We are here today to reflect on the State of our City.

Our theme for this inaugural event is “Making Our Future Together.” Rather than follow tradition by selecting a single word about the State of the City – good, great or strong – I want to paint a picture for you of what Palm Coast has become and where we’re headed.

First I’d like to take a moment to appreciate our past and the foresight of ITT Community Development Corporation to see the possibility of Palm Coast and setting the foundation for a planned community built with amenities that enrich our lives.

Responding to our growth, we reached a point where we, the citizens, decided it was time to take the lead in governing ourselves, and on December 31st, 1999, we formally became a City. I am proud that my father, James Holland, was one of the original members of the Palm Coast City Council, and I am humbled to follow in his footsteps.

I remember my father passionately working with others to shape the vision that helped Palm Coast become the special place it is today. My dad would spend hours in his office, pursuing grants and working to ensure that the tree canopy over Palm Coast Parkway was preserved for future generations. As a curious 20-something, I would ask him, “Why?” And he told me something I will never forget: “Milissa, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. “

Thank you to my father, former Mayors and Council members for creating this great first impression, our extraordinary city, Palm Coast.

I’d like to recognize former Mayor Jon Netts and his wife Priscilla, who are here with us today.

The early leaders of our City had sound aspirations for Palm Coast, and subsequent City Councils have worked tirelessly to maintain our high quality of life. Our Vision embraces Palm Coast as a multigenerational community recognized as one of Florida’s premier cities that provides exceptional amenities and standards that support a high quality lifestyle, protects our environment, and builds a sustainable economic base while providing necessary infrastructure improvements and services.

Because my own father proudly served as one of Palm Coast’s founding fathers, I understand the efforts of those who came before us – in supporting how Palm Coast came to be – and following through on what our early leaders envisioned for us. I want to take just a minute to recognize one person in particular. We are lucky to have the Palm Coast Historical Society to preserve our rich history, and today I would like to honor Art Dycke, City Historian, for his long service to our community.

Art, please come forward to receive the Mayor’s Citizen of the Year Award.

Palm Coast is a leader in so many ways. We are strategic in planning for our future. We pride ourselves in being a well-run City, with forward thinking that stays on the cutting edge for economic growth and innovation.

Financially, we are strong. Palm Coast has the lowest taxes for cities our size in Florida. We have an A+ Fitch Bond Rating. Communities that plan well, spend well. We were able to pay up front for City Hall and this amazing Community Center. We earn awards for our budget, financial reporting and performance management system year after year. We are good stewards of our money.

Our strong financial position is directly related to the spending decisions each of you make every day. I want to remind everyone here of the importance of shopping local. It is a great point of pride for me that our local sales tax dollars funded most of this 8 million dollar Community Center without the City needing to borrow a single penny. The more we shop local, the more revenue we will bring in, and the more projects like the Community Center can be built for future generations, making Palm Coast an even better place to live.

Because of that strategic planning and careful budgeting, we are able to invest in infrastructure and new initiatives that fulfill our Vision and Goals.

This past year we had many accomplishments and achievements within our six major goals, while also rising to the challenge of a hurricane for the second year in a row. And I just want to stop here for a moment to thank City staff for their outstanding response. I personally witnessed their dedication to serving our residents. They put in countless hours away from their families to help us recover. And I also want to recognize our citizens for their resiliency and willingness to help their neighbors. It was a proud moment for our City.

Today, you’ll each be receiving a copy of our Annual Progress Report and a summary of our budget. I’d like to highlight some of the 2017 successes you’ll find in these reports:

Our oldest and largest park – James F. Holland Memorial Park – underwent a major renovation and has already become one of our most popular parks. We also added shade sails on the playgrounds at four City parks. Citizens, young and not as young, and even our furry four-legged friends are enjoying these amazing amenities.

At our Community Center, we now have a fabulous playground and a trailhead that connects to St. Joe’s Walkway and Linear Park. The Community Center underwent an extraordinary transformation last year and it is now three times larger than before and, as you can see, modern and airy – bringing the outdoors in through these expansive windows. Children’s laughter carries across the playground into these beautiful spaces where all generations can exercise their bodies, minds, and hearts together.

