

State of the City Address

Mayor Mike Signer, January 17, 2017

Good evening, everyone.

If you haven't seen a State of the City address before, this is my first one, too. Hopefully, we can help each other get through this.

The goal of the State of the City address is, once a year, to take you through the accomplishments of the past year and to give you a sense of where we're heading.

The tradition has been for just the Mayor to deliver the address. But given how hard everyone on City Council works for the City, I didn't see any reason for me to hog the limelight, and so I've asked my colleagues this year to also address you after my remarks.

Let me begin by declaring that the State of our City is strong.

We have maintained our AAA bond rating by two rating agencies.

At 3.9%, our unemployment rate is the lowest in Virginia.

And we have 39,155 jobs in the city, which is the most ever recorded.

We have a \$162 million budget, with over 40% spent on our public schools.

And due to our sound fiscal practices, we ended last year with a \$6 million surplus, most of which we directed toward our long-term capital projects, which are usually underfunded.

We have received many accolades in the last year as well.

We were ranked #3 among Virginia cities in Human Rights First's Equality Index for LGBT folks.

Entrepreneur Magazine named us the #4 city in the country for entrepreneurs.

Expedia Magazine named us the #1 place to visit in the U.S.

And the *New York Post* declared us #3 of the nation's 15 Best Places to Live.

We received the "Go Green" Award from the Commonwealth of Virginia.

And Travelocity put us #1 in 9 top small cities for foodies.

And Healthline named us one of the healthiest small towns in the U.S.

I ran for City Council on a theme of “One Charlottesville,” which to me meant building bridges, focusing on what unites us rather than what divides us.

During my first Council meeting as Mayor, one year ago, I announced the following goals:

“We have an opportunity before us to rebut today’s cynicism with governance itself. As Mayor, I want schoolchildren to watch us on TV and think that they might want to be on City Council someday. I want to lead this City Council to become an exemplar for our citizens of collegiality, of deliberation, of transparency, and of good government.”

I promised that my main value as Mayor would be to strive for the common good. I said I would pursue two overarching goals with this Council: respect and results.

I believe that together on this Council we have accomplished that—and then some. Vice-Mayor Bellamy, Councilor Szakos, Councilor Galvin, and Councilor Fenwick, it has been an honor and a privilege to work with you this last year.

I especially want to thank our City Manager Maurice Jones for the hard work that he and his staff do every day implementing our vision for Charlottesville. Mr. Jones recently became the president-elect of the Virginia Local Government Management Association—an honor he richly deserves.

Reflecting on the last year, it’s the images that stick with me the most.

It was riding on a snowplow through a blizzard with one of our hard-working Public Works staff to get snow out of the way and get people moving.

It was sitting and learning during my first open office hour from the leader of Cville Women in Tech who passionately argued that we should implement an Open Data policy.

It was listening to the hundreds of supporters—pro and con—who showed up to the Blue Ribbon Commission meetings to reflect on our City’s troubled history and our public spaces.

It was standing with a group of citizens protesting yet another police shooting in another city, and walking folks over to meet our new Chief of Police, Al Thomas, who made sure to be there in person.

It was visiting the new headquarters of another remarkable start-up whose founder hopes to devise a non-surgical vasectomy and who decided to locate on Harris Street, in the heart of our City.

It was talking with residents at Crescent Halls about their fears and hopes about where they live.

And it was visiting the Boys and Girls Club last week, where I played a game of Mario Brothers (which was called Donkey Kong when I was little—and this will date me—on my Atari 5200) with three kids on a system they'd designed where an electric current flowed through our bodies so we could play together.

That's our amazing city. Our diversity and our ingenuity, our friendliness and our beauty—and our people, above all else—are what make us a World-Class City.

But when I watched City Council previously, I didn't see that reflected on the dais. Too often, I saw acrimony. Too often, I saw a body that got stuck, whether in arguments with staff or with citizens.

We need political will to solve our problems, even the most difficult ones. We need deliberation to work our way through the issues. And we need collaboration and compromise to get things done.

