



City of Charleston

John J. Tecklenburg

Mayor

The following State of the City Address was prepared for delivery by Mayor John J. Tecklenburg on January 26, 2016, at 7:30 p.m.

Mr. Mayor Pro Tem, members of City Council, honored guests and fellow Charlestonians:

Fifteen days ago, I had the extraordinary honor of being sworn in as our city's 61st mayor. On that day, I spoke in general terms about the vision our citizens endorsed last November -- a vision of Charleston as a city of opportunity, where every individual has a real chance to succeed, and our residents' quality of life always comes first. Tonight, I'd like to talk to you in more detail about our plan to make that vision a reality -- and about the work our city is already doing to further those priorities.

But first, I want to take a moment to recognize my colleagues in city leadership -- the outstanding members of our City Council, who serve the citizens of Charleston with such diligence and distinction. These are the people who give of their time and energy to ensure that every area, every neighborhood, of our city receives the representation it deserves. These are the people whose hard work has contributed so much to the many successes our city has enjoyed in recent years. These are your friends and neighbors -- and my valued colleagues.

So, now, I would ask each member to stand as I call out their name, and to remain standing until all have been recognized.

District One Councilmember Gary White-- District Two Councilmember Rodney Williams -- District Three Councilmember James Lewis -- District Four Councilmember Robert Mitchell -- District Five Councilmember Marvin Wagner -- District Six Councilmember Dudley Gregorie -- District Seven Councilmember Keith Waring -- District Eight Councilmember Mike Seekings - - My fellow newcomer to this chamber, District Nine Councilmember Peter Shahid, Jr. -- District Ten Councilmember Dean Riegel -- District Eleven Councilmember Bill Moody, Jr. -- And District Twelve Councilmember Kathleen Wilson.

Fellow citizens, these are my partners on the Charleston leadership team, and I'd like to ask you all to now join me in recognizing their many accomplishments -- and in thanking them for their service.

Thank you all, and please be seated.

As I said two weeks ago, this is a moment rich with the promise of a better, brighter future for all our citizens. We need only the will, and the wisdom, to work together to claim it. And already, it's clear that we as a city are coming together around a plan that will do just that -- a practical, comprehensive quality-of-life plan that will help us ensure that Charleston is not just the best city in America to visit, but also the best city in America to live, work, worship and raise a family.

To do this, we must take action in five major areas – citywide livability, transportation and public transit, the economy, jobs and housing, more responsive city services, and specific initiatives to improve each and every area of our city – from West Ashley to the Peninsula, and from Daniel Island to James and Johns Islands.

And the place we start in terms of citywide livability is with the first job of government -- public safety.

In recent months, our police chief, Greg Mullen has introduced a whole series of initiatives that will make our citizens safer -- and our community more united. First among these is the Illumination Project, an innovative, year-long effort to break down the barriers between our police and the community they serve, and to build lasting relationships based on trust and mutual respect. Funded by the city, the police fund and private donations, this project is seen as a groundbreaking initiative, and a model for cities around the country. Along these same lines, the CPD has also launched a Community Outreach Unit, and is now testing a new citation and release pilot program, designed to reduce the number of citizens incarcerated for minor offenses.

In addition to its community-building efforts, our police department has also made great strides in using technology to help keep our citizens safe, with a new, state-of-the-art Crime Information Operations Center, and more than 170 body cameras already deployed and more on the way.

Along with Chief Mullen, our fire chief, Karen Brack, has also been working hard to keep our citizens safe, and to ensure that our fire department continues to be woven deeply into the fabric of our community. In keeping with those goals, providing robust emergency response to the Upper Cainhoy Peninsula will be one of our principal priorities in 2016. To that end, Chief Brack plans first to open a temporary station in the Cainhoy area, soon followed by the acquisition of a suitable property for the development of a permanent fire station to serve the area. We will also break ground this year on new fire stations in West Ashley, which will help improve service in the Savannah Highway, Bees Ferry Road and Glenn McConnell Parkway area.

Along with these new stations, our fire department is launching two new operations initiatives this year: a community paramedic program that will place two to four “quick response” vehicles in strategic locations to enhance service for some of our most vulnerable citizens, and a back to basics program that will ensure we are using current best practices in the areas of fire suppression and rescue procedures.

After public safety, our second major priority in the area of city-wide livability improvements will be flooding and drainage relief.

