



Press Release

We Are Columbia

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NEWS RELEASE

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Mayor Benjamin Delivers 2015 State of the City Address

COLUMBIA, SC – Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin delivered his 2015 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 milestones and accomplishments in the areas of Public Safety, Budget and Downtown Redevelopment.

2015 State of the City Address Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Mayor Steve Benjamin January 20, 2015 – Columbia, SC

Before I begin, I need to take a moment to recognize a colleague without whom this event would be impossible. She organizes it every year.

Chanique Belton first came to us as a student in our Mayor's Fellows program. She was a Veteran of the United States Army and a single mother whose attention to detail, unrivaled work ethic and sincere passion for service quickly made such an impression that, as soon as her fellowship was over, we hired her to serve in the Mayor's Office as my Executive Assistant full-time.

Since then, she has proven herself invaluable to our office. She manages my schedule, despite my best efforts to ruin it, keeps me on task, organizes major events like tonight and was even studying to earn her Masters of Public Administration all while raising five children.

This past November after helping to organize our great breakfast to raise funds for the Palmetto Health Foundation and Bosom Buddies, Chanique was diagnosed with breast cancer – yet she has refused to let her diagnosis define her – meeting her sickness and her treatment with the characteristic determination, honesty and courage that makes her an inspiration to all of us.

Chanique, we just want to say thank you. We love you. And we're here for you.

Let me also take this opportunity to thank my colleagues: Sam Davis, for your experience and wisdom; Tameika Isaac-Devine, for your open mind and open heart; Leona Plough, for your commitment and your courage; Brian DeQuincey Newman, for your energy and vision; Cameron Runyan, for your passion and tenacity; and Moe Baddourah...well, I'll just say thank you.

No. Moe, thank you for your criticism, because we can only make good decisions as a group if we are willing to challenge each other every day through constructive dialogue, discussion and yes disagreement.

We must always be thankful that we live in a Democracy where minority opinions will always be valued and all viewpoints are respected.

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

Earlier today a friend of mine gave me some advice: to be charming, to be inspiring and to be brief because even absolute failure in the first two can be redeemed with success in the third.

I also heard that there's a fella in Washington giving a speech later on tonight so, with that in mind, let's get to it.

Dr. Madden, let me thank you for joining us, for your service as our city's first Poet Laureate and for your words this evening. The arts are empowering and our success as a city that values art, culture and history will define us for generations as a phoenix that, 150 years after being burned to the ground, has risen from the ashes to become the most talented, educated and entrepreneurial city in America.

Our poet laureate is absolutely right, there is a story.

For my part, it's a story of blessings because, you see, my life has been touched by God.

I married DeAndrea, the most remarkable woman I've ever known who loves me, supports me and gave me two beautiful children Bethany and Jordan Grace who adore me.

I have a first class education, professional success and the honor to serve the city that I love.

I've never had to struggle with hunger, chronic disease or debilitating injury. I've never slept out in the cold with nowhere to turn. I've never gone to jail and I've never had to fight a war that I didn't believe in.

And if I ever did find myself faced with an obstacle I could not overcome alone, the arms that first bore me are never more than 25 minutes from my front doorstep.

I was raised by Sam and Maggie Benjamin the most wonderful parents a person could ever ask for and a host of loving relatives here today like my in-laws the Gists – who worked harder than any two people, should ever have to so that I could have the kinds of opportunities they could have never dreamed of.

Yes, my life has been blessed and, odds are, if you're here tonight, so has yours.

But what about all of those who couldn't be here tonight, who work two and three jobs just to put a roof over their heads and food on the table and can't take time off to come listen to a speech or speak at a Council meeting or even help their kids with their homework?

What about those men, women and children who have no one to turn to, no one to support them?

What about those families who work hard every single day but never seem to get ahead?

What about the children raised in an environment that teaches them that you'll never be more than dirt poor so you might as well give up now.

You see, in this story, for every one of us blessed with all the benefits of 21st century America – "My country tis of thee, sweet land of liberty of thee I sing" – there are countless others for whom fortune has been far less kind, whose American Dream will never come true because for far too many of our families

a future of economic security and prosperity is simply too far out of reach, mired in a reality of back breaking generational poverty.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I come to you tonight to answer a simple question: Who will stand for them?

