Good evening everyone.

This is one of my favorite nights of the year because it’s a time when our city comes together and the energy is just palpable!  
Thank you for being here.  
I would like to say thank you to Mr. Isaiah Freeman from IB Pittman for opening up tonight’s program and to the students from Peabody Middle School choir under the direction of Deven Graves, their music teacher and their principal Mr. Noah Rogers. Thank you to IB Pittman’s Coordinator Mrs. Gloria Graves.

Thank you to our wonderful students, parents and staff of Petersburg City Public Schools….

Ladies and gentlemen, this is our future and what we sow now in this city is what they will reap for generations to come…. please join me in a round of applause for these great students.

Thank you to the Appomattox Governor’s School Jazz Band, Jennifer Piazza-Pick and the Ft. Lee Color Guard for being a part of tonight.

Let me take the time to recognize some great individuals. I would like to first recognize our legislative leaders working very hard representing us in the General Assembly that could not be here with us tonight….(Senator Rosalyn R. Dance who is in Committee and Delegate Lashresce Aird celebrating her Wedding Anniversary today as well. Happy Anniversary…

It is an immeasurable privilege to work side by side with six other councilpersons that assist me in leading this great city. I would like to ask them to stand and be recognized for our teamwork this evening.

Vice Mayor Sam Parham, Councilman John Hart, Councilman Darrin Hill, Councilwoman Treska Wilson-Smith, Councilman Brian Moore and Councilman David Ray Coleman, as well as our Clerk of Council Ms. Nykesha Jackson.

Let us recognize the presence of Petersburg’s School Board, Schools Chairman Ken Pritchett and Interim Superintendent of Schools Dr. Linda Shiflette.

Thank you for your commitment to our children and what you do to continue to make our schools strong and encourage our children to learn and succeed.

I would also like to extend a special thank you to the Appomattox Governor’s School, their Director, Dr. James Victory and Mr. James Carver for their assistance and allowing us to be in this beautiful facility.

Thank you.

We have had a fantastic year and I am proud to say that we are consistently moving forward in a positive direction because of the diligent effort, collegial teamwork and sincere dedication of our strong and very professional City Council, City Manager, William E. Johnson, III, and most importantly, because of the caring, generous and engaged employees, residents and businesses of Petersburg.

I would like to also recognize all of our city staff and extend a special thank you to our Deputy City Manager, Mr. Irvin Carter, Police Chief John Dixon and Fire Chief TC Hairston.  
Please help me in thanking them for their public service! You are all doing great work in your respective agencies.

It is a sincere and humble privilege as Mayor of the City of Petersburg to discuss a favorite topic of mine, Petersburg.

Progress is a 24-7, 365-day a year job that requires the diligence to stick with and through the process of advancement.

Tonight, I present to you a State of the City that is not laced with elaborate rhetoric or overreaching promises. Instead I present a State of the City that highlights our city’s transformation through transparency, hope in the midst of our hardships, and realism throughout our city’s evolution.

It has been a banner year of strengthened partnerships, new collaborations and exciting opportunities. The changes that have occurred last year in our city speak well for today, and for generations to come.

We have seen an influx of investments and resources from the private business sector and we are creating a new course for our economy.

Last year at my inaugural state of the city, I kicked off 2015 with the theme of our city being UNPRECEDENTED.

So, what is the state of our city this year?  
This year the state of our city is strong and getting stronger.

2016 is RESILIENT…

We are resilient, we are disciplined, we are working together and we are forging ahead to make our city even stronger.

Our first example comes as an email the city manager received from a couple that visited Petersburg in December.

This email was forwarded to Council from a tourist…a couple from North Carolina who wanted a weekend getaway so they decided on Petersburg.

They visited Blandford Church and Cemetery, the Battlefield, ate at the Dixie, walked through Old Towne and was so moved by our city that they described their weekend as something unforgettable and without a doubt something they want to do again.

The husband wrote “the city of Petersburg, Virginia was very welcoming, very warm, and my wife and I thoroughly enjoyed our time in your city. The only criticism we have is not directed toward the city, but rather to the clock and our schedules. We wish we had more time to enjoy the sights. I am certain, when time allows, we will return. But please know, we are so appreciative of the people of Petersburg.”

This letter speaks to the great work performed by all of us in this room.

So, tonight I bring a call to action that we collectively work to continue this momentum.

Tonight, I will highlight a number of challenges, reforms, success stories, and next steps as we continue to build a city we can all be proud of.

First, I begin with the fiscal state of our city. We have seen Petersburg a lot in black and white and tv recently.

During these economic times, I would say this is probably the city’s largest area for opportunity as we move forward.

And, this has been our largest stride in recent years.