You’ve undoubtedly heard that Palm Coast has more than 125 miles of connecting paths. These trails are one of our gems. Just recently at our Citizen’s Academy one couple told me they moved to Palm Coast specifically because of our trail system. Last year, we were able to add two more sections of the Seminole Woods Boulevard Path and we built the new Forest Branch Trail in the F Section. These trails truly connect us to our neighbors, and nature.

As part of our ongoing median beautification, we added a colorful arrangement of trees and shrubs to the medians along Belle Terre Parkway, from State Road 100 to Royal Palms Parkway. That last section concluded the Belle Terre medians – a project that began 15 years ago! These improvements are part of the amazing first impression that welcomes each new visitor to Palm Coast.

With battling hurricanes two years in a row, we’ve had a special focus on our stormwater drainage system. In addition to regular maintenance, we rebuilt the Colorado Bridge and reconstructed the BS-2 water control structure. Using these weirs, we can now control the water levels in our freshwater canals from a smartphone. With the massive amount of rain last fall, we were very pleased with how our stormwater system performed, and we will continue to invest in improvements to our drainage system.

We are proud to have improved on our Floodplain Rating in the National Flood Insurance Program this past year. Our rating is among the best in the nation, which results in lower insurance premiums for our residents. We also earned designation as a StormReady Community. And to increase our citizens’ awareness of where Palm Coast’s evacuation zones are located, we installed color-coded evacuation zone signs at 59 intersections.

Hurricane Irma also pushed us to the limits with our wastewater system. The historic rainfall caused excessive inflow into the sewer system and overloaded our pump stations. Our employees worked tirelessly and brought tanker trucks in to keep the system pumped down – and water out of homes. Thankfully all of our Utility plants performed well through the storm, and our Utility never lost water or sewer service.

We will soon open a second Wastewater Treatment Plant that will add to our capacity. Due to our strong financial position and thoughtful planning, future development will pay for this additional capacity, without raising taxes. In addition, this new wastewater plant will produce an effluent quality that nearly meets drinking water quality standards.

All should be proud of the efforts of your City to be environmentally responsible. We started converting City facilities to LED lighting, and streetlights being installed by Florida Power & Light are LED. Our City Hall is Florida Water Star and LEED certified, and we built the Community Center to LEED standards.

For economic growth, you’ll see in the report that development and growth are steadily rising, and new home construction in Palm Coast is booming again!

To help the City achieve all of these goals we invest in ongoing training to develop our Workforce Talent. The Annual Progress Report has a list of projects we accomplished in-house, saving us tax dollars. It also highlights employees from multiple departments who earned regional, state and national awards this year.

We’ve developed several innovative programs such as summer internships for college students. We want to give graduates of FPC and Matanzas a chance to gain work experience, while also helping the City with specific projects. I enjoy seeing these young adults working at City Hall, they bring fresh new ideas and diversity to our City government.

As you can see, 2017 was a busy year! It was a productive 12 months that strengthened the State of our City. We made strong progress in pursuit of every one of our goals, and as Mayor I am very proud of all we accomplished.

Nevertheless, we must keep moving forward, we must rise to meet the challenges of tomorrow, and make our future better together.

The City Council has charted a course for the future, and this afternoon I want to share with you that vision and some of our plans for a prosperous 2018. We are focused on projects and initiatives around three important themes: Public Safety, Quality of Life, and our Downtown Innovation District.

I’m going to start with Public Safety.

Our residents asked us to increase our law enforcement efforts, and our new budget funded five additional Flagler County Sheriff’s Deputies this year. We have a strong partnership with Sheriff Rick Staly and appreciate the excellent service we receive from the Sheriff’s Office in keeping our community safe.

Our Fire Department is also key to public safety, and we’re proud to have one of the best Fire ISO ratings in the nation. We are now in the process of purchasing a new fire engine, and for our firefighters, we are converting to new personal protective gear (or bunker gear) with additional safety features built-in, including safety harnesses and improved reflective striping.

