Good afternoon.  Thanks to each and every one of you for coming to this signature event of the [Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce](http://www.hamptonroadschamber.com/).

And thanks, Jim, for your kind words.  As many of you know, Jim has been my friend for a long time, so it was tough for me to lose him as our city manager after 24 years.  Fortunately, among the many legacies Jim left was his replacement, Dave Hansen.

Dave is no stranger to our City and the region.  He has been a leading contributor to our successes over the last 10 years.  Of course, he has a lot of help from our top-notch workforce.  And it’s not just me who thinks they’re top-notch.  Ninety-four percent of our residents say they are satisfied or very satisfied with City Services, and 85 percent are satisfied or very satisfied with our schools and School services — a testament to Jim Spore, Dave Hansen, Dr. Aaron Spence, and the 22,000 employees who work for the City and Schools.  Dave and Dr. Spence, will you please stand, along with all City and Schools employees and volunteers… so we can recognize you all?

As I reflected on the last year, both personally and professionally, I came to really understand an essential truth: when you make a mistake, as I did, you find out a lot about yourself.  You also find out who your real friends are — and many of mine are here in this room.  Even though it was an unintentional mistake, I will regret it forever because it caused some people to question my integrity.  I want to take this moment to thank you, my friends, and City employees, for your support and encouragement throughout the last 15 months.  My family and I are more grateful than you can imagine.

And now, I’m eager to move ahead with all of the great plans for this city.  Those plans will lead us on an amazing journey.  It’s a journey that paints a bright and exciting future for Virginia Beach.  It starts with much of what we already have: a place where we feel safe in our homes, our neighborhoods and our schools.  A place surrounded by the beauty of the outdoors, and abundant entertainment, learning and recreational opportunities.  And, a place that provides the highest quality of services for residents, and the very best place for tourists to visit.

This journey starts on a day in the not-too-distant future when Bev and I take a driverless vehicle from our house to the nearest light rail station, transfer to high-speed rail that will take us to Dulles International Airport, where we can catch a nonstop flight to Germany.  Imagine that — from Virginia Beach to Germany in a half day — without having to drive.  That’s just the beginning of our journey.  I’ll return to that idea a little bit later.

Not long ago, I received an e-mail from a resident who talked about the investments Virginia Beach has made over the last 20 years.  He talked about the importance of having a connected region, and worried that our children leave this wonderful area to move to Austin, Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham, and D.C. in search of walkable, sustainable communities connected with vibrant multi-modal transportation systems they can’t find here in Virginia Beach.

He speaks to the very core of what is important for us as we look ahead: making connectivity a priority, not only so our own children will choose Virginia Beach, but so other young people will see the opportunities this great city has to offer, and elect to move here, as well.

Connectivity — it’s our desire.  Connectivity — it’s our destination.  Connectivity — it’s our destiny.  This, my friends, is the year of connectivity.  Moving forward, Virginia Beach is positioning itself to make connectivity a priority.  We are setting the stage for a prosperous tomorrow.  That means we must build a better, stronger, more inclusive and connected Virginia Beach today.  Our future quality of life depends upon it.

Today, I am going to address connectivity from several different perspectives — mobility, economic vitality, and long-term livability.

Mobility means having a comprehensive, integrated transportation system that starts with a network of roads, bike paths and pedestrian walkways that help people get around.  It also means having a growing, vibrant international airport with direct flights to destinations across the globe.

But we must not stop there.  We have to address the bottlenecks and gridlock that occur between the Peninsula and the Southside.  And, we have to expand our transportation alternatives so we aren’t completely dependent on our cars.

On our horizon are three transformative transportation projects that may very well be the most important initiatives of our lifetimes.

As chairman of the Hampton Roads Transportation Accountability Commission, I am committed to getting these done.   First, we will expand the High Rise Bridge and add two lanes, taking it from four to six lanes.  We have figured out how to save money on the Bridge that will allow us to dedicate the remaining funds to our second project, which is the construction of a third crossing for Hampton Roads.

If Senator Frank Wagner’s proposed gas tax bill succeeds in Richmond, I believe we can do it without additional tolls.