We are digging ourselves out of a hole that was created years and years ago, it just happens that now it is our mess to clean up.

But, we accept the challenge.

Based on the fiscal policy set forth by City Council, 2015 was the first year we set aside money in our reserves and 2016 will be the second consecutive year of growing these reserves.

With this great news, we have to face the reality of another tough budget year.

The Administration and the City Council are prepared to make choices that will not gain us popularity, but will ensure our city’s stability.

Our city cannot and will not function in a system that does not ensure its viability and prosperity. This year, we will make decisions that are necessary for our city’s improvement.

The City Treasurer, Kevin Brown and his staff has introduced new tools to help us get to where we need to be.

City Council has approved to implement a five-year financial forecast along with the city’s strategic plan to make sure we are collecting our taxes, residents are paying their taxes and the city is using this revenue efficiently to deliver top of the line services.

With fiscal responsibility being the priority, the city manager has maintained the Revenue Anticipation Note at $4.5 million, down from $6 million two years ago.

The City has also seen substantial progress in the City Assessor’s Office. Mr. Richie McKeithen and his team are hitting the pavement and holding our businesses accountable to make sure all development is on the books.

With our continued focus, all of us will press through. But we need your help.

We will not be knocked down and this year we will rebound better than ever.

RESILIENT

Although our fiscal state is slowly improving, things look promising as this past year was a banner year for new construction and redevelopment in our community.

I have heard folks say why doesn’t our city look like Colonial Heights or Hopewell, well we are not them and do not want to be them.

We are Petersburg.

I Am Petersburg!!!

So, what is Petersburg doing?

At the end of 2015, we made a major announcement about a new mixed-use development that includes a hotel coming to Exit 52. This project will be a game changer for our community because it brings life back to our major gateway in to our City, as well as create 200 new jobs.

We have 13 new developments under construction or under review, totaling $48.5 million in private investment and an anticipated 76 new jobs.

The redevelopment of the BB&T Building located at 30 Franklin St. is nearing completion. This will be the new location for the Visitor’s Center and our Economic Development and Tourism departments. The anticipated completion date is June 2016.

We will break ground for the Reggie Williams basketball venue in the second quarter of 2016.

We have an array of major projects coming to fruition for 2016 including the Trapezium Brewery, Farmers Market restaurant, Family Dollar, Southside Depot and a developer for the former Petersburg Hotel.

We also have a Letter of Intent for Titmus and a purchase agreement for the Halifax Triangle. You may remember we hosted a Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel this fall discussing the possibilities in the Triangle. This report will be coming soon.

Recently, we announced the expansion of the city’s tax abatement program to allow for rehab on vacant lots for more residential development and to increase more homeownership.

Through our Planning and Community Development department we know that this strategic tool will continue to assist our efforts to spar more revitalization throughout our neighborhoods.

So, 2016 is shaping to be another promising and transformational year.

We are resilient.

For 2016, there is a significant effort focused on broadening educational opportunities for our children. This partnership geared to helping our children is not only at the local level, but includes the help of the state Secretary of Education, Chief of Staff and Secretary of Health and Human Services.

We have made an important request in the next fiscal year’s budget to help fund social workers in schools and reinstate the schools truancy program.

We have to focus on reducing the number of school aged children out in the streets and being unproductive ---- this is a call to action for everyone.

Getting our children off the streets is not enough. We will be helping schools with the reinstatement and follow through implementation of the algebra project to improve SOL scores.

The education and the future of our children is the responsibility of all of us.

You may have seen on Harding Street some great advancement of the hydroponics center located in Petersburg.

The Hydroponics Center in the City is a partnership between VSU and the City of Petersburg and is gaining more and more popularity in our city.

To have this resource in our own backyard is truly a testimony to the focus of making health and wellness a priority in the city.

As we continue to make our city a healthy city, access to fresh fruits and vegetables is important.

The City also recently launched a health and wellness hotline as a primary resource for residents to be connected with the health resources in the community.

With one phone call, you can find out about general health information by calling 804-518-1000.

Petersburg…we are moving in the right direction.

We are resilient.

Another goal of the city is to focus on how we appear from the outside looking in.

They say you cannot read a book by its cover.

But, boarded up or falling down homes is not a great introduction to the great story our city has to tell.

The City will continue a strong enforcement effort to combat dilapidated and uninhabitable properties. We will be proactive and have a plan of action as we demolish structures that are not contributing to the welfare of the community.

Through Operation Renew, we have submitted 37 properties for 2016. We will also improve our process to engage absentee landlords and homeowners in maintaining their properties so they don’t fall in disrepair.

Along with making sure our communities and homes are kept in order, we have to make sure our streets and corridors are clean as well.