While there are many fire safety professionals responsible for the Palm Coast Fire Department’s success, one individual stands at the top – and that is Chief Mike Beadle. Chief started with our department as a volunteer in 1988 and worked his way up. After Palm Coast incorporated he was hired as the City’s first Fire Chief on September 4, 2000. He is a shining example of how our City employees serve our citizens with dedication and excellence. It’s no secret that Chief plans to retire this September, and today I want to honor him for his service.

Chief, would you please come forward to receive the Mayor’s Public Service Award?

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Continuing on the topic of safety, we also responded to our citizens’ requests for more street lighting. A new master plan is being finalized for the City’s continuous street lighting program, with the top priorities for this year being Lakeview Boulevard and Belle Terre Parkway from Palm Coast Parkway to State Road 100.

This year, we are making improvements to several roadways to improve traffic safety. Improvements to the intersections of State Road 100 and Belle Terre, State Road 100 at Seminole Woods Boulevard, and at the U.S. 1 entrance to the City’s Public Works facility were designed in 2017 and will be constructed this year.

A major traffic safety study showed that improvements were needed along Whiteview Parkway. In response to the study findings, Whiteview Parkway will be reduced to two lanes and a path for pedestrians and bicyclists will be built, as well as intersection and drainage improvements along the entire corridor. The design will be completed this year with construction in 2019.

We’re also continuing to work on expanding 3.6 miles of Old Kings Road North to four lanes. The design has been approved by the Florida Department of Transportation, and the City is now acquiring right-of-way needed. The City is urging the Florida Department of Transportation to fund the construction of this important project sooner rather than later.

Another project that is a top priority is the construction of the pathway on Lakeview Drive. The Lakeview Path is in our Pedestrian Bicycle Master Plan, and with City Council support and a grant from the Florida Department of Transportation, this project has been advanced. It’s been designed, and I’m pleased to announce construction will begin soon.

To ensure our continued progress, we have a number of other important infrastructure improvements this year. We are replacing three of our aging water control structures on the freshwater canals this year, with two of those funded by a grant from the St. Johns River Water Management District. With federal grant funding, will be installing generator at City Hall and several lift stations, which will help us recover more quickly after inclement weather.

Next I would like to share with you the projects and initiatives aimed at maintaining and enhancing our quality of life.

Thanks to our typically beautiful weather, our parks and our location near the beach, we are fortunate to have an active outdoor lifestyle year-round. The City offers recreational programs and events all year long to give our citizens many ways to enjoy life with their families, friends and neighbors.

Right now we are in the midst of the Mayor’s 30/30 Challenge – where I have challenged everyone to exercise 30 miles in 30 days. And I would like to challenge each of you to sign up on our City website and start logging your miles today.

In this renovated and expanded Community Center, which opened last month, we now offer more classes and social activities than ever. We’re thrilled to have the space needed to continue our adult and senior programs through the summer, even while camp for children is in session.

Perhaps the most exciting project to improve our Quality of Life in 2018 is Phase 2 of Holland Park. Construction will start this summer on the splash park and additional playground equipment. Phase 2 will also include a shade structure for the small dog park, a covering for the Bocce court, new handball and pickleball courts, exercise/fitness stations and lighting. And I’m happy to report the park will remain open through the improvement projects!

As I mentioned earlier, our trail system is one of our City’s greatest assets and contributes greatly to our extraordinary Quality of Life. This year we’re planning to finish the major trail network in the Seminole Woods area with the final two phases along Sesame Boulevard. We are excited that our trail system will now connect every neighborhood in Palm Coast!

I am even more excited and optimistic about the future of Palm Coast. City Council is focused on projects and initiatives targeted toward a Downtown Innovation District.

In the 18 years we’ve been incorporated, we’ve always prided ourselves on selecting the latest technology for City services and operating at a high level of service for the benefit of our citizens. Technology is more and more a part of our daily lives, and the trend will only accelerate in the future for both citizens and our City government.

We’re already advancing many innovative strategic initiatives.