The table is set, and now we must take the necessary and prudent steps to smash through transportation chokepoints, unlock our region, and enhance our connectivity for the continued growth of all our economies, military preparedness, tourism, and our quality of life.

The third initiative is more controversial, perhaps, but no less vital to the long-term economic health of our region.  Thanks to Governor Terry McAuliffe, Secretary of Transportation Aubrey Layne and the Virginia Beach City Council, we have the financing in place to complete the design and construct the extension of The Tide light rail line into Virginia Beach.

Connecting the centers of Virginia’s two largest cities is a start.  Down the road, we must extend light rail to the Norfolk Naval Base, to the airport, to Greenbrier, and to the beach.

We’ve all heard the arguments against investing in light rail.  Among them is the notion that light rail doesn’t alleviate congestion.  That may be true, but no city has ever widened its way out of a congestion problem, either.  While we will always build roads, let’s not kid ourselves — they, too, are expensive projects.  The Lesner Bridge is $120 million dollars.  The Kempsville/Princess Anne Intersection cost $93 million dollars, and just one-half of the improvements to the I-264/64 interchange is $314 million dollars.

The value of any rapid transit system is the ability to have an alternative to congestion and to spur the kinds of investments that create jobs, broaden the tax base, and provide people choices to live, shop, work and play in connected communities that don’t depend on having a car for every trip.  We must build a smart and comprehensive transportation system that can move people and goods with ease and speed.  Our leadership responsibility is to equip this community to be successful — not just for today, but for the future, for our children and their children.

Connectivity is more than meeting our growing regional transportation needs.

It’s ensuring our excellent public schools and institutions of higher learning provide educational pathways into high-demand careers.

It’s ensuring that growing industries bring jobs and services to Virginia Beach.

It’s ensuring the broadband capacity that our businesses need for global commerce and 21st century job growth.

Picture this….  Lines of fiber running beneath the Atlantic Ocean — from Europe and Brazil to Dam Neck Road, and on to fiber transmission facilities at the Corporate Landing Business Park.  Companies, universities and communities that connect will be able to conduct research, engage in commerce, and compete globally in ways that expand the use of big data, video and large file exchange.  It’s faster than the speed of thought.

We are off to a good start.  Taken together, the City and Schools have more than 200 miles of high-speed Internet fiber connecting all the schools and the vast majority of our road systems and signalized intersections.

Now, Virginia Beach is on the verge of becoming the East Coast’s fiber transmission hub, facilitating ultra-high-speed broadband communications across the ocean.

To support this exciting enterprise, the City Council has agreed to invest in expanding our Next Generation Network.  Beginning this year, our IT Department, in partnership with Cox Communications, will be expanding our fiber network and broadband capacity.  This initiative will also deliver broadband availability to our Strategic Growth Areas, and establish connectivity opportunities for Old Dominion and Norfolk State universities and Tidewater Community College.  It will also give existing businesses and biomedical enterprises greater research capabilities and opportunities to grow.

What a powerful incentive to attract new businesses and biomedical enterprises to Virginia Beach and Coastal Virginia.  What an asset as we partner with Virginia Beach City Public Schools to close the digital divide in our community.  What a brilliant way to connect!

 Thanks to Virginia Beach City Council Member Ben Davenport for his enthusiastic leadership in forming the Broadband Task Force, and developing a strategy for expanding broadband capacity in Virginia Beach and Coastal Virginia.

With the expansion of broadband, we are on the cusp of incredible economic growth leading to innovations and breakthroughs in medicine, business and technology.

Just two years ago at this event, I announced the creation of the Biomedical and Healthcare Task Force and since then, Chairman Tom Frantz of Williams Mullen, and Vice Chairman Rony Thomas of LifeNet Health, have been paving the way for success and opportunity.  For too long, our City’s economy has been based on a three-legged stool featuring tourism, defense and agriculture.  This will create a fourth leg for that stool.

One of the most important industries powering economic growth in the United States, bioscience is responsible for the creation of more than 5,000 new jobs, and $1.9 billion dollars in biomedical and life science-related capital investment in Virginia in the past decade alone.