I say, "We will...We must!"

So let us say it together. Let us make this promise today – Columbia's Promise – that if you're willing to work hard, contribute to your community and respect others you deserve a quality education, a good job and a living wage; that your circumstance should not determine your success and that, regardless of whatever past sins you carry with you, if you're looking to change your life for the better, we will do everything within our power to help you reach your goals.

I'm talking about a bold vision to secure the real needs of ALL Columbians and while this may seem overly ambitious to some, I point to the many great things we have accomplished together already.

We've built dozens of new homes in Burton Heights, completed major infrastructure improvements across the city and funded new park improvements at Hyatt, Hampton, Southeast and Finlay Parks, expanded our youth sports program and committed to a new, state of the art Greenview Park Pool.

We've cut total crime by over 11% and violent crime nearly 33% over the past four years including double digit drops in Motor Vehicle Theft, Burglary and Aggravated Assault this year alone and even when the budget was at its tightest, we found ways to make new, historic investments in Public Safety including \$4.5 million in new funds this year alone put towards hiring additional personnel, putting more patrol cars on the street and completing long term projects like a new burn building, the Busby Street Facility and Resource Center and replacing the old Olympia Fire Station.

We've secured years of budget surpluses, cut the Water & Sewer Fund Transfer by another 5.9% this year, cut the Hospitality Tax Transfer by 14.4% restoring it to the arts as promised, increased Hospitality Tax allocations by more than \$1.4 million and received the "Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting" for the first time in nearly a decade.

Today North Main Plaza is fully occupied for the first time in its history and, if that wasn't enough to get excited about, this past fall we got word that we've received a Department of Transportation T.I.G.E.R. grant which, combined with the Transportation Penny, translates into a \$40 million dollar investment in North Columbia helping bring new infrastructure and economic activity to that area and create a truly seamless city for all.

Right now Metro Unemployment is at 5.9%. That's a nearly 40% decline over the past five years and there are enough jobs available right now to bring us close to 2% Unemployment if not lower.

The State of our City isn't just strong, it's explosive.

Working with partners like Hardball Capital, Hughes Development, Contract Construction, Enviro AgScience, Construction Dynamics, DESA, Barton Malow, Spirit Communications and a diverse team of mentors, protégés and minority contractors, earlier this month we broke ground on Spirit Communications Park, a world-class, state-of-the-art multi-use sports and entertainment venue expected to bring half a million new visitors downtown every year and help generate thousands of new jobs.

Working in partnership with organizations like The Animal Mission, The Humane SPCA, Pawmetto Lifeline and the NOMA Bark Park, our aggressive spay and neuter program has provided over 25,000 spay/neuters vouchers helping cut intake at our Animal Shelter by 14% as we march towards becoming a no-kill shelter.

And thanks to a new partnership our city's environmental quotient has reached a new high, I'm proud to say that by this time next year your old blue 18-gallon recycling bin will be replaced with a new 96-gallon roll carts giving us the potential to increase recovered recycling materials by 500%.

We're talking about 100,000 metric tons of CO2 saved over ten years and hundreds of thousands of tax dollars saved every year thanks to Curbside Value Partnership's Recycling Partnership.

So let me take this opportunity to recognize everyone who made this important project possible.

Please stand so we can say thank you.

We've done great things in this city because, time and again, we have chosen to lead, because we believe in Columbia, because we see what is possible and because it is the right thing to do.

We chose to lead in August when we passed our resolution welcoming unaccompanied immigrant and refugee children and calling on local, state and federal officials to enact comprehensive immigration reform because our city was founded in the hope that oppressed of every land might find a refuge under the wings of Columbia.

We chose to lead because it was the right thing to do.

We chose to lead in March when we signed the Civility Pledge because democracy is about respecting each other as citizens, putting the common good before our personal ambitions. It's about recognizing that whether we like it or not we're all in this together and building our collective future is more important than winning an argument.

We chose to lead because it was the right thing to do.

