

City of Richmond, VA
State of the City – 1/31/2019

Mayor Levar M. Stoney

REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY – EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

Good evening!

Welcome!

It's so good to see all of you here tonight, and to welcome those residents who are watching live on Facebook.

Before I begin, I want to thank Jamie Bosket for hosting us here at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture. The museum is working hard to change the way we talk about our past, and to tell a more complete story of who we are, and where we come from. Thank you, Jamie.

I also want to thank Jalia Hardy for that awesome introduction!

I met Jalia last year after she was named the statewide winner of the Virginia Municipal League's, "If I Were Mayor" essay contest.

In her essay, she stated: "There is way too much hate in the world. And if other cities and states see what Richmond is doing, they might try something like it."

These words stopped me in my tracks. They made me proud and reminded me of the warmth and compassion of the people in this great city.

Jalia was the inspiration behind Richmond's first ever "Kindness Week" this past November.

Jalia, thank you for your words of wisdom. I look forward to celebrating "Kindness Week" again in 2019.

I also want to thank the young men and women of Ms. York's 4th grade class at Holton Elementary School for our "Pledge of Allegiance" – as well as the talented young performers from the Huguenot High School jazz ensemble for gracing us with some jams tonight!

Richmond, we've got talent!

Ladies and gentlemen, after two years in office, I've gotta tell you – I am still excited.

Over the last year, we have worked hard to improve our delivery of core services and to improve our responsiveness to the needs of our citizens.

To become more efficient and more accountable to tracking residents' requests for service, we launched RVA311 and our new Citizen Service and Response Office.

The office received 98,000 calls in its first six months. It was able to satisfy 60 percent of them right on the spot...and we're improving every day.

In just two years, we have repaired more than 175 miles of road, 2,900 alleys, 3,200 sidewalks and 50,000 potholes.

I want to give a shout out to my public works director Bobby Vincent and the hardworking men and women of his department.

Working with our partners at VCU, we also reopened our beautiful and historic Monroe Park, and christened a new 17th Street Farmers market as improved and welcoming public spaces.

The city that operated the first electric street car entered the 21st century when we launched the Pulse last year.

We have shattered ridership expectations and given thousands of Richmonders, and visitors, the opportunity to connect to jobs, grocery stores, family and all this great city has to offer.

In addition, we added new bike lanes down Franklin Street and have launched a scooter pilot program in an effort to help our residents safely “go the last mile.”

It's important we at City Hall also roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of making our city welcoming and supportive of all our citizens, regardless of the color of their skin, how they worship, or who they love.

Before I took office, Richmond's score on the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index, which measures a locality's responsiveness to the LGBTQIA+ community, was 46 out of 100.

Last year, working with Councilmembers Agelasto and Robertson, we passed and launched our city's first Human Rights Commission.

When paired with several key reforms spearheaded by this administration, we raised our score to 94, achieving the greatest score increase of any city in the country, and allowing us to claim the highest Municipal Equality Index score in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

For this work, we were recognized by the Human Rights Campaign for being a city boldly leading the way toward LGBTQIA+ equality, and honored as an emerging LGBTQIA+ sports destination. And this May, we will host the inaugural Sports Diversity Jubilee for LGBTQIA+ athletes.

This is what it means for our city to be inclusive.

This is what makes us more competitive and opens the door to new opportunities.

Richmond was also named a top 10 U.S. travel destination, one of the 10 coolest U.S. cities to visit and one of 18 must-be-seen cities in 2018.

Ladies and gentlemen, your city is on the map!

Today, more people are working – which is evident by the city's 2.9 percent unemployment rate.

Our median household income also rose, with gains topping 5 percent, among the highest in the nation.

In addition to ongoing projects, the city has had more than \$1.5 Billion in investment over the last two years.

Richmond is **COMPETING**, and it is competing at a higher level than it has in a long time. I truly believe we are positioned for even greater growth in the months and years ahead.

And for that reason, I can say without equivocation – and with pride and gratitude – the state of our city is **STRONG**.

But, we cannot rest on our laurels.

Creating opportunity for our residents is a critical strategy in how we address the systemic issues that have challenged our city for generations.

