



Mayor Steve Williams
City of Huntington

2016 State of the City Address

Mr. Chairman, members of City Council, this message and the accompanying budget are submitted to you in accordance with Article 10, Section 10.2 of the Charter of the City of Huntington, WV.

The fiscal strength of the municipal government of the City of Huntington is proving itself to be resilient. Its resilience is credited to the unyielding commitment of the employees of the city in each department to ensure an efficient, innovative and effective product is delivered to our citizens.

In short, we have created a foundation on which to proceed. Our Police, Fire, and Public Works departments are credited as being the most effective departments in the region. Certainly, each could use an infusion of millions in additional funding to do more. If additional capital comes available as a result of a growing economy, they each are positioned to intelligently invest that capital in an efficient, innovative and effective manner.

The departmental budgets proposed are ostensibly flat.

There is a hole in the budget, however.

The hole is the insurance line.

Our insurance line makes up property and casualty, workers' compensation and health care benefits. Seven years ago, the public safety pensions were the greatest challenge to the ongoing fiscal operations of the city. Insurance presents a greater challenge than pensions ever posed. We were able to project what would happen if the Legislature didn't act on pensions. However, the Legislature will not be able to help us fix this problem.

Today, our insurance costs are spiraling out of control. Because the city is self-insured and has a small pool of employees, insurance costs are the only expenditure that we seemingly have no solution to establish control. Our department heads know very clearly what their budgets are and are held accountable to maintain their spending to that which is assigned to their area of responsibility. However, while the city has implemented wellness programs and wellness education; established a more vibrant and dynamic safety program; and rid ourselves of properties that created unmanageable risk, the insurance costs are continuing to pose significant problems.

Our projections indicate that our insurance costs could increase 40% in the next year.

The coming weeks will be important in determining how we address the ever-increasing expenditures in this line. We will continue negotiations with our three bargaining units and, in turn, solicit bids from prospective insurers.

We have built a strong partnership with our bargaining units. The bargaining units have a vested interest in assisting us in controlling all of our insurance costs. They fully recognize that the protection of their jobs necessitates that we find an economical solution.

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A partnership works seamlessly in good times. The value of an effective partnership demonstrates its worth in difficult times.

The stability of our Fire, Police and Public Works departments depend upon our ability to identify an affordable solution to our insurance challenges.

Other than insurance, our departments are effectively addressing our community challenges. Are all our issues resolved? Of course not. However, each of the departments, including leadership and rank and file, are engaged in a long-term path to resolve complicated issues with complex responses.

My “Walks with the Mayor” last year were eye-opening. Certainly, each neighborhood has its own unique challenges. One point was crystal clear, though. Every neighborhood, regardless of economic status, had crumbling sidewalks as well as vacant buildings and unkempt property. Naturally, the problems were more pronounced in some areas than others. In every neighborhood, the owner-occupied properties were nearly pristine.

This Council has already endorsed and authorized strategies to address each of these issues. The bold step by this Council to create a fund for capital projects by increasing the user fee enables us to fund with this budget a pilot project for neighborhood sidewalk replacement. As we ask each Council member to provide a proposed list of streets to be paved, we are also asking for a similar list of sidewalks to be repaired or replaced.

City Council recently adopted a vacant buildings ordinance that will enable us to create a registry for vacant properties. The registry will enable us to quantify in greater detail the extent that vacant buildings are contributing to the decline in property values in our neighborhoods. Our Unsafe Buildings Commission has identified 250 structures that need to be demolished. I am told that there could easily be an additional 500 buildings placed on that list.

An anonymous donor has generously given \$100,000 to demolish buildings in the city. We will match that donation with \$100,000 from our capital budget. We have become known for our aggressive programs to address the presence of substandard and dilapidated buildings such as our Land Bank, our Unsafe Buildings Commission and our code enforcement efforts. Now that we have the vacant buildings registry ordinance on the books, we must coordinate our efforts toward a common goal to systematically begin demolishing dilapidated buildings in every neighborhood. I have asked Tom Bell to lead this effort.