Currently, we have funding in place for several existing drainage projects, including final completion of the Market Street drainage tunnel, as well as Phase 2 of the Septima Clark Parkway area drainage improvements. The city has also begun work on the early stages of major projects in the areas around West Oak Forest, the St. Andrews Shopping Center, Citadel Mall, Orleans Rd. and West Calhoun Street – and will continue to work directly with citizens in and around Shadowmoss until real solutions to their problems have been found. In addition to these projects, we will begin work this year on review and expansion of the City’s just-released sea-level rise plan, which will be the foundation of our strategy to mitigate the effects of sea level rise, now and in the years ahead.

Our next livability priority is a comprehensive, citywide zoning review, with the clearly stated purpose of bringing properties into conformance with the city’s already-passed comprehensive plan, and protecting our neighborhoods from irresponsible overdevelopment.

Separate from this zoning review, but on a related matter, I’m happy to report tonight that our City Council’s efforts to bring citizens and the business community together to reform our city’s Gathering Place ordinance appear to be bearing real fruit. Several productive meetings among the stakeholders have now been held, and we hope to have a new, more workable, more neighborhood-friendly ordinance before this Council at a date not far in the future.

Our fourth citywide livability priority is protecting the natural environment we all share and enjoy. To that end, we will continue our efforts to preserve and expand greenspace throughout the city, such as our current plan to develop the Lowline -- a remarkable project that will convert an abandoned rail line into a linear park connecting several upper Peninsula neighborhoods that citizens from all over the area will use and enjoy. We will also work to implement the portions of the city’s Green Plan that have already been approved by City Council, encourage the retrofitting of older buildings to promote conservation and improve energy performance, and maintain our opposition to oil and natural gas exploration and drilling off our coast.

Finally, with regard to improving general livability, it’s time for us to ensure that the cultural arts are accessible to citizens throughout our city. And to do that, we will be working with city officials and the private sector to identify affordable space for local arts organizations, partnering with city schools to offer more arts programs at all age levels, and expanding our current efforts to spread arts and cultural programs such as Piccolo Spoleto and the MOJA Arts Festival to more areas and schools, so that all of our citizens can attend and participate.

Our second major area of focus in our quality of life initiative is transportation and public transit, starting with the single most critical infrastructure challenge currently facing our city – the completion of I-526.

That is why I am tonight calling on our state and regional leaders to come together to save this vital initiative. This is not just another local road project, as some outside our area have mistakenly suggested. It is critical to the future growth of our entire state -- with tourism, the aviation industry and our remarkable Port of Charleston all dependent on the efficient movement of people and products from one end of our county to the other. Put simply, if this critical project is lost, the residents of West Ashley will not be the only victims. Our whole state’s economy will

suffer -- and we will all soon find ourselves asking why the next Boeing or the next Volvo decided not to call our beautiful state of South Carolina home.

But I-526, as important as it is, will not alone solve our traffic and transportation challenges. For that, we are going to need a comprehensive regional transportation and public transit plan. And the good news is that that process is starting to come together. By working with our citizens and regional partners, we've already seen real progress on several major fronts, from the re-think of Folly Road, to the widening of Clements Ferry, to the I-26 Alt study, which recently recommended a bus rapid transit system from Summerville to Charleston. This kind of close collaboration between and among citizens and jurisdictions is going to be key to solving our traffic problems in the years ahead -- and we as a city are committed to doing our part to make it work.

In addition to these road and public transit initiatives, our transportation plan includes two other important elements.

First, we will begin to make our city more walkable and more bikeable, with light-infrastructure improvements such as striping, signals and signage, the creation of a major North-South bike corridor on the Peninsula, the development of a safe way of getting from West Ashley to Downtown, and a full scale bike sharing system of the kind that has worked so well in other places. In addition to these improvements, we will also improve safety on our streets by enforcing the existing rules of the road on motorists, bicyclers and pedestrians alike.

And second, we will begin a major reevaluation of our city's parking policies, with a move toward unsubsidized parking rates for our city's visitors, the creation of "park and ride" opportunities outside the city center, an expansion of parking opportunities for neighborhood residents, and discounts for non-Peninsula citizens who come Downtown to work, worship, shop or play.

The next major area of focus in our plan is on economy, jobs and housing -- for without real economic opportunity, the quality of life we want for all our fellow Charlestonians will be out of reach for too many of our citizens.

That's why we begin with strategic economic development, with a particular focus on West Ashley revitalization, the creation and retention of creative, knowledge-based and value-added jobs, the deployment of a full-time city staffer to connect people with the jobs that are coming open, and the continuation of our efforts to encourage headquarters and office relocations to the city.

But all those efforts could prove useless if our citizens are unprepared for the jobs we are bringing into the area. For that reason, we will also work directly with the school district to offer our students more vocational and training opportunities, more mentoring programs, more recreational and after school programs, and more summer jobs for teens, particularly those most in need. In addition, we will also expand our partnerships with private employers to ensure that our workforce is trained and ready for available job opportunities.