Recognizing the potential for Virginia's economy, the governor included $30 million dollars in funding per year in his proposed two-year budget for the development of spin-off bioscience companies in multiple regions of the Commonwealth.

We are delighted to see that the legislature is considering bioscience-focused initiatives that would advance the industry — years ahead of the Biomedical and Healthcare Task Force's timeline.

Three months ago, the Virginia Beach Department of Economic Development announced the launch of VABeachBio, an initiative to attract biomedical and life science businesses and their high-paying jobs to Virginia Beach.

This bio accelerator builds on the strength of the assets already in the Princess Anne Commons corridor.  It will be located at TCC’s Regional Health Professions Center and will include office space, meeting rooms and wet labs.  We hope this support structure enables bioscience start-ups to reach critical milestones more rapidly, so they can graduate from the bio accelerator and open their own facilities in Virginia Beach.

Our accomplishments over the last year bode well for the future, and we look forward to the next phase of bioscience in Virginia Beach.

Another key to ensuring long-term livability is connecting people with their government and with each other.

We’re creating new ways to engage citizens and making more information available — all designed to support our goals for transparency and accessibility.

For example, we just developed a mobile app as another way people can provide us input.  SpeakUpVB! is the name of it — check it out.

We’re also making more of our budget and financial data accessible on VBgov.com.  Our “Open Data” initiative gives people a better idea of how their money is being used and helps us to improve internal processes.  Council member Bob Dyer established the Process Improvements Steering Committee to promote more transparency and improve our municipal government efficiency.  Thank you, Bob, for spearheading this important work.

From every angle, we are successfully making connections that are enriching the already-irresistible Virginia Beach lifestyle.  That journey into the future I mentioned a few minutes ago?  It keeps getting better, because Bev and I will soon get to take our grandchildren to see a Disney Live! performance at the new Virginia Beach Arena.

With City Council’s approval of the $210 million dollar privately funded Arena, we are stepping up our game.  After close to two years of negotiating, the City and United States Management struck a deal requiring no general fund monies to support this world-class multipurpose entertainment and sports arena.

The Arena aligns precisely with pre-existing plans to achieve a distinctive year-round resort that benefits the people who live, work and play in Virginia Beach.  Would the leadership of The ESG Companies, including Andrea Kilmer, and Joe Gelardi, and my friend Governor Bob McDonnell, please stand?

Thank you for advancing this vision that will create jobs, generate tax revenues, and make our hotels, restaurants and businesses more profitable… while attracting live performance and sporting events that currently bypass Coastal Virginia.  I want to recognize City Council Member John Uhrin for his leadership in keeping this important project on track… and to Council Member John Moss for his support of the Arena.

After the visit to the Arena for the Disney Live! show, you know Bev and I will have to take our grandchildren for a ride on the amazing 180-foot SkyWheel at the new 15th Street Pier.  Just imagine that view!

These kinds of investments we are making in the future of Virginia Beach help us to grow our tax base, expand our job base, and enhance the quality of life for every resident in our community.  Many of these investments — including the Arena — would not have been possible without the private and public sectors coming together to make a deal work to benefit everyone.

Now I know we can debate whether it is the role of government to be involved in public-private partnerships.  However, I support the ones we do in Virginia Beach.  Public-private partnerships are opportunities to leverage skillsets and cost-sharing to create better outcomes.  They bring about better projects, enhance services and deliver favorable returns on investments for our residents.  Laskin Gateway, the 31st Street Hilton, Neptune’s Park, and the Amphitheater are prime examples of partnerships that have enhanced our quality of life and brought economic benefits with them.

Look at Town Center, which gave Virginia Beach a skyline with more jobs, new places to live, restaurants, and shops not found anywhere else in Coastal Virginia.  Last fiscal year, the core area of Town Center generated $7.5 million dollars in business taxes — taxes that would not exist without a successful development of this magnitude… taxes that pay for public education, public safety and street maintenance in every corner of Virginia Beach.