That is why it is so important we provide opportunities for ALL Richmonders.

Last year, we launched a pilot workforce development program with the Department of Parks and Recreation – a program that provides job training to returning citizens.

Programs like these provide our most vulnerable citizens with the skills and mentorships they need to turn their lives around.

I actually had the opportunity to sit-down and talk one-on-one with Ashley Hicks before and after she graduated from this program.

She learned the challenging job of landscaping – and believe me, Ashley got me on a zero-turn lawnmower and that is no easy job.

Her hard work is paying off. Ashley is now working for the great City of Richmond.

She turned her life around and now has a city-family supporting her as well.

This is what it means to be inclusive.

This is what makes us more competitive.

Even though Ashley could not be here tonight, we want her to know we are so proud of her.

I have always believed access to a stable, well-paying job is the greatest pathway out of poverty, and away from crime.

Last year, the city experienced, on average, an 8 percent reduction in overall violent crime, including a 20 percent reduction in our homicide rate.

However, in order for these trends to continue, our officers need appropriate training to guide them when they encounter difficult situations.

I am encouraged by the progress we have made to date, and the commitment of the Richmond Police Department, to make sure 100 percent of its officers are crisis-intervention certified within the next two years. We have also committed to a national search and an extended community engagement process in the selection of our next police chief.

I want a chief who respects and engages his or her community.

Someone who understands that the job is not just about locking people up; it's about lifting people up.

Someone who will not only fight crime, but do battle with fear and misunderstanding, and replace it with hope and trust among the people he or she serves.

Our police department plays a vital role in keeping us inclusive and competitive.

We are also doing the hard work of promoting education, understanding and atonement for our past.

When I think about this challenging, important work, I think about my grandmother who helped raise me, Mary Stoney. She grew up in the Jim Crow South and spent the majority of her working life as a maid.

She's gone now, but I truly believe she would want me to see this work through, not just for her, but for all the Mary's out there – and their children, and their children's children, who need to see and hear and learn the truth about our history.

That's why we embarked upon the work of the Monument Avenue Commission, and convened the first serious city-sponsored conversation about the Confederate monuments on that street in decades.

And that's why last fall we created Richmond's first History and Culture Commission.

This commission will help us follow through on the recommendations from the Monument Avenue Commission. And it will listen to and advise our community on the many matters of historical and cultural significance in our city.

Richmond has a history of excluding people. But moving forward, we seek to design a city that includes the stories of ALL our people.

Ladies and gentlemen, unpacking the baggage of our complex history -- and owning it -- will take time.

But, there are some matters of historical significance I believe need to move forward now – such as the renaming of the Boulevard after a native son and humanitarian, Arthur Ashe.

Arthur Ashe is one of Richmond's true champions, and he deserves to be honored.

I appreciate the work of Councilwoman Kim Gray to bring this forward, and I urge the council to pass this ordinance at its next meeting on February 11th.

Tonight, I am also excited to announce the establishment of the Shockoe Alliance, a collaborative effort charged with guiding the design and implementation of concepts and recommendations for the future of the Shockoe area.

The Alliance will consist of stakeholders from city government and representatives from the Shockoe Partnership, Shockoe Bottom Neighborhood Association, Preservation Virginia and Sacred Ground Historical Reclamation Project.

Later this spring, the Alliance will engage the greater Richmond community on a vision forward for the Shockoe area.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the National League of Cities and the Rose Center for Public Leadership for its guidance and support to move this important conversation forward.

It is fitting we begin this significant work in 2019 -- which has been proclaimed the Year of Reconciliation and Civility -- and during the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia.

I firmly believe that telling the true story of the tragic history that occurred in Shockoe can be the most inclusive history told anywhere in America.

AND telling an inclusive story of our history will attract visitors from all over the globe.

This is what it means to be inclusive.

This is what makes us more competitive.

As many of you are aware, I committed to visit every Richmond public school each year while in office.

And last year, on a visit to Maymont Preschool, something happened that really stuck with me.

When I got to Ms. Tisdale's classroom, I was greeted by a handful of students, all holding brightly colored signs that read, "Welcome Mayor Stoney."