We also know, however, that the single greatest way to expand opportunity is by expanding and nurturing our local and small businesses. And to that end, we will continue to develop our city's already successful incubator program, with the Flagship 3 incubator able to begin construction this year – promising more space for entrepreneurs throughout our city, particularly our underserved women and minority-owned business people.

And finally, we must tackle the challenge of affordable housing – a challenge that has grown considerably in recent years, with many workers pushed out of the city and forced into long commutes that only make our traffic and parking problems more severe. To begin to remedy this, we will work through the Housing Authority and with the private sector to incentivize the creation of more workforce and affordable housing where it's needed most here in the city. Related to this, we have also recently seen the emergence of so-called “tent cities” in certain areas of the Peninsula – a problem that we are already working with county government, SCDOT, the Homeless Coalition and others to bring to a humane but clear end in the near future.

The fourth focus of our quality of life plan is making city government itself better and more responsive to our citizens.

To do this, we will begin with a performance review of city processes, which will help us understand what's working – and where we need improvement. With this information in hand, we will then be able to make our city more efficient for taxpayers, more effective for citizens and more rewarding for our workforce.

Alongside this review, we will also soon roll out a series of initiatives aimed at increasing transparency, improving collaboration with our neighborhoods and citizens, and enhancing cooperation between and among our regional partners. And we are already at work on a far-reaching digital initiative that will help us improve and expand basic city services with technology.

As part of this project, we will be expanding our online offerings for business -- where now, for the first time ever, business licenses can be acquired through our city's website, and soon, the entire building permit process will be available in a single, seamless online system.

The fifth and final focus of our plan is squarely aimed at the place where quality of life issues are experienced most powerfully -- in the areas and neighborhoods our residents call home.

First, West Ashley. As many others have noted in recent days, no part of our city is more ready for a renaissance than West Ashley. And I am happy to be able to report to you tonight that our city is already making real progress on that goal.

This year, for the first time, revenues from our city's tourism industry are going to enhance and beautify West Ashley, with two future parks being paid for in part with the accommodations tax, and a Tax Increment Finance District in the planning stages to finance major streetscape and revitalization projects, such as those our city has performed so successfully on Upper King Street and elsewhere on the Peninsula.

But these initiatives are just a start. Later this year, we will break ground on the West Ashley Senior Center -- and by the time it's complete, those seniors and other area residents will be able to purchase and enjoy fresh, high quality produce at a new city-sponsored West Ashley Farmers Market. And in the years ahead, as we continue to make the necessary investments in beautification and revitalization, West Ashley will take its place as a crown jewel in the Charleston cityscape -- and a centerpiece of our region's future cultural and economic development.

Next up is the Peninsula, which as I mentioned earlier, will benefit from the Lowline project now being planned. It will also be well served by the recent splitting of the Board of Architectural Review into two separate bodies, as well as the implementation this year of the city's new Tourism Management Plan -- a sensible set of rules that establish reasonable limits on new events, better regulation of cruise ships, a more rational approach to parking and more. In addition to these initiatives, we plan to take several steps this year to further improve quality of life on the Peninsula -- including reform of antiquated zoning laws that have recently been utilized to allow additional density in areas where it may not be appropriate.

Like West Ashley and the Peninsula, James, Johns and Daniel Islands all have remarkable strengths -- and a highly specific set of quality of life concerns. That's why our plan has been specifically tailored to address their needs, as well. For James Island, that means better relationships and coordination between neighboring governments, consolidation of services where it might save our citizens tax dollars, and the furtherance of agreements that guarantee the fastest possible response times in emergency situations when life and property are at risk. For Johns Island, it includes strict observance of the Urban Growth Boundary to preserve the area's character, and efforts to improve and expand recreational opportunities. And for Daniel Island, it will involve street improvements, continued implementation of one-side parking -- and the resolution of long-standing commitments from the original Daniel Island Development Agreement.

My fellow Charlestonians, the plan I've laid out here tonight is not a small set of proposals designed to nibble away at the edges of the quality of life challenges facing our city. Rather, it is a practical, comprehensive strategy to make our already great city even greater by putting our neighborhoods and citizens quality of life first. And, at the same time, it is entirely in keeping with the Charleston spirit of unity and common purpose that we've shown the world over the past year. And, so, I am happy to report to you tonight that the state of our city is united -- and hopeful.

Working together, we can make our future even brighter than our past, and our present. And, being Charlestonians, I have no doubt that we will.

Good night, God bless you all, and God bless the great city of Charleston, SC.