

## State of the City Address

Given by Mayor Andrea Oakes, July 22, 2021

I began as Mayor in July of 2020, which was a very difficult time for our community and the world due to the pandemic. Everything seemed to be operating differently, budgets were - and still are -strained, and there was a heightened sense of unease. But Stauntonians tapped into our reserves of imagination and resilience, and pulled together as one to get through the challenges.

When City Hall and other facilities closed, we found a creative way to continue to communicate personally with the community members to keep them informed of city programs and services. Produced in-house by city staff, a series of videos featured elected officials, City Staff and community partners.

We also launched Shop and Dine Out in Downtown, which continues to be very popular.

We distributed over \$4.3 million dollars in CARES funding to schools, non-profits, small businesses, the jail, and others in the community to address the pandemic and offer some relief through small business and non-profit grants and recovery kits, rent/mortgage assistance, gas and electric utilities assistance, childcare assistance, mental health services, and temporary shelter. We could not have done this without our partners at the Staunton City School Board, Staunton Economic Development Authority, SAW MSA Recovery Task Force, Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge, Augusta County, and others.

It was truly a demonstration of how Staunton pulls together in times of need. We had the opportunity to demonstrate those qualities yet again when Staunton experienced two significant floods in our downtown area. The community rallied around those who were impacted, and again, Staunton kept going.

We witnessed significant collaboration among Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge, Staunton Downtown Development Association, Shenandoah Community Capital Fund, and the City. Damage assessment services were provided for businesses and residents. Public Works staff offered extra refuse and large item collection, as well as sandbag distribution. Donation sites were established at the library and downtown to receive cleanup supplies. The landfill opened for additional days and hours to allow debris drop off. And over \$169,000 in flood relief was distributed to small businesses through the Shenandoah Community Capital Fund. An additional \$156,000 was distributed to residents from the Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge. I think all of us can agree that Staunton's true character shone bright during that very challenging time and throughout this past year.

Despite all of these obstacles, we kept a portion of our focus in recovery and continuing our work on the Staunton Crossing Economic Development Business Plan, in an effort to improve the chances of landing a targeted business. No pun intended with the Target business. With three important actions kicking off in the past year: one, the demolition of the existing buildings on the site; two, the design of the primary access road; and, three, leveraging previously procured funds for the demolition to secure additional state funds.

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While phase one of the plan already brings in over a half of a million dollars in taxes during non-COVID years, these items move Staunton Crossing closer to qualifying as a Tier 4 site under Virginia's Business Ready Sites Program, which will make it an even more marketable site, and will further position Staunton as a premier place to bring businesses.

In addition to the movement we saw at Staunton Crossing, we also saw : Noteworthy progress along the Richmond Avenue Commercial Corridor; The completion of the second phase of the Staunton Innovation Hub in downtown; The opening of the Blackburn Spa and Conference Center; The award to homegrown, Ryzing Technologies of funding through the Virginia Jobs Investment Program to expand its operations of textile-based engineering solutions right here in Staunton; and, the award of \$300,000 from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to help assess, clean up and revitalize former industrial and commercial sites in Staunton's West End.

Finally, over the past year, the City continued to work in partnership with the state and region, as well as local organizations such as the Shenandoah Capital Community Fund (formerly Staunton Creative Community Fund), Staunton Downtown Development Association, and Staunton Innovation Hub to support local businesses. So many thanks to those partners in assisting with our efforts.

While tourism was one of the hardest hit industries throughout the pandemic, Staunton remained front of mind for when folks feel safe and ready to travel again. Among others, we were featured in Washingtonian, Strong Towns, Southern Living, USA Today and on MSN and Oprah Daily. Now, you know you have done a good job when Oprah recognizes you.

There were other meaningful accomplishments that should be recognized over the past twelve months. On November 12, 2020, Rita S. Wilson Council Chambers was dedicated in Staunton City Hall. Ms. Wilson, among other accomplishments, served on City Council from 1991 to 2008, as the first African American female to serve on Council, including a stint as Vice Mayor, and on the Staunton School Board from 1985 to 1989. Ms. Wilson served the community with passion and zeal. She was instrumental in the evolution of her alma mater Booker T. Washington High School into a community center. She tackled community problems through her public service, and worked countless hours with numerous charitable and civic organizations. We are proud to acknowledge those many contributions through the dedication of these chambers and remain grateful for all she did for Staunton.

