



Press Release

We Are Columbia

Public Relations, Marketing and Media Department

(P) 805-545-3020 | (F) 803-343-8719

pio@columbiasc.net | www.columbiasc.net

NEWS RELEASE

Embargoed until 6:00 PM

January 21, 2014

Contact: Michael Wukela (803) 413-5052

Mayor Benjamin Delivers 2014 State of the City Address

COLUMBIA, SC – Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin delivered his 2014 State of the City address this evening at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

Below are Mayor Benjamin's full remarks as prepared. Also attached are four graphics from the event's program outlining several key accomplishments in the areas of Fiscal Responsibility, Job Creation, Public Safety, Infrastructure and Environment.

2014 State of the City Address

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Mayor Steve Benjamin

January 21, 2013 – Columbia, SC

Members of Council, Madam City Manager, honored guests, gathered family and friends and my fellow Columbians:

The story is that, on a cold day just like this many years ago, the Sun and the North Wind were having an argument over who was greater.

To demonstrate his strength, the North Wind pointed to all the fields and forests, rivers and lakes frozen in this winter season as far as the eye could see and bragged, "Who but I could do all this?"

"See how they shake and shiver," he said pointing to the village below. "See how they close their doors and shutters huddling around the hearth's fire hoping to keep my sting at bay. Why, I have frozen life itself."

But the Sun was unimpressed and pointed, instead, to a simple traveler walking alone on the road far below bundled in his winter coat.

"Here is one who braves the cold and strikes out unafraid of your bluster," the Sun said. "If you really are so strong, then it should be nothing for you to blow his coat from off his back."

The traveler's boldness and audacity infuriated the Wind. So, seeking to make an example of him, he accepted the Sun's challenge, took in a deep breath and began to blow.

He blew and he blew, harder and harder. He blew so hard that birds clung to the trees, deer and wolves alike scurried for cover and the ground itself swirled into a cloud of dust.

But the harder he blew, the tighter the shivering man clung to his coat.

Then, without warning, the Sun came out from behind his cloud and began to shine.

The Wind stopped. The air warmed. And the man removed his coat.

When I look back over the past four years, I am simply blown away by the progress we have made as a city and as a people.

We've had four straight years of budget surplus, saved \$4.5 million in salaries without furloughs or layoffs, maximized efficiencies, eliminated waste and improved our credit rating with Standard & Poor's to AA+.

We've increased public safety funding by over \$8 million over the past four years, tripled the size of our gang unit and cut violent crime by 24%.

We've invested hundreds of millions of dollars into our water and sewer infrastructure, kicked off dozens of new sustainability initiatives, planted over 5,000 trees and cut sewer spills system wide by 71%.

We've partnered with the private sector and regional partners to create thousands of new jobs and secured billions in new capital investment. We've recruited new top-flight retailers, help build new high-tech industries, given new life to landmark buildings and revitalized Downtown.

We've forged strong new regional partnerships, we've invested in our knowledge and creative economies and, together, we've cut Metro Unemployment by more than a third – from 9.5% when I took office to 5.9% today – now that's saying something.

So when you ask me "What's happening in Columbia?" I say "A lot."

You ask, "Where are we going as a community?" and I say "Forward."

You ask, "What is the State of our City?" and I say "We shine."

When we increase Public Safety funding by nearly \$2 million in one year raise first responder salaries and create a new hazmat ordinance that helps keep them safe on the job, we shine.

When we support our neighborhoods by tearing down abandoned and derelict buildings like the old Varsity and rebuild that sense of community by completing long-awaited projects in Earlewood Park, Maxcy Gregg Pool, Coble Plaza and the Katheryn M. Bellfield Community Center, we shine.

When we protect the environment by expanding our recycling efforts, launch a new program to overhaul our wastewater system and further reduce sewer spills and cut Water and Sewer Fund transfers while working to end them once and for all, we shine.

From Greenview to Shandon, Hyatt Park to Sims Park, Uptown, Downtown, Fort Jackson to the River – We shine.

We shine when 23 façade grants approved this year help 23 small businesses transform the North Main Corridor.