Please stop littering.

This year we will team up with organizations that are doing a great job in keeping our city clean. We are hopeful that others will be motivated to help with keeping the City clean and free of trash and litter.

This is a responsibility of all of us.

We get questions all the time about the progress of Virginia Avenue School.

Virginia Avenue School is in the fundraising and business development phase.

Petersburg Community Development Corporation received the deed to Virginia Avenue School last month, and has three years to complete the fundraising, development and construction of the new health and wellness center.

A meeting between PCDC and two prospective development partners is scheduled to happen very soon.

This is a project that I look forward to coming to fruition for our community.

As we talk about education, jobs and a thriving city, transportation is key to continued growth.

The expansion of access to jobs is crucial to a better quality of life. Without a great transportation system, we cannot link people to jobs, medical appointments, educational institutions or other needed services.

We are studying opportunities to increase options throughout the region into Waverly/Wakefield and Greensville/Emporia, as well as to the Amazon plant in Chesterfield.

Currently we are servicing the Dinwiddie Amazon location to assist our working age population but emphasized service enhancements have also been placed locally for our seniors.

We now offer those 70 years old and older direct door-to-door para-transit service, along with our disabled residents.

Petersburg Area Transit is growing in leaps and bounds.

We will soon be cutting the ribbon for the opening of the 2nd floor at PAT.

We are resilient and bouncing back.

We are excited to hear about the results of the Collier Yard selection.

The potential of the project will allow Petersburg to grow and bring more people to our great city but also provide viable economic development and increase foot traffic.

This is a project that has to happen in Petersburg, and frankly speaking Petersburg is the only smart choice.

These results should be delivered very soon.

Affordable homeownership is supported by myself and members of Council. It is the first of several steps in creating your own personal wealth.

Through the efforts of city staff, Community Development Block Grants will offer down payment assistance funding for 1st time homebuyers.

There are some exciting deals and fixer uppers available in our great City.

Collaborating with our housing partners, the city will continue to hold seminars to make sure everyone knows about the resources available to them to purchase a home.

To make sure our city government and our community is sustainable, homeownership is key. Let me emphasize again the new expansion of the tax abatement program for residential development.

Something that I hold near and dear to my heart is workforce development.

Petersburg hosted a regional meeting in mid-January with regional leadership to address workforce development within this region and how we can provide the proper skills training that will afford our residents job opportunities.

It is my hope that with our next meeting this spring we will be able to launch a program that aggressively provides opportunities for those seeking employment.

Outreach is key as well, therefore; Schools, Social Services and others that provide this service must be at the table making the connection between people, skills and jobs.

Thankfully, unemployment rates have reduced from 10.6% in 2014 to 8.3% in 2015 - this is the first time since 2008 that the rate has been below 9%.

I think this deserves a round of applause.

We will continue to work to make sure our residents are employed, able to afford to purchase a home, give their children a great future and help to build and give back to our community.

Petersburg is resilient.

So what are the takeaways that I implore everyone to walk away with tonight? Yes, we have had some hiccups in the road, but you never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have.  
TAKEAWAY 1: The fiscal responsibility of this city is up to all of us. Without money in the bank, yet a continued high expectation of providing quality customer service, everyone must be held accountable.  
TAKEAWAY 2: A team is only as strong as their weakest link. Let us all be strong Ambassadors for this city.  
TAKEAWAY 3: We must all work together. We have a common goal to keep this city clean and safe and we as a city government cannot do this alone.  
TAKEAWAY 4: Resiliency. This is our moment and we must seize the opportunity to bounce back and be stronger than ever before.

Good people, this is Petersburg, this is our city.

We take pride in our history, in our families, and in our community.

I'm honored and humbled to be your Mayor, and I look forward to the future of our great city.

Thank you for taking the time to be here tonight. I know all of you have lots of demands of your time.

A special thank you again to our great City Council, invaluable community partners, our elected officials, the volunteer community, our city workforce and so many others who make our city the special place that it is.

I appreciate your commitment to the future of our city.

Your energy is the fuel that keeps me going as your Mayor.

Last year during my state of the city address, I talked about how we had turned a corner and the recovery had begun.   
Now I can say that we’re in full gear! We’ve got massive momentum due to the indomitable spirit of this city and its residents.   
But we’re not done yet.   
We still need to keep our sleeves rolled up and keep working toward a better future for Petersburg. Let us seize the day. Let’s make this city into everything that YOU deserve.   
We are Petersburg.   
God bless you and God bless the City of Petersburg.

I Am Petersburg… TRANSCENDING… ….TRIUMPHANT…PREVAILING…and RESILIENT…

Thank you very much.

Good night.