We are one of only a handful of Cities in the entire state of Florida which operates its own municipal broadband utility. Since 2006, we've laid over 50 miles of fiber for our FiberNET system, connecting City buildings, schools and businesses for high-speed internet. This deliberate decision to invest in our own future will empower future technologists and the companies that relocate here to pursue top level technology talent. This infrastructure will propel our city into the future, such as an adaptive traffic coordination system that will improve traffic flow. The City isn’t stopping there. City Council authorized a feasibility study to determine how we can leverage FiberNET even more for economic development, growing our downtown, and smart city applications. We're listening to the job markets and understand the emphasis being placed on the ability to telecommute to work. We want Palm Coast to convince technologists from all over the country to relocate here, and enjoy the quality of life we offer, without the price tag of Silicon Valley.

One of our newest high-tech initiatives is to improve cell phone service in Palm Coast. The City Council updated the City’s cell tower ordinance and is partnering with Diamond Communications to attract cell carriers to build new towers here. Major carriers have already committed to putting up new towers and expanded coverage and service here in Palm Coast.

A few years ago, we started converting to advanced meters for digitally reading our water meters for accuracy and efficiency. Once again, the City isn’t stopping there. Our next phase will allow us to remotely read those advanced meters and provide citizens the ability to monitor their water use, so we can all better conserve one of our most precious resources: water.

Water conservation is a major emphasis for us, especially here in Florida where water is such a precious resource. This month is the National Mayor’s Challenge for Water Conservation, and I want to encourage each of you to renew your pledge to conserve water. We placed 17th in the nation last year, and I’d love to see us improve our ranking for 2018.

Palm Coast is excited to participate in FPL’s SolarNOW project for solar energy. Three solar trees have been “planted” at Central Park and a solar canopy has been installed in the parking lot here at the Community Center, with another planned at Holland Park.

All of this, however, is just the beginning. Our local economy has rebounded -- growth and development is back in full swing. Now we are ready to take our efforts to a new level – focusing on innovation and developing our downtown.

Our future downtown is an innovative hub of activity. A place that offers residents of all ages spaces to interact, enjoy the outdoors, go shopping or get inspired by arts and entertainment, and then grab a bite to eat - all within walking distance. The future Downtown will also include diverse housing options to provide convenience and quality of life improvements for those who desire to live, work and play within the same neighborhood.

We are excited to see the execution of this plan coming to life already.

The success of Palm Coast could not be possible without private investment in the development of our community. We are fortunate to have Allete Properties as our largest single investor and proud of the vision they created for Palm Coast Town Center. And we are especially thankful for their continued dedication and investment to ensuring our high standards for quality of life as they continue building in Town Center and throughout Palm Coast with such exciting projects like the new Palm Coast Park development along U.S. 1. Allete has engaged a new development team, Douglas Property & Development, to position our downtown for the future, and we are excited about their partnership.

The Palm Coast Arts Foundation is working on its Performing Arts Center and is already offering quality programming. The Flagler Auditorium at Flagler Palm Coast High School is being renovated and expanded. The main entrance to our downtown is paving the way for new development. This is just the beginning. The future for our downtown will be realized over the coming months and years with more announcements on the horizon.

The City is working to kick start development and realize this vision. I had the honor in December of participating in the Mayors Institute of Community Design. Together, we worked on creative solutions and strategies that will help our downtown become the hub of activity and innovation. And City Council has put forth new goals and objectives to communicate our strategic vision to City staff, so that they can execute and collaborate with community partners.

To help us achieve these ambitious goals, City Council authorized a new position this past year, the Head of Innovation & Economic Growth. While only starting a few weeks ago, this position and City staff have already formed the Innovation Team to accelerate those initiatives.

After coming back from the U.S. Conference of Mayors Annual Meeting I was inspired to help transform our community to attract the next generation of innovators and leaders. Our downtown will embrace and enhance the diversity of our community and be a catalyst to the growth and diversification of our local economy.

I am confident that our team and partners will help our vision of downtown become a reality.

Florida Hospital Flagler is not only a great provider in delivering cutting-edge medical services, but is also a great partner in helping realize our vision for the future of downtown. The hospital has invested millions of dollars into medical technology and robotics found in few other places in Florida. And their footprint will only grow as they build out their master plan in the coming years, bringing more employment opportunities, medical professionals and people looking to have state-of-the-art procedures completed in Palm Coast.