I knelt down to shake their hands. And that's when I met little D'marcus "Mook" Taylor.

I will never forget that moment – because this three-year-old reached up, held my chin in his hand, and looked me straight in my eyes.

Mook did not say much to me then – but in his eyes, I saw curiosity, and the hope and promise of our great city.

These powerful moments remind me why I get out of bed each and every morning.

Our kids ARE our future, and it is vital we support them in every way that we can.

That is why a year ago, I stood before you and asked for your support to make a \$150 million investment in our kids, and the schools they attend.

I am proud to stand before you today and say, with the support of Councilmembers Addison, Agelasto, Hilbert, Jones, Newbille, Robertson, and Trammel, we made that historic investment in our children happen YEARS before it would have been possible, if we did nothing.

That commitment and collaboration allowed us to break ground in December on THREE new schools that will open to students in the fall of 2020!

Now THAT is what you call teamwork!

I would be remiss if I did not thank my Chief Administrative Officer, Selena Cuffee-Glenn, Richmond Superintendent of Schools, Jason Kamras, and their teams for working to achieve this aggressive timeline for the completion of these new schools.

Last December, I also presented an \$800 million plan to FULLY fund the school facilities needs that have been identified by RPS over the next 20 years.

I want to thank all nine members of city council who signed on as co-patrons of this plan and unanimously approved it this past Monday.

Committing to this plan will ensure that another generation does not come and go without addressing the critical needs of our school facilities.

Schools will now be part of our city's Capital Improvement Plan for the next 20 years!

In addition to supporting the classroom, I am also focused on the 80% of time Richmond's children spend outside of the classroom, particularly those critical hours after the final bell rings.

One of my proudest moments of 2018 was standing at Peter Paul Development Center to announce new partnerships that close the gaps that exist in out-of-school time programs.

Thanks to city investment and the leadership of our philanthropic and nonprofit partners, we are on track to accomplishing our goal of ensuring all students at elementary and middle schools have access to high-quality, out-of-school time by 2020.

I am committed to doing my part to support our students and our schools. But we must acknowledge that the Commonwealth has failed to do its part.

On December 8th, and on Monday, we marched to the Capital to demand more funding for our children from those state lawmakers who have shirked their responsibility for far too long.

The state needs to step up and acknowledge the true cost of education includes many items not adequately captured in their funding formula, like teachers' salaries, school facilities, technology for the classroom, nurses, counselors and bus drivers.

Not only is it our responsibility to support all the Jalias and Mooks, it is also our responsibility to support their families.

Your city should be a leader and an advocate.

That's why we expanded paid parental leave for city employees to cover up to 8 weeks of care for loved ones.

That's why we recognized and promoted the significant health benefits of breastfeeding.

Last summer, we proclaimed August 25th-31st as Black Breastfeeding Week RVA to build a more equitable breastfeeding-friendly community.

And that's why this year the City of Richmond will become the first city government in the South to have a lactation policy for city employees who are nursing mothers.

We are committed to strengthening families in the City of Richmond.

My father, Marvin Stoney, was a returning citizen who worked incredibly hard as a high school janitor until 2011 when he passed.

He worked hard every day to put food on the table and a roof over our heads. And I'm forever grateful.

My dad, along with my grandmother, ensured that I had access to an education, AND a supportive community, that would give me a ladder to success.

Dad constantly reminded me we were one paycheck away from being on the streets – a reality I know is also true for too many of our families in Richmond.

Ladies and gentlemen, we cannot expect our families and children to thrive if it takes everything just for them to survive.

So, we not only need to help our most vulnerable find jobs, but they also need a stable and affordable place to call home, right here in the City of Richmond.

This year, we will continue our progress toward our goal of building more affordable housing, increasing economic empowerment and generating additional revenue to improve our schools and neighborhoods.

We also will introduce a fresh approach to how we plan for our critical city assets and infrastructure.

In addition to modernizing our schools, I will also include in my budget this year, a 20-year Capital Improvement Plan that will guide our investments in our streets and sidewalks, our community centers, and our city fleet, among other priorities.

