

Mayor Levar M. Stoney's State of the City Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Good evening and welcome.

Thank you, Pastor Bibbs, for your blessing. Thank you, kids for that great rendition of the pledge of allegiance. Thank you Miguel for that introduction. And thank you to Principal Dabney and the staff of Martin Luther King Middle School for hosting us here tonight.

Before I begin, I'd like to recognize the members of our Richmond City Council, President Hilbert and Vice President Newbille, as well as the members of our School Board, Chairman Page and Vice Chairman, Dr. Sapini. I want to also give a special welcome to our incoming Superintendent, Jason Kamras, an innovative educator whom I believe will make a real difference in the lives of our kids. Jason, I'm excited for what the future holds and I'm looking forward to working with you.

Our state lawmakers, Senator Jennifer McClellan, and Delegates Delores McQuinn, and Jeff Bourne, who are working hard for us in the General Assembly, and our Congressman Donald McEachin, who's doing the same in Washington DC.

I want to acknowledge the city's Chief Administrative Officer, Selena Cuffee-Glenn and members of my cabinet, seated behind me, our department heads seated in front of me, and our hardworking city employees who helped make a lot happen in our city over the last year.

Finally, I want to thank the residents of the City of Richmond. Over the past year, I traveled extensively throughout the city, visiting every district, every school, and every police precinct and attending hundreds of events, from boardrooms to ball games, community centers to church halls.

Your support and encouragement -- and sometimes unfiltered advice -- has helped remind me what is important, and what we need to continue to do as we work toward building One Richmond.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm optimistic for the future of our City. And thanks to what we were able to accomplish together over this past year, I can confidently stand before you tonight and say that the state of our city is **STRONG**.

2017 was a pivotal year for our city, and I believe we must take this momentum we've built into 2018 to tackle some of the biggest challenges we face.

After years of unmet expectations, neglect and breakdowns in the basics, we restored faith and confidence in City government by improving its efficiency and concentrating our focus on delivering the service our residents deserve.

We did the little things that can make a difference in the everyday lives of our residents.

We plowed the roads. We cut the grass. And we cleaned up the alleys. 1,600 alleys, roughly 100 miles in improvements, to be exact, in addition to repairing 25,000 potholes. And yes I'm quite aware there are more still out there!

We revamped our permit office, offering expanded hours, better parking and expedited processing to make doing business with the city easier. With the help of City Council we

invested in our police and firefighters, providing the raises we need to retain those we train.

And I am proud to announce tonight that the Richmond Department of Fire and Emergency Services just received word that it has received the Insurance Services Office Class 1 rating for fire safety -- one of only 270 Public Fire Protection Districts in the country, out of 45,000 nationwide to receive the designation. Congratulations, Chief Carter.

We conducted a performance review of all city services, and have already begun implementing our department action plans. And, frankly, we made changes in leadership of key departments to put the right people in the right positions to better serve you.

After years of dysfunction and missed deadlines, we also put our financial house in order. We brought the overdue Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports from previous years to completion, AND, we finished our own 2017 CAFR on time – in fact, three weeks early.

We held a tax amnesty period to collect long unpaid city taxes and brought in \$2.9 million, roughly a half million dollars over our goal. And through the proactive efforts of our Finance Department, we conducted a bond refunding that will save the city nearly \$13 million over the next 15 years.

The Wall Street credit ratings agencies rewarded us with a reaffirmation of our AA+ bond rating, making Richmond one of the few cities in the country with that distinction. Additionally, Fitch put us on the doorstep to a AAA rating.

Businesses expressed confidence in our direction by locating or expanding in our city. Owens and Minor, Enerva Health and Thomson Reuters, were among those businesses who helped us add more than 1,000 new jobs in 2017 right here, in Richmond. More than 50 projects have been announced covering residential, commercial, industrial and mixed use development, representing an estimated \$924 million in investment in our city.

And we have received a very positive initial response to our proposal to redevelop the area North of Broad Street in downtown.

We also breathed life into public projects that had been long delayed or derailed, and we engaged with our community on issues that haven't been seriously discussed or addressed for many years.

We got RVA Bikeshare off the drawing board and on the streets. We initiated RVA Green 2050, with a goal of reducing our carbon footprint by 80 percent in the next three decades. We launched Vision Zero – our zero tolerance plan to prevent traffic deaths – and took the step toward installing 250 high-visibility intersections on our roadways.