The problem of dilapidated buildings is at the top of the list of concerns in every city in West Virginia and across the nation. The problem is not unique to Huntington. In fact, Huntington is identified as a national leader in addressing the problem with innovative solutions. On Friday of this week, the City of Huntington will serve as the host city for the West Virginia Housing Development Fund’s new Property Rescue Initiative for communities throughout southern West Virginia. In turn, I have been asked to be a guest presenter the past two years for the West Virginia Bar Association to address community efforts to deal with dilapidated housing.

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A common phrase that “all politics is local” rings true here. Our city is directly experiencing the effects of policies set forth in Washington, D.C., and in Charleston.

To an undisciplined eye, it can be argued that we have virtually no control over our own destiny.

International markets and national policies are directly impacting our economy. This is certainly nothing new to our region. We can view our recent 30- to 40-year history and observe how the long-vacated industries have left our neighborhoods empty and have caused subsequent decline.

Our state is experiencing a downturn in revenues due to a changing international energy market and a disruptive national energy policy.

Coal and natural gas prices are reaching historic lows, and federal policy seeking to encourage the development of energy alternatives has been slow to recognize that energy dependent regions have been left behind. The people living in these regions are left to suffer the consequences.

In the meantime, our health care economy is in transition. Indeed, millions of people are at last receiving health benefits. However, the resulting increase in insurance costs is leaving every private and public enterprise in limbo as they attempt to balance their books and continue on a level course toward prosperity.

While the issues we share with virtually every city in the state and nation are similar, we can learn from our past.

The answers can be simple but, as we are also learning, are certainly not easy.

Our response has been consistent these past three years. We will not be defined by the difficulties we face. We will define our challenges and, in that effort, discover our solutions.

We can learn from our past and create a pathway for others to follow.

We have been down this road before. Our history seems so distinct, so fresh, so final. While we lack the ability to change the past, we absolutely can determine our future.

Our efforts are already beginning to sprout new seedlings.

The opiate epidemic that is so devastating to the fabric of our community -- our families, our neighborhoods -- is being wrestled to the ground by several fronts. U.S. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said simply, yet strongly, that “Huntington’s efforts to stem the drug epidemic should serve as a model for other cities.” The Mayor’s Office of Drug Control Policy has in less than a year assisted in the delivery of more than \$3 million of federal, state and private nonprofit grants and in-kind assistance to various agencies in the area to assist in the fight of the opiate epidemic.

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Rather than be defined by this epidemic, our city has defined the problem and now has a strategic means to conquer this enemy. In short, because of the Office of Drug Control Policy led by former Police Chief Jim Johnson, Deputy Fire Chief Jan Rader and Huntington Police Department Criminal Intelligence Analyst Scott Lemley, lives are being saved.

The City of Huntington has been named as one of 15 semifinalists in the America's Best Communities competition sponsored by Frontier Communications and others. Our proposed community revitalization plan for this competition represents a comprehensive initiative that will transform our city and region to a level of success not seen in the past 70 years. Our success will enable cities and communities throughout the region to unfurl the bridle of limited expectation and unleash the opportunity of anticipated prosperity.

By looking to our past in each of these instances, we have learned not to idly accept the results that trickle down to us from national policies and international markets. Instead, we respond aggressively and assertively and seek solutions that are unique to our community.

We respond by choosing to define our problem.

We define ourselves by doing.

We do by joining together in radical cooperation.

In radical cooperation, this Council and administration have stood together when others have tried to shame us toward a fractured voice.

In radical cooperation, this City Council and administration responded to the calls for help during the past three years. Often times, we responded to a drumbeat that others have not had the temerity nor the spirit to respond.

In radical cooperation, this Council and administration had the courage to speak as one voice on three separate occasions to proclaim that all people living in our city will live in an environment of equal opportunity free from discrimination and hatred.

In radical cooperation, this Council and administration had the courage to speak in a single voice to assure that labor and business can and should work hand in hand -- not as adversaries, but as community members with a common goal of prosperity for all.

In radical cooperation, this Council and administration had the courage to act on numerous occasions rather than waiting on Charleston or Washington to provide us declarations to our problems. Instead, we will determine our own destiny and create resolutions to our challenges with a chorus of voices that ring out in harmony.

In radical cooperation, this Council and administration have stood together.

And in radical cooperation, this community will be defined by acting, by defining our enemy and by showing the world that we win when we stand together.

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