Since Fiscal Year 2005, Town Center has generated $64 million dollars in business taxes, used mainly to support the General Fund and Schools.  This, I can promise you ….  Without projects like Town Center, Virginia Beach would NOT have survived the Great Recession.

Town Center continues to flourish….  The next phase starts soon and will bring more retail, more restaurants, more apartments, and a new public plaza.  This project represents a $41 million dollar investment and will generate additional tax revenues that pay for City services.  The new Zeiders American Dream Theater will seat around 300 people, and provide young and emerging artists a place to showcase their work and improve their crafts.

Across Virginia Beach Boulevard at Pembroke Mall, we’re enjoying new retail investment, connecting you with first-to-market retailers REI, which opens in May; and Nordstrom Rack, which opens next month; as well as new stores for Fresh Market, coming in April; and DSW shoes, coming in May.

I’d like to recognize Vice Mayor Louis Jones and City Council Member Jim Wood for working with Gerald Divaris, Lou Haddad, Fred Napolitano, Richard Olivieri, the officers and directors of the Central Business District Association, and people throughout our community to bring such a wonderful, high-energy area to the heart of Virginia Beach.

From Shore Drive to Centerville, from Kempsville to the Resort Area, and from the North End to Pungo and Blackwater, we are all part of the same community.  We must maximize our connectedness to make the most of our great city.  And we must make our community a better place for each and every one — no matter the age or lot in life. This is the very essence of long-term livability.

Virginia Beach was recently named one of the top caring cities in the United States, and for good reason.  I’d like to share a brief email I received last month from a Green Run resident who wrote:

“I just wanted to make a comment about things I have been noticing lately.  There have been several cities making the national news with the bad things that have been going on there for a long time.  I am pleased to notice the City of Virginia Beach has been demonstrating for a long time how a good city works together.  I know we are not perfect, but I cannot imagine a place I would rather be.  I would like you to inform the city officials and workers of the excellent city they are making for all of us.”

I can’t tell you how nice it is to get messages like this one.  It speaks to so many of the incredible things happening in our city that make it so special.  Let me give you just a few examples.

Every day, I see volunteers contributing to our quality of life.  We have more than 17,000 people volunteering their time and talents across 30 city departments.  Traveling from my home to my office at City Hall, I’ll often think of them as I drive by the Virginia Beach Rescue Squad, and the Virginia Aquarium & Marine Science Center.  Sometimes, I’ll take a different route and see volunteers walking dogs outside the Virginia Beach Animal Care and Adoption Center.  I’ll turn at Nimmo Parkway and think about the people volunteering at the Princess Anne recreation center and library.  Our army of volunteers perform a thousand tasks that otherwise would not get done or would get done at a significant expense to taxpayers.

Here’s another example….  Second graders in Title I schools are learning how to swim through the Students on the Swim program — S.O.S. for short.  Thanks to City Council Member Rosemary Wilson for connecting the City’s Parks & Recreation Department and Virginia Beach City Public Schools together to help keep our children safe in the water.

Virginia Beach has partnered with Children’s Hospital of The King’s Daughters to ensure that all children entering foster care visit a pediatrician within 24 hours — with a comprehensive evaluation to follow.  We are making sure that our most vulnerable children are connected to quality health care.

City Council Member Shannon Kane has spearheaded a new caring initiative for Virginia Beach called We Feed, which collects and then distributes donated food to those in need. The first food drive she organized collected 1,600 pounds of food that, through the Food Bank, was provided to children who might otherwise go hungry.  The next food drive will be this spring.

In Virginia Beach, it’s our philosophy that the people who are homeless in our city are OUR homeless, and they are our shared responsibility.  Ray Bjorkman of Beach Fellowship; and Steve Kelly of the Wave Church established the Virginia Beach Home Now foundation to raise a minimum of one million dollars to eradicate homelessness in our city.  Thank you, pastors, for leading the charge, because no one should live without a roof over their head.

Much of the fundraising efforts will go to support services at the new $29 million dollar Housing Resource Center, which is another great example of a partnership that’s the result of caring people who are connecting their visions to effectively help residents who have become disconnected.  I am pleased to announce that the design is complete and the RFP for construction has been advertised.  We plan to open this facility in April 2018.