When we help five companies at the Midlands Technical College Business Accelerator combine for over \$3 million in sales; when the USC/Columbia Technology Incubator is named one of INC. Magazine's "Incubators to Watch" and when just a few months brings ten new restaurants to Main Street, we shine.

Now, at the beginning of a new year and a new term in office, we seek new prospects and new opportunities for growth and excellence, to think bigger and reach farther, to set high expectations and, once set, exceed them.

Stand in the heart of our city and what do you see?

Look North and see the Lutheran Seminary, Columbia College and Palmetto Health. Look South and there's the State Capitol and our flagship Carnegie Research 1 facility the University of South Carolina. Look East to see two proud HBCUs in Benedict College and Allen University, Providence Hospital, the Dorn VA Medical Center and the largest army training facility in the world at Fort Jackson. Look West and there's the State Museum, the Koger Center, Colonial Life Arena and the riverfront.

Each of these is an integral strand weaving together the fabric of our community providing immeasurable benefits for education and cultural enrichment, spiritual and physical empowerment, economic advancement and jobs.

Each is essential in helping us secure billions in annual economic impact and create the vitality of living in a dynamic city where the creative class thrives.

Each is a tremendous asset to our community which we can and must continue to leverage in order to secure new private capital investment.

Unfortunately, none of them pays property taxes.

In fact, the truth is that an estimated two thirds of the real property in the City of Columbia is not on the city's tax rolls requiring the remaining one third – folks like you and me – to pay more in order to meet the pressing needs of growing our city.

This creates a unique challenge for our city, one we've managed with remarkable success by creating new efficiencies, eliminating waste and prioritizing our budgets closing our books with a surplus for the past four years and without a tax increase for the past six.

We've saved the taxpayers \$4.5 million in city payroll without resorting to layoffs or pay cuts and we saved \$15.4 million through bond refinancing. We've cut healthcare costs with our new Employee Health Center, cut our GASB liability by more than half and this year saw Standard & Poor's improve our general obligation (GO) bond rating to "AA+."

That's the highest credit rating we've had in at least 25 years if not the highest in our city's near 230-year history. So, I'd say we've managed things remarkably well and there are some who would be content with that. There are some who would pat themselves on the back, hang up their hats and call it a day. I, however, am not among them.

Don't get me wrong, this is an incredible accomplishment and everyone who worked to make it possible deserves our heartfelt congratulations and our thanks from senior staff, our City Manager, our new CFO, Jeff Palen, and Budget Director, Missy Caughman, to every department head and city employee who has done more with less every time we've asked exceeding our expectations at every turn.

But as proud as we are, we are not satisfied. How can we be? How can we be content with managing the circumstances when we can solve the problem? How can we settle for simply getting by when we could thrive? How can we be satisfied with merely surviving the long cold winter huddled together afraid of the North Wind's howl when we have it within ourselves to shine?

The answer is we can't. If we want to truly become the city we can be we must grow our capital investment tax base. We've begun that process already by increasing annexation efforts and bringing over 180 acres of state owned property back on the tax roll with the Bull Street development. But to really make a difference, to really start reversing that two to one ratio, we must change the way we think.

In short, to find our answer we must literally reach for the stars with a new season of downtown vertical development.

The truth is that one 30-story tower sitting on less than two acres in Downtown Columbia would generate as much if not more property tax revenues as a 150-acre, 600-home subdivision in any neighborhood. Furthermore, it does so at less cost to and burden for our infrastructure.

It's more efficient, it's more profitable and it's greener encouraging foot traffic and public transportation rather than the exhaust filled gridlock of single-car commutes.

That's why, this year, we'll be proposing a series of reforms to that, combined with low interest rates, high occupancy rates and the current Downtown renaissance, will create an environment ripe for vertical development.

Our goal should be encouraging \$1 billion in private investment for vertical development over the next four years and we can start by reducing fees on new construction including eliminating the initial plan review fee as well as the trade permit fee.

This will not only serve as a major incentive to private commercial development that more than makes up for lost one-time fee revenues with ongoing tax revenue, but will do so in a way that also encourages smart development. For example, eliminating the initial plan review fee would be coupled by significantly increasing fees for second and third reviews encourages contractors to get it right the first time saving city resources and taxpayer dollars.