That's been the approach this year, and it's worked. Coming into office, I saw four major areas where we needed to move forward: innovation, infrastructure, governance, and reconciliation.

Innovation because for our economy to thrive for all, we cannot just depend on a few major monolithic employers. We instead need creativity and innovation for a resilient, flexible economy—an economy more like a thriving summer garden than a sparse forest of a few tall trees.

Infrastructure because we live in a city that depends on built things—concrete, steel, wood, and metal. These things are expensive, and they are difficult to handle politically. But they are crucially important. And if we fail to deal with them, then they will fail us.

Governance because we must provide a government that mirrors the best aspects of the human beings who pay for it—that’s transparent and responsive, outgoing and reflective, learning and resilient.

And reconciliation because the past, as William Faulker said, is never past. Surveys show our deepest value in the Charlottesville area is history. We have injuries in our past, on both race and class, that haunt us today. And we must continue to strive to recognize, address, and overcome them.

We made progress on all four fronts. Let me be clear. In an age of cynicism not only about government but about politics, all of these accomplishments depended on political will.

Here are what I see as a “top 10” from 2016:

#1: We increased the funding of our public schools by over \$2 million. Our public schools represent our most profound commitment—both in terms of dollars and human capital—to our most vulnerable. They are the engine of progress in our City, and we delivered for them.

#2: We expanded the technology tax credit. 15 years ago, we were the first city in Virginia to create a city-wide 50% rebate on professional taxes for technology companies. That was expiring last year. We not only renewed the tax credit. We expanded it, from 5 to 7 years, which will allow more young companies more help during those crucial early years of growth.

#3: We lowered building heights on West Main Street because of our concern to protect historic neighborhoods surrounding, and because of our interest in historic preservation. While this reduced the value of the real estate on this corridor by tens of millions of dollars, we thought the future of the city was more important.

#4: We voted to move the West Main Street Streetscape Project ahead. This project had been stalled for decades. The new street will at long last make biking safe on a crucial corridor. It will modernize utilities, quadruple tree canopy coverage, beautify the corridor, and widen sidewalks, making West Main Street, in the long-term, a destination like the Downtown Mall.

#5: We made serious progress on parking. We presented a unified front against a threat to privatize our Water Street Garage. We invested almost \$3 million in a parcel that will allow us to expand parking downtown. And we provided the public with a comprehensive parking plan, including the creation of a new Parking Division.

#6: We prevented the proposed re-zoning of the Booker Hill neighborhood, protecting a historic African-American neighborhood from increased gentrification. We allocated \$80,000 to the rehabilitation of the historic Daughters of Zion cemetery, which tells an important chapter of Charlottesville's history—that of our robust African-American middle-class. And we created the Blue Ribbon Commission on Race and Public Spaces, which produced a thorough and thoughtful report that we'll be discussing tonight.

#7: We became the first Virginia city to require that city agencies register voters on-line. In a time when the right to vote is under systemic assault, measures like this will expand the franchise while bringing innovation to the basic functions of a democracy.

#8: We voted to create a new Open Data Policy. This was an important step for both transparency and innovation that will make all city data machine-readable and allow folks to access and mine our data, coming to new discoveries about what we're doing well and where we can improve.

#9: We passed a series of Memorandums of Understanding with our friends in Albemarle County. These covered the environment, transit and transportation, redevelopment, and education, committing our governments to a new era of regionalism in an era where we're all seeking efficiency and collaboration.

#10: We passed new governing procedures for our meetings. Among other benefits, we brought work sessions that were previously held off camera into the public eye, and we focused our agendas and deliberations on action, rather than just talk. Together, these steps have led to more engaging, efficient, and effective meetings.

So it's been a good year.

But not for everyone.

When I was at former Vice-Mayor Holly Edwards' memorial service last week, I was painfully reminded of the fact that for Holly and for many others, Charlottesville can feel like a city that is leaving our most needy neighbors behind. Hearing all of these accolades and accomplishments, some folks might still be thinking, "That's all great. But I feel like folks are getting squeezed out, that they're not comfortable in a changing city."