A little more than a year ago, I committed the City of Virginia Beach to the national goal of ending veteran homelessness by the end of 2015.  Working with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, multiple nonprofit agencies, and the faith community, 157 homeless veterans either had or were on their way to having a place to call home!  We are continually trying to find and assist any veteran in need of housing.  These efforts are in place to ensure that everyone who has proudly and bravely served our country gets the help and support they so richly deserve.

We are honored to have such a diversity of military commands in Virginia Beach and Coastal Virginia.  Will the following members of the United States Armed Forces please stand:

Admiral Philip S. Davidson, Commander of U.S. Fleet Forces Command;

Vice Admiral Dixon R. Smith, Commander, Navy Installations Command;

Retired Admiral John C. Harvey, Jr., the former Commander of U.S. Fleet Forces, who currently serves as Virginia’s Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs;

Rear Admiral Rick Williamson, Commander, Navy Region Mid-Atlantic;

Brigadier General Paul F. Griffin, Director of the Joint Staff of the Virginia National Guard;

Captain Frank Hughlett, Commanding Officer of Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story; Captain Lou Schager, Commanding Officer of NAS Oceana; and

l all military members — both active and retired — please stand and let us salute you.

In addition to serving the country, our military neighbors volunteer on our rescue squads and coach our kids on our athletics fields.  Thank you for being a big part of what makes Virginia Beach the greatest city in the world.  We are eternally grateful for the sacrifices you and your families make for this country.  You are true heroes, and because of you, America remains free and strong . . . a force for peace and progress . . . and a land of opportunity for all.

The strength of our military connections is one of the reasons we connect with people across America and around the world.  There is no better example of this than our 40-year connection with Stihl.  Today, Stihl is the number-one selling brand of handheld outdoor power equipment in the U.S. through its more than 8,500 servicing dealers, as well as exports to more than 90 foreign countries all over the world — right here from Virginia Beach.  We deeply appreciate Stihl’s vote of confidence, and the vitality that you bring to our community.

Congratulations to Fred Whyte on his retirement after 23 years as president of Stihl… and best wishes to Bjoern Fischer, who succeeded him.

Businesses are choosing Virginia Beach.

Joining our growing number of craft brewerie

s, San Diego-based Green Flash, has broken ground on its East Coast brewery at Corporate Landing.

Last year, more than 1,400 new jobs were created in Virginia Beach, which experienced more than $350 million dollars in new capital investment.

DOMA Technologies, a Virginia Beach-based company that specializes in cloud-based data and document management, added 150 new jobs to its workforce in October of 2014.  Today, I’m pleased to announce that this year, this veteran-owned company will add another 100 employees to support the Veterans Choice Patient-Centered Community Care program that provides eligible veterans access to health care.

Tourists are also choosing Virginia Beach which, as we all know, helps our businesses.

2015 was yet another record year in tourism.  Fifteen years ago, the City invested in sports tourism, and that investment has paid off in a big way.  I’d like to thank our local partners in the room who helped make that effort successful.

 Think about it….  When times get tough, a family may not have the resources to take a vacation, but if their son or daughter is competing in an athletic event, people find the money.

More than 70 percent of our room-night business from this very building came from people participating in sports in 2015.  Think about the additional economic impact and market share growth Virginia Beach will experience once we are lighting up the nights in the winter at the arena.  Have no doubt — Virginia Beach is striving to be one of the top markets in the country to watch and play sports.

We clearly understand that tourism is another area where interconnectedness is vital to our economic strength.  For example, we are connecting with [tourists in China](http://www.vbgov.com/news/Pages/selected.aspx?release=2720) — the fastest-growing country of origin for overseas arrivals in the United States.  Overseas travel brought more than 100,000 visitors to the Virginia Beach/Norfolk area, and accounted for 26 percent of the state’s total international visitation last year.