Furthermore, it creates a less confrontational and more collaborative partnership between the city and those looking to invest in the city allowing us to more effectively encourage environmentally friendly sustainable development that not only increases revenue and puts people back to work but improves the quality of life for all Columbians.

You see, as proud as I am – as we all are – of our wide range of accomplishments, we have only just begun to scratch the surface of our potential, only just begun to realize the sheer volume of Columbia's promise, only just begun to truly shine.

I believe we are destined to be a city of ideas. But ideas demand courage. They demand courage because the future scares us and it's easy to give in to that fear, to complain and criticize, to reject an idea for no other reason than because it's not what we're used to, because it's not our idea or just because it's new.

But the bitter truth is that is that, in the grand scheme of things, even the worst big idea is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. Because the idea is born out of an attempt at greatness and the criticism is a defense of mediocrity, because the idea risks our ridicule and our ridicule risks nothing.

The world is often unkind to new talent, new inventions and new ideas. The new needs friends.

Over the past four years we have installed electric car charging pods and expanded our recycling program. We have planted community gardens and thousands of trees. We've improved connectivity, invested in green infrastructure, launched Clean Water 2020 and committed to daylighting Smith Branch and a majority of this council supported the transportation penny revolutionizing public transportation across the region.

Our efforts at supporting sustainability in our government, in our businesses and in our lives have taken us, step by step, to becoming a city known as much for the green of our forests and the rush of our rivers as the bustle and concrete of our sidewalks and boulevards.

Now I want to introduce you to an idea that is more leap forward than step. Tonight, I want to discuss something different.

Every year the City of Columbia pays millions of dollars to ship tons of sewer sludge from our wastewater treatment facility to be buried in landfills in our community. It's inefficient, it's expensive and it's about as far from sustainable as you can get. But, up until now, it's been our only choice.

Well, that's changed.

Tonight I am proud to announce that we have several private sector partners who are ready, willing and able right now to build a facility here in Columbia where they will recycle that sludge to produce a high-quality fertilizer as well as enough compressed natural gas to fuel a fleet of city vehicles and enough electricity to power 500 homes.

This isn't a few hundred gallons of household grease. It's tons of sewer sludge. It is the single most impactful green initiative our city has ever undertaken. What's more it will save tens of millions of taxpayer dollars.

THIS is a new idea. It's time has come and I say let's make it happen NOW!

Isn't that what this job is all about – removing barriers and creating opportunities? If it's not, well it should be because opportunities are far too rare in this life and life is too short to let them pass you by.

And if it ever seems like I'm too eager, that I'm moving too fast or pushing too hard, that's why. Because I know that tomorrow is promised to no one. God gives you only so much time and when it's up, it's up forever.

It's a lesson we've learned far too often this year, a lesson I've learned personally.

Today as I think about nine homicides this year in the City of Columbia, I think about nine families going through what we have: the shock and sadness, the confusion and doubt, the dull pain in your chest that won't go away no matter what you do no matter how hard you cry or pray or try to forget.

Nine families going through that same thing and all of a sudden condolences just don't seem to be enough.

Now, let me be clear, Chief Santiago and the men and women of the Columbia Police Department have done a truly outstanding job. Their clearance rates for murder, robbery and burglary are all far above the national average. Crime is down in nearly every single category this year and in most it's down double digits. Violent crime is down 25% for the year and total crime is at its lowest point in FIVE YEARS.

Let me repeat that, total crime is at its lowest point in FIVE YEARS! Chief, that's an outstanding job. Why don't you and every police officer here with us tonight, stand and be recognized. You deserve it.

I am so proud of what they've done. But you know and I know that crime doesn't begin or end with the police department.

Too often we've read about crimes that never should have happened because the career criminals that committed them should have been behind bars.

Too often these men and women risk their lives to take these violent criminals off our streets only to see them back out the next day.

Too often it feels like we're fighting a losing battle and I think it's time that changed.