And we chose to lead this past November when we became the first city in South Carolina to extend full employment benefits to same-sex couples because we believe in equality. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere and maybe a piece of paper isn't going to change that but it's a good place to start.

We chose to lead because it was the right thing to do.

We chose to lead and today we have the first Homeless Court in all of South Carolina.

We chose to lead and now the common sense bond reform we fought for is finally the law helping shut the revolving door on repeat violent offenders.

We chose to lead in raising police salaries and we chose to lead with Justice for All because training, diversity, accountability and engagement aren't the exception here, they're the rule.

Nobody told us we had to. Nobody mandated that our officers receive additional training in cultural sensitivity and conflict de-escalation. Nobody told us we had to recruit more minority officers to make our police force as racially and culturally diverse as our city. Nobody forced us to issue body cameras to all uniformed officers, establish a citywide Human Rights Commission, appoint civilian representation to our Internal Affairs Review Board or publicly publish an annual report of all Internal Affairs complaints.

Nobody forced us to record all violent crime suspect interviews. In fact, most law enforcement agencies in this state don't. But we do, not because we have to but because it's the right thing to do...period.

There are no stronger advocates for our police officers than Chief Skip Holbrook and Deputy Chief Melron Kelly. But they also hold their officers to the highest standards of professionalism and respect and they will hold anyone who falls short of that standard accountable. That's what we expect and, with them at the helm, we will continue to lead all American cities in that direction.

You see, great cities aren't born; they're made.

Brick by brick, block by block, great cities are built to become something more than a loose conglomeration of neighborhoods and businesses, something more than the sum of their parts...something great.

In an article last month, Warren Bolton from The State newspaper wrote:

"Columbia doesn't have to be Charlotte or Atlanta or Greenville to become a thriving metropolitan city that competes with any rivals in the Southeast — or even beyond. What it needs is vision, leadership and private investors willing to spend their own money even as local governments and other public entities, led by the city of Columbia, provide reasonable incentives and regulations that foster quality, responsible development.

"If you've been watching in recent years, then you know those pieces have been coming together.

"And if you're among those who've been waiting for Columbia to come into its own, wait no longer. This city is about to explode with growth."

Rev. Bolton is right. The moment we've been waiting for is right now. But waiting didn't get us here.

We're not growing by chance, we're growing by choice. And that makes all the difference.

In less than four years we've seen over \$1 Billion in new downtown investment.

Think about that for a second...over \$1 Billion in less than four years. And that's not even counting Transportation Penny projects expected to generate \$1.2 Billion in total economic impact and open the riverfront for the first time in our city's history.

That's not counting the hundreds of millions of dollars we have invested and continue to invest on restoring and improving our water, sewer and stormwater infrastructure though we must do more to protect our three beautiful rivers and it's time for this Council to step up.

And that's not counting Columbia Common which right now has 41 signed letters of intent from major retailers and is projected to create over 11,020 new permanent jobs; \$581 million in new annual wages and another \$1.2 Billion in new economic activity.

Over \$1 Billion in less than four years...That's not an accident.

These projects didn't just happen. Working with the private and public sectors in a business friendly environment we made them happen.

Creatively leveraging parking assets helped us close the deal with The Hub worth \$80 million and bring Agape's headquarters to Main Street.

Partnering with the University of South Carolina, IBM and Flour, we were able to secure a new Center for Applied Research and create hundreds of jobs with annual salaries starting at \$50,000.

Our façade programs leveraged roughly \$745K in federal CDBG funds to create nearly \$7 million in private investment for Main and North Main Street and now we're ready to expand that effort to Two Notch Road.

Famously Hot New Year and Main Street Ice have coupled with the Soda City Market, Main Street Crit and our expanded Public Art initiative to reintroduce Downtown Columbia to countless families, individuals and potential investors.

Five years ago our outdated zoning laws didn't even allow modern private student housing in the city. But we changed those laws and created new incentives and now we have five private student housing projects right downtown totaling nearly a quarter of a billion dollars in new investment.

Great cities aren't born; they're made and we choose to be great. We choose to lead.

We've done great things in Columbia. Now I ask you to help me do even more.

