the development of a strategic diversity and inclusion plan for the school division and an Alternative to Suspension Center for students.

**We are grateful to have positive working relationships with the School Board and other school leaders, and we look forward to our continued collaboration and goodwill.**

**We said farewell to a few longtime friends and public servants in 2017.**

We laid to rest one of Staunton's most notable philanthropists, Lee Cochran, a loyal and passionate supporter of local performing arts and historic preservation, including the American Shakespeare Center, Frontier Culture Museum and the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library. Undoubtedly, her powerful influence has left a mark on the City for years to come. We also bid happy farewells to Director of Library Services Ruth Arnold; Clerk of Council and Paralegal Linda Little; City Sheriff Alex Caldwell and Commonwealth's Attorney Ray Robertson, who retired after dedicating decades of their lives to the betterment of our City. Between the four of them, they devoted 115 years of service to the City. We are grateful for their contributions.

**And now, I'm going to take one more opportunity to brag about the City. We've got an ace team of City employees who work diligently to maintain Staunton as a thriving place to live and work. Our sincere thanks to City staff, including our first responders, for the excellent and sometimes difficult work they perform daily. And our congratulations to our Parks & Rec Department and all other departments and staff who earned regional and state recognition for their work last year.**

Staunton's future remains bright, and we are most fortunate to call the Queen City home. We live in a giving and welcoming place full of creatives, visionaries, go-getters, do-gooders and everyday superstars. Thank you for making our City shine. May Staunton be blessed in 2018, and may we always remember to do the right thing.