And we finally unveiled the statue of Maggie Walker, in her rightful place, right on Broad Street.

Speaking of monuments, in response to the rising national discord over Confederate statuary, we formed the Monument Avenue Commission to tackle this difficult issue in our own city by committing to a process of dialogue and outreach, not violence and division.

And when out-of-state protesters came to town, our police department -- and our residents -- rose to the occasion. We faced the hate and bigotry and disruption that targeted our own city, and handled a confederate rally and counter protest with professionalism, preparation and a plan. We protected rights as well as people and property, resulting in a day that produced no violence and no injuries.

Chief Durham, I am thankful and proud of the job your department did that day, and grateful to our many regional law enforcement partners and city and state departments who lent their assistance to keep Richmond safe.

Friends, Richmond is a welcoming, inclusive and diverse place.

That is our strength. Monuments may move, they may rise, they may remain or they may fall, but we will never let the hate, intolerance and bigotry of those looking to cling to a Jim Crow past get in the way of this city's future.

And folks across the country have already noticed that our city is moving in a new direction.

In 2017, Richmond was rated one of the South's top cities by Southern Living and the 24th best place to live in the U.S. by U.S. News and World report. We made the top 5 in Business Insider's Hippest Cities to live in under 30. Realtor.com has designated us as a Top 10 Tech Town. And Entrepreneur.com ranked us 3rd on its list of "booming cities."

Accolades are nice. They are evidence of our city's strength and vitality. However, in 2018, I am more interested in where we are going, than where we've been. Everyone in this room should be proud of what we've accomplished. But everyone in this room should know that we have a lot more work to do.

It is time for us this year to take the necessary steps toward being a greater city, toward building One Richmond.

For us to be the best, we need to be even better – not simply by filling more potholes, approving permits faster, and being smarter stewards of our dollars, but by creating more opportunity for ALL of our residents.

Our people deserve an opportunity to earn a living wage, and have reliable transportation that gets them to their job. Our people deserve an opportunity to find affordable housing in a safe neighborhood. And perhaps most importantly, our children deserve the opportunity to get a good education in our public school system – to be taught by teachers who inspire, in a system that has the resources our kids need to succeed, and in school facilities that are incubators for learning.

Education is the pathway to success. Having that opportunity is the reason I am standing here before you today. I was the first in my family to graduate high school, and the first to graduate college, and I want every child in our city to have that same access to that opportunity to succeed.

We have already taken important steps to meeting some of the immediate needs of our school children. Last year, we made the largest single investment of any administration -- an additional \$6.1 million toward teacher salaries and retention.

Working with the business community, we partnered with Sprint, which will provide tablets and free internet access to every incoming public high school freshman for the next four years. And with our non-profit partners Connexus and Vision to Learn, we were able to forge a partnership with RPS so that every Richmond School child who needs eyeglasses will get them.

The day we presented those glasses to children at Redd Elementary School was one of the proudest in my brief time as mayor. These initiatives can make a big difference in a child's life, but we all know there is a need to do more.

For too long we have neglected these needs, and watched our facilities slip into obsolescence, decay and decline. That is why I am grateful to both the city council and the school board for your commitment and investment in unanimously passing the RVA Education Compact to care for the whole child- a first of its kind.

This agreement will provide the framework for meeting the educational needs of our children, and I am excited that we have our compact team in place and we are ready to get down to work.

Passing the compact is a pledge between our 19 elected representatives to set aside politics, to work collaboratively, with the best interests of our students in mind. It does not mean we won't disagree – we will! Debate is healthy; but we all know our residents expect action.

The citizens of Richmond are tired of the finger pointing, and the old squabbles. They are ready to see us set aside the historic fights between the Mayor, the Council and the School Board and to get to work on the most pressing problems facing our schools. That was what they elected us to do.

We cannot underestimate the importance of improving instruction in our schools. We cannot expect new school buildings to be the final solution to closing the achievement gap – but we must acknowledge that our school system faces a number of critical and serious facility needs, whether that be overcrowding on the Southside, or the deterioration of conditions at schools like George Mason Elementary.

This state of affairs is simply unacceptable.

At the first joint meeting of the Education Compact, the City's financial advisors relayed to us that the City's debt capacity is functionally maxed out. To fund any new school construction before 2023 will require not only an investment of funds to cover the debt payments, but also new revenues to create additional debt capacity.