I ask you to help me fulfill Columbia's Promise because right now in Columbia over 24% of our fellow citizens live in poverty and nearly a quarter of them are children.

Right now a person making minimum wage in Columbia has to work two full-time jobs just to afford the average single bedroom apartment, a single mother making minimum wage spends roughly a third of her annual income just on childcare, and a student at the University of South Carolina working full-time earning minimum wage spends two thirds of his annual gross salary on tuition alone in just two semesters.

Right now 200,000 of our working men and women in South Carolina earning less than 100% of the federal poverty level, including tens of thousands in Columbia, have no access to healthcare because our state refuses to expand Medicaid.

I'm asking you to help me change that. I'm asking you to help me write a new story because this is America and in the richest, most powerful nation in the history of the world you shouldn't have to work full-time just to raise your kids in poverty.

I'm asking you to help me write a new story for folks like Shakaya McCoy and her family caught in an unwinnable situation.

You see, no matter how hard Kaya's husband works, with two kids at home and a third on the way, it never seems to be enough. And when Kaya tried to help the family get ahead by going back to work herself, she learned the same hard lesson too many of our families have had to learn.

Forty hours a week at \$7.25 an hour doesn't even cover the cost of childcare.

She can't work because she can't afford childcare and she can't afford childcare because she can't work.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have done great things in this city.

We have cut crime and grown the economy, funded public infrastructure and protected public funds.

But if we can secure over \$1 Billion in new downtown investment in less than four years, but can't do something to help folks like Shakaya McCoy and her family, then we don't deserve to be here.

This is why we were elected. It's our job, it's our duty and, most importantly, it's the right thing to do.

To build a great city we must build our people.

So, while the debate over raising the federal minimum wage continues in Washington, we're taking action. Any day now we expect to receive recommendations from our Citywide Comp & Class study to raise wages for our city employees and, in the meantime, I'm asking my colleagues on City Council to support our request to raise the minimum hourly wage for our city employees to exceed the proposed \$10.10 threshold.

Furthermore, today I'm asking local and state leaders throughout the Midlands to join us because roughly 55,000 men and women work for the City, Richland County and Richland School Districts One and Two,

state government here in Metro Columbia. Imagine the impact if only a fraction of those men and women, those at the lowest end of the pay scale, saw a meaningful raise this year.

Imagine what that would do for families across our city and beyond.

That is what's possible. That is Columbia's Promise.

Imagine if we took the success we've seen in student housing and applied those same incentives to affordable housing. I'm talking about working with developers, non-profits, contractors and great partners like the Federal Home Loan Bank of Atlanta generating \$100 million in new privately developed affordable housing developments across the city, in all four council districts so that all of our neighborhoods see the benefits.

Imagine the burden that would lift from the shoulders of our working families. Imagine the veteran who went from serving in an Iraqi desert to sleeping on a bench and being able to help him rebuild his life instead of just trying to survive.

More shelters aren't the answer to homelessness; affordable housing is and it's time we did something about it.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Imagine if we stepped up for folks like Dee Albritton and her program Fast Forward who over the past six months alone placed 50 homeless veterans in new jobs. That's roughly two jobs a week including a 28 year-old soldier home from Iraq with nowhere to go and nowhere to turn.

Apart from the Army he'd only ever had one other job and his lack of experience – coupled with the inherent trauma of returning to the real world from a war zone – was just too much for him and when his muster out pay ran out, he ended up on the street.

It was just bad luck, bad timing and a bad situation but when he walked into Fast Forward and met Dee, all of that changed. All it took was a little time, a lot of training and a new focus and she got him a job at the Marriott on Hampton Street where he quickly worked his way from part-time to full-time and now he's been named employee of the month twice.

Now Dee doesn't have a lot of money or a large staff. Most of what she's able to do she does through donations, volunteers and one grant. But she gets her guys Work Keys certified, gets them real world training, transportation, clean clothes and a haircut then she gets on the phone and gets them the interview but, after that, it's up to them.

It's not fancy. It's not expensive. But it works. Time and again we see miracles. There's just no other way to say it.