Last month, the Mayor's Panel on Violent Crime and Bond Reform, led by former SLED Chief Robert Stewart, issued their report outlining a series of steps we need to take to stem that tide including passing state legislation for comprehensive bond reform.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that I will push Council to adopt every single recommendation they made including a resolution to urge our state legislators to make bond reform a true priority and pass the bill immediately – not next year or in five years but right now, this session, today!

This isn't a game. People are dying and it's time to stand up and take action.

This is a community problem and requires a community solution. We must come together strengthening and leveraging our existing partnerships and creating new ones to form a truly united front demonstrating to those who would threaten our security that we are stronger than they are, stronger than they ever will be and we will prevail.

In that spirit, we have been working with our partners at the University of South Carolina and on projects like promoting and securing Five Points, recognizing that district's unique character and challenges, to put forth a series of unique solutions which include:

- Fostering increased collaboration across jurisdictions including the Columbia Police Department, the Richland County Sheriff's Department and University Police that puts more officers on the street and leverages those officers more strategically,
- Incorporating a clean and safe initiative similar to the yellowshirts that have proven to be a useful, non-law enforcement tool designed to improve quality of life,
- Instituting a monthly meeting between the city, local merchants, bar and restaurant owners and university officials to ensure that we are meeting our safety goals together, and
- Establishing a weekend pedestrian district in Five Points that will enhance both safety and business in the district and will include a comprehensive and inclusive parking and transportation plan.

I am confident that Five Points will thrive under our collective leadership and that this strategy will serve as the first step in a new spirit of collaboration which will become a model citywide.

We must be unrelenting and unapologetic in pursuing, apprehending and prosecuting the violent repeat offenders terrorizing our community. But we also have to realize that locking everyone up isn't going to solve the underlying problem facing our society.

The same way being healthy doesn't just mean not being sick, it's not enough to fight a war on crime and ignore the fields of desperation, deprivation, poverty and hopelessness that feed their armies. It's not enough, not when you can do more. Not when every child deserves a chance to shine.

I love my children and I worry for them as any parent would. But my children are privileged.

They benefit from all the wonders of this 21st century. They live in an upper-middle income home. They have two doting parents, four loving grandparents – who, admittedly, are sometimes pathetic pushovers – but would sacrifice anything to give them every opportunity to live up to their God-given potential.

I don't worry about the Benjamin girls.

But I remain resolved in my firm belief that every child... **EVERY CHILD**...in this city deserves those same opportunities.

Every child, regardless of race, heritage, ethnicity or creed – regardless of what social status they belong to or what zip code they were born in – every child deserves to be loved, to be cared for, to be engaged and encouraged, challenged and protected.

Every child deserves the chance to shine.

But right now, that's not the case. Right now our children are struggling and we must do more.

I must admit that I am personally and particularly concerned with the status of the young black men in our community and I believe that, together, we can develop new strategies and solutions that put children who may fail on the path to success and children and children who do succeed on the path to being superstars enriching this great city for generations to come.

I want our city working with business leaders, established non-profits, academia and yes the church to develop a Center of Excellence for Black Male Achievement so Columbia can establish itself as a model for thoughtful solution-oriented ideas that improve the lives of all of our children.

Children don't fail en masse. Adults fail children en masse.

The importance of faith-based partnerships in this endeavor, led by individuals like Dr. Wendell Estep of First Baptist Columbia and Dr. Charles Jackson of Brookland Baptist, cannot be overstated.

It cannot be overstated because I firmly believe that many of our children are fighting diabolic forces and you cannot fight the devil with manmade tools.

We need men and women of God actively involved in this discussion because we are fighting for our children's souls, for the future of our city, and we can't afford to wait.

I don't know, maybe they're right. Maybe I'm trying too hard. Maybe I'm thinking too big. Maybe I'm just a dreamer.

But I'll tell you what I do know. I know that we can't be content with recruiting new jobs when we can create entire new industries. We can't settle for lowering unemployment by fractions of a percent here and there when we can cut it in half or wipe it away completely. We can't be satisfied with a city that's just safer than we were when we deserve to be truly safe - safety that doesn't require provision, qualification and doesn't need statistics to prove it.

I'm talking about changing the entire way we look at success and that requires that we open our eyes wide to the opportunities before us.