That's why, yesterday, I submitted an ordinance to City Council that would increase our city's meal tax rate by 1.5%. This would generate an initial \$9.1 million in new funding per year, which would allow us to expand our debt capacity and provide \$150 million dollars in new capital funding over the next five years, solely dedicated to Richmond Public Schools. These funds will be placed in a special reserve, only available to fund school facilities' needs.

As opposed to an increase in our city real estate tax, which would be born 100% by Richmonders, nearly a third of the meals taxes paid in the city are paid by out of town visitors who live more than 50 miles away. And with our city population swelling by tens of thousands of people every work day, the percentage is even greater.

Let me be clear – I do not relish the idea of imposing a higher tax on any of our residents, or even our visitors. And I respect the concerns of our restaurateurs who are responsible for so much of the positive trends we've seen in our city. I promise to be a committed champion for their success, and pledge that we will work with you to make it easier for you to grow and expand.

But, we are talking about one and a half pennies. One and half cents - for our children. Surely, our kids are worth that much.

Now let me speak to the parents of our students, to our families, to everyone who cares about our children. This is a plan that will allow us to begin building schools today – not in five or six years.

I have been to every school in this city. I have seen the overcrowding in our Southside elementary schools. I've been to Elkhardt-Thompson and to George Wythe. And I cannot accept the cruel reality that if we do nothing, a kindergartener in George Mason Elementary School today will spend her entire elementary years in that same unacceptable facility.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a clear path forward and I believe we must act now. I'm calling on City Council to pass this measure and I'm urging all those who care about the future of our children to support them and make your voices heard.

Once this funding plan moves forward, hard choices will still remain. We will need to ask ourselves how we use our limited pool of funds to offer a 21st century learning environment to the greatest number of students, as fast as possible.

I want to thank the School Board in passing their school facilities plan in December, and I will not dictate to the school board, as has been done in the past, what schools to build or how to build them.

But we will have to stretch every dollar to ensure the greatest outcome for our students.

I've already said I put this school facilities funding plan forward because frankly I don't believe we can wait until 2023, when our city's debt capacity will open up, to start addressing the emergency needs of our school system.

But I also don't believe we can wait until 2023 to plan for how we will use this future debt capacity. We can no longer afford to talk about Education, Housing, Public Safety and Poverty Mitigation -- the four pillars of building One Richmond -- in silos.

That's why building One Richmond, will require One Plan. One Plan to guide our investments in schools, housing and neighborhoods to build true Communities of Opportunity. A community of opportunity is a neighborhood that boasts attractive, sustainable, affordable housing--both rental and owner occupied.

These homes line safe streets. The children and adults in these homes have access to affordable healthcare and healthy foods. The children attend high performing public

schools—pre-K, K-12, and beyond. The adults hold jobs that pay wages that enable them to meet their needs and the needs of their loved ones. The jobs, the schools, and the houses are connected by a multi-modal public transportation system. And woven throughout all of this is a rich tapestry of natural, recreational, and cultural amenities that are accessible and affordable to all.

But our current situation underscores a hard truth – that our city is only as strong as our weakest neighborhood and our most vulnerable neighbor. I was proud of the steps we took last year through our Office of Community Wealth Building to expand our services to help more than 1,500 residents find a path to employment and self-sufficiency.

Today, we are making progress on schools and employment. We must devote similar attention to our housing needs.

Housing is foundational. Because without safe and stable shelter, in the words of Harvard sociologist Matthew Desmond, “everything else falls apart.”

I know, from my own personal experience, what it is like to live in a place that doesn’t have heat, where you have to keep warm by wearing your winter coat inside and turning on the stove and opening the oven door.

No one deserves to live in that sort of environment. The conditions in our RRHA housing communities are shameful and unacceptable.

In my recent conversations with the leadership of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, I have urged them to acknowledge that trust is lacking and it must be restored. But that will not happen until compassion and concern are demonstrated, and promises are kept.

The simple fact is that for decades, the federal, state and city government has let our public housing residents down. For that, I am sorry. We all must do better. And I will do everything in my power as Mayor to address the current issues facing RRHA and work with them toward longer term solutions.