We need to focus on long-term investment in our city -- not just 5 to 10 years out, but 20 years out – to ensure that, as we build new schools, we are also making investments in our neighborhoods and communities.

Our city is ripe for growth, and we need to approach the redevelopment of our downtown with careful deliberation no matter how long it takes – acting only when the “i’s” are dotted and the “t’s” are crossed.

We will only move forward when we are assured a development is in the best interests of the city.

That is why, if council reaches a similar conclusion following its own deliberations, the proposed Navy Hill development could represent a transformative opportunity.

One that impacts our long-term goals to provide economic empowerment, generates hundreds of millions in additional revenue for our schools and neighborhoods and creates nearly 700 units of affordable housing.

As you know, I've pledged to build 1,500 affordable housing units over five years. And we are well on our way.

In 2018, we broke ground on affordable housing developments in Jackson Ward and Church Hill.

And we recently cut the ribbon on the Port City development in Southside, which will be nearly 300 units of affordable housing for singles, couples and families.

However, despite our best efforts to create more housing that is affordable, there are still an unacceptable number of our residents living on the margins.

These residents have become victims of a punitive and discriminatory state regulatory system that traps people into a cycle of debt and housing insecurity.

This cycle often ends in an eviction – the forcible displacement from one's home that in many cases can, and should be avoided.

According to the Eviction Lab at Princeton University, as reported in the New York Times, Richmond and four other cities in the Commonwealth of Virginia have some of the highest eviction rates in the country.

Richmond should not be on this list. It is UNACCEPTABLE.

Few things are more stressful on a family than not having a stable place to call home.

That is why tonight, I am pleased to announce the City of Richmond, in partnership with the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, Housing Opportunities Made Equal in Virginia AND our courts, will launch an eviction diversion program for our citizens.

Under this pilot program, tenants would get the benefit of a clean slate.

Financial literacy education.

Access to supportive services.

AND landlords would also get the rent owed and avoid the expense of the eviction and finding a new tenant.

Ladies and gentlemen, this program, which will launch later this year, will be the first of its kind within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

In addition, our eviction diversion program incorporates the following key strategies:

First: Financial assistance to support eligible tenants;

Second: In-court mediation between landlord and tenant;

Third: A payment plan to ensure landlords receive the tenants' rent due in a timely fashion.

And finally, use of pro-bono attorneys, some of whom will have offices right in the John Marshall Courthouse, to support tenants facing eviction.

Through this program, our goal is to cut Richmond's eviction numbers down by hundreds of cases each year.

This is another great example of how collaboration and partnership with the private, public and non-profit sectors helps our city to thrive.

A special thanks is owed to Chief Judge Joi Taylor, who along with the other circuit court judges have made space available to house this program so it is readily accessible to support families facing an eviction.

Ladies and gentlemen, THIS is what it means to be inclusive.

THIS is what makes us more competitive.

And that's what building One Richmond is all about:

Investing in our people.

Sharing in our prosperity.

Leveraging our diversity as a strength.

And creating a place where people want to live, work and raise a family.

A place where you can live out your God-given talents to become the best versions of yourselves.

I am so excited about the possibilities for our city.

And I am so confident we will be successful because all of you are here with me on this journey.

Richmonders: you march, you volunteer, you organize, you celebrate, you create and you inspire.

Our city is more than ready to move on from its past, and it should not be afraid of its future.

ONE RICHMOND. Inclusive, competitive. Not merely surviving– but thriving.

Thriving in all aspects of life – in stronger families, in steady employment, in safe neighborhoods, affordable homes, better schools and good health.

I want Richmond to be more than a Top 10 place to visit. I want it to be a Top 10 place to live.

We all have a responsibility to create opportunity and build a supportive community for Jalia, Mook and Ashley, and the thousands of other Richmonders who all call this great city their home.

We have a responsibility to make Richmond the most inclusive city we can so we can be the most competitive city we can be.

This is not just my job as your mayor. This is personal to me.

It's why I get up every day.

I thank you for your faith, your effort and your love.

Together, this city is working. This city is moving forward.

And we are not turning back.

God bless you all. And god bless the great City of Richmond!