We’re fortunate to have strong leadership representing us in Tallahassee, as well. Representative Paul Renner and Senator Travis Huston are superb leaders at the State level, and they share our vision for the future of Palm Coast as a hub of innovation and economic growth. I’m confident they will answer our calls to represent Palm Coast to assist in achieving our strategic initiatives.

We have a shared purpose and common values with our local government partners, as well. With Flagler Beach’s quintessential beach town, Beverly Beach’s quaint community, Marineland’s research and education, Bunnell’s agricultural contributions and the Hammock’s lovely homes and resorts, we have many opportunities to attract visitors and new residents. We work closely with the Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity and the Flagler County Chamber of Commerce to attract new business while supporting and growing existing local businesses.

The Palm Coast Business Assistance Center – which is a partnership with the Florida Small Business Development Center at the University of Central Florida – plays an important role, too, by providing business consulting services to entrepreneurs at no cost. After I attended the Mayor’s Conference on Entrepreneurship through the Kauffman Foundation, I was inspired to continue to support the entrepreneurial movement and build our entrepreneurial ecosystem to empower the makers, the dreamers, and the doers.

One of the most vital components for successful economic growth is quality education. Flagler Schools has a strong reputation for their deep commitment to excellence and for preparing our children for the workforce and higher education. Through their digital learning initiative, every child has access to technology each and every day. Students have many options for college-prep including Advanced Placement classes, the International Baccalaureate program and dual enrollment with Daytona State College, which also offers trade certifications and workforce training for our community.

Flagler Schools is on the cutting edge of developing the workforce of tomorrow through their innovative Flagship programs for classroom-to-career success. As American entrepreneur Adam Braun says, “It is the local community that needs to own the commitment to education.” We could not carry out our vision for our Downtown without a world-class K-12 education system. And Flagler Schools is the keystone in our success.

During my term, I have been most inspired and encouraged by our talented youth who truly are our future, and that future is very bright. They are the reason I work tirelessly each day to help make this future a reality.

Today, I would like to honor one of the young adults who helped develop the City’s internship program while serving as an intern. Maeve Dineen, a graduate of FPC and Mercer University in Georgia, has interned with us twice now and is currently assisting the City with several special projects until she goes to law school this summer to study intellectual property law. Maeve is a shining example of the potential of the youth in our community.

Maeve, please come forward to receive the Mayor’s Next Generation Award.

In conclusion today, I would like to go back to the theme of this year’s State of the City, “Making our Future Together.” The key word being “together.” It truly is each of our residents who are the most important of all – our community members are the motivation for everything we do.

Every time I speak to a group, I get a chance to hear their stories about how they found Palm Coast and what they cherish most about this community. I am reminded that very few of us were born and raised in Palm Coast, but we CHOSE to live here.

Those who attend our Citizen’s Academy share warm memories of enjoying time with friends, walking on our trails, taking in a performance, shopping in our local boutiques, or simply going outdoors and enjoying paradise. I even hear from residents about the positive first impression they had in our community under the tree canopy along Palm Coast Parkway – reminding me of my father.

Your stories inspire us, and your choice to live here motivates me to keep making our tomorrow even better than today.

All of us – business owners, civic leaders, government employees, elected officials and all citizens of Palm Coast – have a stake in the future of our community. It is of utmost importance that we continue working together to keep Palm Coast progressing in a positive way for future generations – so that we are a robust, well-rounded community that is always stretching, reaching and growing.

I especially look forward to our blossoming partnerships with Allete Properties, Douglas Property & Development, Flagler Schools, Florida Hospital Flagler, our State partners, and others that will join us to complete exciting projects in our Downtown. Please stay tuned, as I am sure many exciting announcements are to come.

In just a moment, we’re going to end with a short video. But before that, I just want to tell you how honored I am to be your Mayor and how much I appreciate the chance to be part of this occasion. From our earliest days Palm Coast has been a very special place and will continue to be a special place for generations to come.

I’m proud of the State of the City today and I am excited to see what our future holds.

Thank you for attending today and I invite each and every one of you join us in Making Our Future Together.