Now imagine the possibilities if we could get her operating to scale.

Imagine if she had the resources to place 500 vets instead of 50.

Imagine the good we will do by working with all of our partners like Fast Forward, MIRCI, Salvation Army, Transitions, The United Way, Christ Central, the Oliver Gospel Mission and so many others on thoughtful results oriented approaches to meeting the needs of our underserved and cast aside.

That's what we're talking about today. That's Columbia's Promise supporting organizations like Fast Forward that are making a difference in our community. Supporting organizations like the Columbia Urban League whose Summer Work Experience Leadership Program last year helped 250 students, our children, find summer jobs, giving them a vision of the world beyond their neighborhood and giving them the tools and experience they need to build a better life than the one they were born into.

Imagine a public private community partnership that raised that number from 250 to 1,000 jobs this summer.

Imagine the difference that would make to children, some of whom have only ever known poverty and deprivation, kids inches away from a life of gangs and drugs and violence, inches from making the kind of mistake that can turn you into a statistic.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Today I'm also proud to announce a new trial partnership with Spirit Communications to provide free Main Street Wi-Fi access from the State House to Washington Street and, if successful, even further.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Now imagine if we took that initiative citywide. Imagine tearing down the digital divide that separates too many of our children from the combined knowledge of the world's libraries.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Imagine if we made education a true priority in this city, if we embraced the philosophy that you can't be a great city without great schools and invested in initiatives to support Richland One in its efforts to attract and retain the best teachers with low interest home loans if you reside in our city.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Imagine leveraging new apprenticeship initiatives to provide hands-on training in high-tech industries and skilled trades to retrain our existing workforce and give students the head-start they need to thrive in the rapidly changing knowledge economy.

That is Columbia's Promise.

Imagine what's possible.

That's Columbia's Promise.

Imagine becoming an entrepreneur without a degree or past experience.

Imagine being equipped with skills and training to make you an effective and fully competent business owner. Skills and training that will give you the leg-up you need to bring yourself and your family out of poverty and into a self-sufficient and independent lifestyle.

Imagine perfecting the craft of owning and operating your business and it becoming your own.

Sound absurd? Not even close.

In cities like ours all across America, visionary business and community leaders have created a cooperative business model that supplies unemployed, underemployed and even undereducated citizens with the necessary skills to not only run a business, but to be successful in doing so.

These co-ops create business ventures in industries specific to the strengths of the city. Areas like construction, laundries, grocery stores and franchise operations are used to grow new businesses and create jobs for those who need them while servicing the needs of the city.

This isn't about giving someone a job. It's about giving them a future. It's about creating new wealth in communities that have only ever known poverty. It's about creating a sense of pride and accomplishment

that a parent can pass down to his or her children, creating a tradition of achievement that infects generations to come.

This isn't about giving someone a job; it's about fundamentally changing their lives and the lives of the families.

That is Columbia's Promise.

It's happening all across America and it's time we made it happen here.

That's the story I want to be a part of. That is Columbia's Promise.

We can do it, you know. It's up to us. We just have to choose to do the right thing, choose to lead, choose to be great.

As President Kennedy once said, "All this will not be finished in the first one hundred days. Nor will it be finished in the first one thousand days; nor in the life of this Administration; nor even perhaps in our lifetime on this planet. But let us begin."

I don't expect this to be easy, nothing worth doing ever is. But let us begin right here, right now.

Because, in this story, there are too many families suffering, too many children going to school hungry, too many mothers for whom breast cancer also means bankruptcy, too many of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, friends and neighbors living without hope, without a future, without Columbia's Promise.

So let us say it together. Let us make this promise today – Columbia's Promise – that if you're willing to work hard, contribute to your community and respect others you deserve a quality education, a good job and a living wage; that your circumstance should not determine your success and that, regardless of whatever past sins you carry with you, if you're looking to change your life for the better, we will do everything within our power to help you reach your goals.

Who will stand for them?

I say, "We will."

150 years ago this city was burned to the ground. But we have risen from the ashes and we will continue to rise.

Because we are a great city. We are Columbia. And our time is now.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the great City of Columbia.

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