Pearl Buck once wrote, "I believe in human beings, but my faith is without sentimentality. I know that in environments of uncertainty, fear, and hunger, the human being is dwarfed and shaped

without his being aware of it, just as the plant struggling under a stone does not know its own condition. Only when the stone is removed can it spring up freely into the light.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I say it's time to remove that stone. I say it's time to grasp our destiny with both hands. I say it's time to shine.

Today at City Council we discussed just the kind of opportunity I've been talking about: building a year-round, multi-use sports and entertainment venue that would, among other things, host a Minor League Baseball team.

Now, understand what we're talking about here, because this is about more than baseball.

It's about embarking on the largest new economic development north of Elmwood in 40 years.

It's about bringing half a million people Downtown every year. That's more than three times the impact of the convention center.

It's about new shoppers and diners booking 35,000 room nights and spending \$201 million in our local hotels and restaurants.

It's about creating more than 1,600 new jobs and \$192 Million in new wages on top of the thousands of new jobs and \$1.2 billion economic impact already projected for Bull Street.

And it's about generating \$18.5 million annually in new tax revenues to help support vital services like our police and fire departments.

Most importantly it's about creating a community asset unlike anything we've ever known.

Imagine a place where a family can afford a night out together for forty dollars or less.

Imagine a father reconnecting with his son over a mid-summer double header or cub scouts camping out in the outfield.

Imagine professional sports supporting our local charities and non-profits and children who've never imagined a world beyond hardship and deprivation finding their heroes on the field of play instead of the street corner.

Imagine a new state of the art venue for art, concerts, business conferences and community events that compliments the surrounding neighborhoods instead of disrupting it and imagine doing it all without having to raise taxes, increase fees or pay for ongoing maintenance and operations.

That's the kind of project we're talking about and the opportunity we've been waiting for.

The city we are today is only a pale reflection of the city we can be...are meant to be: a city of ideas – new and bold, reaching past the boundaries of our preconception and conventional wisdom to break new ground and find it fertile.

Ideas that spark and inspire, that spin like centrifuges and rise like towers of glass and steel reaching to the sky.

Ideas that speak to that undeniably American impulse within us all driving us to explore and discover, innovate, invent and achieve.

There will always be those who disapprove and decry, who complain and criticize, who say we're doing too much or moving too fast. There will always be those who bluster and blow with the cold north wind of negativity and doubt.

This is nothing new.

Nearly a century ago they argued that Columbia was too small, too backwoods and too Southern to train the soldiers our nation needed to fight the Great War bearing down in 1917. But today Fort Jackson stands as the United States Army's flagship training facility and a source of pride for our city, our state and our nation.

40 years ago they said we didn't need a zoo, didn't want a zoo and couldn't afford a zoo. But where would we be today without Riverbanks Zoo and the more than 1 million visitors it brings to our community every single year?

What if the old Columbia Mills Building had never become the State Museum, if the Columbia Museum of Art had never moved to Main Street and if EdVenture had never been built at all?

Imagine our great city with no Interstate highways, no Lake Murray, no Finlay Park and no University of South Carolina.

It's like trying to imagine Charleston without the harbor, Greenville without the mountains or Myrtle Beach with no ocean because they are so intertwined with what this city is, who we are, that separating the two is unimaginable. But it all began with an idea, some small spark of creativity nurtured by the warm breath of hope.

That is who we are, a city of ideas born by hope and in that we become so much more than we were ever meant to be, more than some compromise between the Lowcountry and Upstate, a Capital for travel convenience, but rather an idea, an inspiration and an act of faith, a promise of something greater waiting just over the horizon if we can just find it within ourselves to believe.

"Our deepest fear," Marianne Williamson once wrote, "is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?"

*"Actually, who are you not to be?
You are a child of God.
Your playing small does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.
We are all meant to shine, as children do.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."*

So let the doubters doubt. Let the critics criticize. Let the naysayers say no.

We choose instead to believe. We choose to dream big and act boldly. We choose to roll away the stone and spring freely into the light.

Let the North Wind blow as strong as it may. We choose to shine.

Thank you. May God bless you. And may God continue to bless the great City of Columbia.

####