The plain fact is that Charlottesville is in demand right now. That means that a lot of our assets are also in demand, from housing to parking to infrastructure. And as any college student in Econ 101 will tell you, when there isn't enough supply, the cost increases.

While this is a problem that many declining cities would love to have, it has real human costs, and it will present us with many challenges. I can't tell you there will be easy solutions. What I can tell you that over the next year, we will try our best. We will listen, and we will learn, and we will ask our staff and our stakeholders alike to come to us with the best ideas for increasing opportunity equity and—and in a way that's responsible to our taxpayers and our budget.

I want to begin by putting one big idea on the table. I believe we should explore the benefits of doubling our contribution to the Affordable Housing Fund. We currently spend about \$1.6 million a year on this Fund, and we have invested in the resources we need to take the program to the next level. We have a new director, a new housing study, and a new strategic plan on the way. We're in a great place to redouble our commitment.

One of my proudest moments this year was recognizing and thanking Khizr and Ghazala Khan for their service and patriotism.

During that wonderful experience, I thought a lot about why they resonated so powerfully with this nation. I believe it had to do with their authenticity.

As our city grows and changes, it will become even more urgent that we understand and love one another, despite our differences. That we rejoice in our community. As bad as our politics is, my experience as Mayor gives me faith that there's no problem we can't solve without working together.

This week in Washington, I'm painfully aware that we'll be inaugurating not only a new president, but a style of politics that traffics in stereotypes and in coarse, even vulgar language that demeans the nation envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington.

Some say fight fire with fire. I say (and this is definitely not original), when they go low, we go high.

When I think of one word that captures where we are, and where we should go, it's pluralism. The fact is that nobody has a monopoly on the truth. Cities, like people, must keep learning. And we must recognize that difference—of opinion, of ideas, of people—is the key to our common strength.

In today's politics, it's not just citizens who are under siege. Elected officials can also become a target. I'll confess that as a first-time office-holder, it has been a somewhat surreal experience to hear some of the stereotypes that people have hurled at me and my colleagues.

I don't tend to talk much about myself in public. So many of you may not know that I was born in India to a single mother. My birth father died while she was pregnant. My birth name is Atri. It's the name of an ancient Indian prophet, and that's the name I was known by until the 7th grade. We came back to the U.S. when I was two, when my dad adopted me, along with his whole, wonderful, boisterous New York/New Jersey family.

I'm proud of my Jewish heritage, but I also heard my first hurtful ethnic slur when I was in elementary school. I attended majority-minority public high schools, where my closest friends were black, Pakistani, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, and Peruvian. My father was afflicted with a serious lifelong illness when I was in ninth grade that prevented him from working, so my family spent many years in the

grips of deep economic stress and anxiety. I have both a first cousin and a sister-in-law who are African-American. My sister and her wonderful wife are social workers who have two amazing daughters.

These things don't make me anything other than completely ordinary—in that I don't fit into categories easily, and that I have often felt like an outsider.

The reason I love Charlottesville so very much is that I feel completely at home here. I believe our embrace of authenticity, and of uniqueness, is what makes our community so uniquely wonderful. And I believe this is reflected in your elected officials.

I see it in Wes Bellamy, who grew up in public housing and who's now earning a Ph.D., and who's a uniquely passionate and charismatic fighter for social and racial justice.

I see it in Kristin Szakos, whose father was a professor of African-American studies, who trained and practiced as a journalist and who's one of the most skilled community organizers I know.

I see it in Bob Fenwick, a U.S. Army veteran trained by the Jesuits at Georgetown, who's a small businessman and poet who speaks to the heart and soul of our neighborhoods.

I see it in Kathy Galvin, an architect originally from the rough and tough town of Brockton who brings both passion and rigor to every project she touches.

We don't get it right all the time, but we are definitely trying our best.

But we don't make Charlottesville a World-Class City. You do. It's you who we wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night thinking about. Because it's you who make this such a remarkable, such a challenging, such an inspiring, and such a truly World-Class City to serve.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for the honor, and the privilege, of being your Mayor.