On a sad note, the Staunton City Council lost one of their own, with the passing of past Councilmember Bruce Elder. He fought a courageous battle against cancer. But even during this battle, he worked without end to make Staunton a better place to live for all citizens.

In addition, the Central Avenue streetscape improvement project got started at the end of 2020 and will continue through the summer of 2022. This project will extend the historical character of downtown Staunton, adding the final segment of the unbroken trail of brick sidewalks from Gypsy Hill place all the way to the wharf. The City will also install historic-style streetlights, relocate utilities underground, and repave the roadway. More than 85% of the funding for this project is being provided by federal and state transportation funds, and we look forward with anticipation to its completion.

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In December of 2020, City Council adopted the Staunton Greenways Plan which counters four distinct greenways within the City. The plan will guide construction of additional dedicated paths and infrastructure using a hub and spoke concept with all of the paths originating from downtown and connecting to popular destinations—particularly parks. This plan progresses years of effort of previous Councils and will continue to guide future Councils' strategies for investing in community assets.

We also had the opportunity to welcome U.S. Senator Tim Kaine in early May, where we discussed the challenges of the past year and got to show off a few of our downtown businesses.

Just last month, in June, City Council, School Board and Economic Development Authority came together to discuss how they could work together on a facility need that the school district is facing. Together, they agreed to put together a city-school working group to pursue solutions to these challenges and are already making meaningful progress.

As everyone here likely knows, the city manager is responsible for hiring the majority of the staff at the City of Staunton. However, there are a few positions that City Council appoints directly and we were able to do that twice in the past year. City Attorney, John Blair was brought on board in March of this year, and Clerk of Council Rachael Zinni joined us just last month in June.

The city also appointed two new directors since July of 2020. Jeff Johnston joined us as the Director of Public Works and Michelle Bixler is the new Communications Manager.

Welcome to all of you, as well as the others who have joined the Staunton team!

I'd also like to thank all of our City Staff that retired in the past FY year. We appreciate and thank you for your service to this beautiful city.

And speaking of staff, I want to acknowledge a few of the awards and recognitions received by several of our departments. Commissioners of the Revenue Association of Virginia has awarded accreditation to Staunton's office for upholding the statewide standards of performance and service to community. The Access to Justice Commission of the Supreme Court of Virginia issued a commendation and proclamation acknowledging the hard work of the many civil servants during the pandemic, including the clerk's office, judges, their assistants, sheriff's office, and all other professionals who are dedicated to a functioning court system. The City of Staunton Fire and Rescue Department received a 2020 Governor's Fire Service Award for Outstanding Fire Department Response for its work during the flood on August 8, which included responding to an incredible 89 emergency incidents. The Finance Department received the Government Finance Officers Association Distinguished Budget Award and Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report. In February, Staunton's PSAP, the "911 center," was the fourth locality in the State to complete migration to Virginia's NG911 ESInet and one of less than 10% of PSAP's in the country to migrate to the NG911 I3 standards. In April, the City received a Tree City USA Award marking 25 years as a Tree City USA. In May, Staunton's Water Treatment Plant received a Gold Award for Performance Excellence from the Virginia Department of Health's Office of Drinking Water for exceeding efficiency and

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effectiveness goals that go well beyond the regulatory standards. Also, the Staunton Sheriff's Department was gifted a new Deputy canine puppy named Liberty, as a result of the sad death of Cara.

Excellent work done by all!

I would be remiss if I didn't take a moment right now to send out a huge thank you to all our staff here at the City of Staunton, who have been right here in the thick of it, the entire time. And beyond staff, there have been countless volunteers from the community working with our non-profits and community organizations, and giving their time to boards and commissions. This has been a particularly difficult year, so let us take a moment right now to express our gratitude for all each of you do every day to make our community a better place.

In closing, I would like to take a moment to thank my fellow Council members. While we welcomed three new elected officials to the dais, Councilor Claffey, Councilor Darby, and Vice Mayor Robertson, all of us certainly had our work cut out for us this year. We have each been through these very difficult times alongside our neighbors and friends. I appreciate what each of you bring to this job, and I look forward to working together over this next year with all of my Council members on our common goals for the betterment of Staunton.