That is why I am asking for a full accounting of the capital, mechanical and technical issues surrounding the current public housing communities. I suspect the scope of these issues will be daunting. But, we as a city, need to acknowledge that RRHA cannot do this alone. The city has to step up and be a partner. I am pledging my support, and the support of my staff, as we navigate these difficult issues.

We need to be honest about some hard facts: this work is complicated, it will cost millions. In fact RRHA says it has more than \$150 million in deferred maintenance. The problem took decades to unfold, and it will take years to fix. And in the meantime, thousands of our fellow citizens will continue to reside in the existing public housing courts.

So, as we seek to redevelop public housing and to provide residents with better housing options, we must undertake this work in true partnership with the residents of public housing.

Through the efforts of the Office of Community Wealth Building, our Human Services portfolio, the Richmond City Health District, our non-profit partners, and the generosity

of the philanthropic community, we will continue to identify and deliver the essential human services that provide hope, health, and opportunity for our residents.

We must keep in mind that our ultimate goal is not simply to move poverty around, but to reduce poverty itself. Beyond public housing, thousands of Richmonders struggle to afford their rent or even make their mortgage payment.

The good news is that Richmond is growing; folks of all ages, ethnicities, and walks of life want to live here. The challenge is that the demand for housing continues to outpace the supply.

To meet this challenge, I'm calling for the creation of 1500 new affordable housing units over the next five years. This goal will not be achievable without the help of both private and non-profit developers.

To accomplish this goal will require City Hall to retool its approach to development. Accordingly, I will reorganize the Housing and Community Development functions of the City to put more focus and resources on this important component of development.

I will also continue to insist that affordable housing be a key element when the City issues Requests for Proposals for the redevelopment of significant parcels.

And before this year is out, my administration will deliver to Council for their consideration a package of incentives that will encourage the increased production of affordable housing units.

As I noted a few moments ago, our housing challenges are not new and did not arise overnight; so there's no quick, cheap, or easy fix. Just as our citizens deserve our sustained efforts, so do the communities in which they live.

Because ladies and gentlemen, if we don't commit to building better neighborhoods, brighter futures will continue to elude our young people and their families, regardless of how new their school is.

When our debt capacity opens up by more than 300 million dollars in 2023, we don't want to just build new school buildings that will be inhabited by the same old issues.

When it comes to schools and housing - we can't invest in one, to the exclusion of the other. So my commitment to you tonight, is that we will begin today to develop a unified strategy that will allow us to make strategic investments in schools and housing that build not only bricks and mortar, but also build true communities of opportunity.

So we have much more to do this year, but I am excited about the changes that are already underway.

In addition to its ongoing work, Our Office of Community Wealth Building will create a strong network of at least 50 Richmond organizations to address and destroy systemic barriers to the upward mobility of Richmonders. And it will create career plans and actively case manage 600 low-wealth Richmond residents.

The goal is to move beyond Turkey and toys around the holidays and offer sustainable services that constitute a progressive hand up, not a hand out.

Last year, although citywide violent crime actually went down, too many people were victims of gun violence. It breaks my heart every time a life is lost to violence in our city.

I am gratified that after years of deficit staffing, our police department is now at its "sworn authorized strength" of 750 officers.

This strength will allow our police department to pursue community building strategies that complement their crime fighting strategies.

In addition to the increased deployment of crime-fighting technology, the RPD will also launch the One Richmond Combined Interdisciplinary Team, bringing together key representatives in local, state and federal government to address violent crime.

Through my introduced budget in March, I will also seek approval for our police department to add five civilian Community Outreach Coordinators within the Community Youth and Intervention Unit. These coordinators will work in our high-crime communities and to coordinate the needs of our residents with other city departments and social services.

I have also heard loud and clear from our communities that our children need more access to quality after school programming and to recreation that fills their time in a constructive, positive way. I concur. So you can expect my budget in March to invest in expanded after-school programs and in our neighborhood community centers.

We will continue our efforts to improve the efficiency of City Hall through implementation of performance recommendations to improve our communication, accountability and customer service. This will be led by a new unit in the office of our CAO. With all the needs in our community, we have to be as smart and efficient as we can with the limited resources that are available.

By the end of the year, we hope to have a new website for our city that will make it easier for folks to navigate and access information from the government, and fully implement the EnerGov system that will help reduce permit times even more.

Later this year we also expect our Bus Rapid Transit line to be completed, and when synced with our Transit Network Plan, it will provide efficient and reliable transportation to businesses and jobs with less waiting and faster commutes.