Tourism is one of the most important elements to our economy, and aren’t we lucky to live where other people choose to vacation?  Have you been to Topgolf or iFLY yet?  When was the last time you caught a show at the Sandler Center?  Did you catch Billy Joel at the Amphitheater last year?  And have you noticed that special ViBe in Virginia Beach?  I’m not just talking about our energy, although we have that, too.  I’m referring to the energetic new creative arts district near the Resort Area.  It’s coming into focus as a vibrant center for the arts, culture, entertainment and technology.

There’s so much excitement happening here, and Coastal Virginians are loving these experiences just as much as tourists.  And there’s more!

The preservation and revitalization of the historic Cavalier on the Hill, a symbol of the city’s early resort days, is well underway.  Did you know that nine U.S. presidents visited this magnificent landmark?  So did Judy Garland, Bette Davis, Frank Sinatra, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, and Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.  We sincerely appreciate the efforts of Gold Key | PHR Hotels and Resorts. Thank you for your commitment to the preservation of the Cavalier.

The City Council unanimously voted to convey land to build Virginia Beach’s own African American Cultural Center to connect, preserve, and celebrate Virginia Beach and Princess Anne County's African American culture dating from the mid-1600s to the present.  Thanks to Council Member Amelia Ross-Hammond and the Mayor’s African American Roundtable for championing this center, which will be constructed on five acres of city-owned land at Lake Edward Park.

Do not underestimate the potential of agriculture in Virginia Beach — it’s our third largest industry with an estimated 28,000 acres in production, and an economic impact of more than $120 million dollars, and we still have plenty of room to grow.  I’d like to thank City Council Member Barbara Henley for being such a strong and effective advocate for farmers and agriculture in our community.

There are a few more people I’d like to acknowledge for their leadership in making connections to advance Virginia Beach and Coastal Virginia….

I’d like to recognize my good friend Paul Fraim, who is stepping down from public office.  Mayor Fraim — would you please stand?

Throughout your 21 years as Mayor of Norfolk and just short of three decades on the Norfolk City Council, your dedication to the citizens of Norfolk and the region has been inspirational.  I have the utmost respect for you, and I’m proud to call you my friend.  Thank you for a job well done.

Last but certainly not least, I am grateful to The Sessoms Family for all the love and encouragement you give me day in and day out.  My lovely wife, Bev; our three daughters, Mollie, Kate and Anne Douglas; our granddaughters, Madie and Willie; our one-month-old grandson, Walker; our sons-in-law, Kyle and Fred; our future son-in-law, Chad; my sister, Barbara and her husband Jeff; and my Mother — you all mean the world to me.

In closing, I’d like to share a story that futurist Joel Barker tells, which is based on the writings of Loren Eiseley, a scientist and poet:

*“*

*One day, a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a younger man in the distance picking something up and throwing it into the ocean.  As he got closer, he called out, "Good morning!  What are you doing?"  The young man paused and said, "I'm throwing starfish in the ocean.  The sun is up and the tide is going out, and if I don't throw them in, they'll die."*

*"But young man, don't you realize that there are miles and miles of beach with starfish all along it?  You can't possibly make a difference."*

*The young man listened politely, then bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves.*

*"It made a difference for that one."*

*The older man didn't know how to reply, so he just turned and walked away.  All afternoon, he tried to work and couldn't get the image out of his head.  As he thought about it, he realized that what the young man was doing was choosing not to be an observer in the universe and watch it pass by, but choosing to be an actor in the universe — and make a difference.*

*When morning came, he got up, put on his clothes, went to the beach, found the young man, and with him, spent the rest of the morning throwing starfish in the ocean.*

*You see, what that young man's actions represent is something that is special in each and every one of us.  We have all been gifted with the ability to make a difference.  And if we can — like that young man — become aware of that gift, we gain through the strength of our visions the power to shape the future.*

*And that is your challenge.  That is my challenge.  We must each find our starfish.  And, if we throw our stars wisely and well, I have no question that this is going to be a wonderful place….*

*Because vision without action is merely a dream.  Action without vision just passes the time.  But action with vision can change the world.”*

Today, we are standing on the threshold of that change.

Together, let’s drive growth… and provide the best possible quality of life for future generations.  Together, let’s have the vision to see where the world is heading — to see beyond the horizon, and to connect.