Next month we will get our first look at proposals generated by the RFP for our North of Broad redevelopment. Let me reiterate that we will only move forward with a proposal if it meets our goals of including a new GRTC transfer station, providing mixed income housing, local jobs and does not require existing city revenues to build.

And we will proceed with exploring our best options in developing the valuable city-owned real estate off of the Boulevard. And, I maintain my promise, that in the late spring we will cut the ribbon on a revitalized 17th St. Market.

Late last year, I was honored to be one of four mayors selected to be part of the Rose Fellowship sponsored by the Urban Land Institute and the National League of Cities, which brings in a team of experts to look at a land use issue.

I have focused our efforts to look at Shockoe Valley.

Next month, these advisors will spend time in Richmond and will present their high level recommendations in a public meeting on February 8 at Main Street Station.

We need to balance our investments into Main Street Station and mass transit and meet the environmental challenge of the area being in a flood plain. But, most importantly, we must respect the national, historical significance of the burial ground and jail site and elevate the work that the Slave Trail Commission has done.

Important work is already being done to identify and develop the former site of the Lumpkin's Jail and Devil's Half Acre. The sacred grounds contained within the Shockoe Valley footprint, is an area we will protect and honor. Enslaved Africans built this city; and it's up to us to ensure they are remembered.

In doing so, we have an opportunity to create a cultural and international destination that will not only educate, but also promote dialogue, reconciliation, and ultimately, healing.

In the coming year, my team and I look forward to meeting and working with stakeholders to make this project a reality.

I also look forward to working with our regional partners, and continuing our collaboration and cooperation on issues that matter to all of us, whether it's working together on economic development projects and transportation or addressing challenges that know no boundaries like homelessness and the opioid crisis.

Our localities are different, but our goals are the same, and our futures are intertwined. A strong Richmond means a strong Henrico, Chesterfield and Hanover. I am grateful to have friends who understand this, and who know that we need each other, and we all benefit when we work together.

And I am grateful, again, to the people of this city, who have given me the opportunity to lead.

This has been the fastest and best year of my life. I am proud of our fast start, and I expect more progress over the next year.

We have done a good job getting the small things right and we must continue to do so. But now is also time to lean into the big things.

We have daunting challenges that have vexed this city for decades. But while we must be aware of our history, we cannot be trapped by it, or overcome by the scale of the task before us. We have the opportunity to make change, here and now, that will impact the future of our city for generations to come. We must be bold. We must be united. And we must have faith.

One Richmond means a Richmond in which every person lives with dignity and has an opportunity to thrive. Everyone has a right to rise.

And it is achievable if we harness our resources and focus our collective will to action.

This is what I am demanding first and foremost of myself, my team, and the public servants who work for our great city every day. But it is also what I am asking of everyone who cares about Richmond's present and future.

Earlier this evening one of the Richmond Symphony's Youth Orchestras was practicing in this school. The symphony also has an in-school program for MLK students. I believe the next YoYo Ma, or Wynton Marsalis, can come from right here.

That's why whether it's Amazon, or our bid to host the International Olympics of the Violin competition here in 2020, we need to think big. More importantly, we want our children to dream big.

It's easy to complain about ills and challenges we face. But tough times require us to keep working, and to remain steadfast.

So whatever your age, gender, race; whether you live in poverty or affluence; whether you serve a faith community, lead a foundation, work for a non-profit, or earn your pay in the private sector—everyone has something at stake, and something to contribute.

The challenge to create real opportunity, real justice, for the next generation will outlast my time in office, and may even pass to some of you here.

But it is important work that we need to continue. And believe me, it's worth it.

Together, this year let's make Richmond, and the Richmond region, a leader, not only in our state but in our nation. Ladies and gentlemen, this may seem like a lot, but we can walk and chew gum at the same time. In fact, we can run. We are a strong, resilient city.

As I told you just over a year ago on my first day in office, I promise you I will not rest in working for you. I will not slow down. And you already know I will not give up. I'm too excited for our future.

So, tonight I ask you again to join me in banishing the doubt and defeatism that have long impeded the progress of this great city on the big issues, and to be bold, and courageous in embracing the positive promise of what we can accomplish this year, working together, as One Richmond.

Thank you! And may God bless the City of Richmond.