

# State of the City Address 2024

**Delivered by Mayor Stephen Claffey**

**March 28, 2024**

To the citizens of Staunton, it is my privilege to be here tonight to do something we haven't done in a few years.

In the name of transparency and openness I think it's important we bring back this annual tradition, updating everyone on the State of the City.

My fellow councilmembers and I, along with all of the great people of Staunton have had a busy 2023, and we have a lot to look forward to this year. However, it's important to note that tonight, we continue to work.

The state of our city is strong, but it doesn't always come easily or without difficult decisions.

Unemployment rates continue trending downward in the Queen City. For the year, the rate sits at 2.6 percent, which is below the state average and slightly lower than last year.

New businesses continue to open their doors across different parts of Staunton and the economy continues to grow. The East end of Staunton continues to develop on both sides of Route 250. Crossing Way, the connector road through Staunton Crossing to Valley Center Drive, will finally be complete this May. This was a VDOT project costing over \$9 million, paid for with State funds. State grants have also been approved for further infrastructure improvements on the property. All of this progress will make the site more attractive and closer to "move-in ready," for the right businesses.

New shops are opening downtown as well, and the fifth season of Shop and Dine Out in Downtown kicks off next Friday.

The growth of restaurants and hotels in the city has also brought in significant revenue from visitors and residents, providing a record more than \$7.5 million in meals and lodging taxes.

As we look back on the numerous accomplishments from 2023, I think it's important to note that some of our biggest successes are only just beginning, and will still require much work.

One of the most comprehensive projects in the works is the Uniontown Neighborhood Action Plan. The plan was developed by city staff and a steering committee of residents to bring back the historically neglected neighborhood. This predominantly African American community, with records dating back to the Reconstruction era, sits primarily vacant and disconnected from the city.

During this year's legislative session, a bill proposed by our local delegates passed unanimously and was signed by the governor, allowing the city to waive utility connection fees. The process continues to move forward with a mass rezoning of the area from industrial use to a newly created residential zoning district.

The city continues to address housing issues. Staunton has a new Housing Planner and Grants Coordinator in the Community Development Department. We continue to partner with the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission with their housing study and the city is working on a more local housing survey to learn what types of assistance the city should offer.

Construction continues on several large projects bringing more than 200 new units to Staunton, many of which are set aside as work-force housing.

We recognize the difficult and important work accomplished by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Commission over the past almost 2 years. At the end of 2023, they presented specific goals and action items to City Council to help make sure Staunton truly lives up to our slogan of, "You belong here." The commission will become a permanent part of the boards and commissions in 2024.

Keeping Staunton residents safe was a top priority in 2023 as well. New creek level monitors and rain gauges that signal flooding were placed around the city and tied to real-time alerts. Every second counts during flash flooding like we saw a few years ago, and instant notifications can save lives and property.

The city rolled out PulsePoint this past year to help save the life of someone in cardiac arrest. Make sure you register for these life-saving apps.

In the next couple years, walking in our beautiful, historic, downtown will be safer and easier than ever. Public Works received official word from VDOT that improvements to 10 downtown intersections are funded, worth more than \$1.1 million.

Revitalizing Staunton's West End continues to be a high priority with the West End Revitalization Plan well under way and completed this summer.

I am excited that the construction of the new Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court in the former Chestnut Hills Shopping Center will help anchor revitalization of the West End. The construction of the new court is a signature project for the city and ground breaking will be within the month.

Many other projects will come online this year.

Stream restoration is underway in Gypsy Hill Park that will help reduce pollution that ultimately makes it to the Chesapeake Bay and help reduce the recurrence of flooding in

the park. The people of Staunton should be proud of the continual updates and maintenance in our parks and their facilities. They are such a beloved part of our city, utilized so frequently by residents and visitors.

The Staunton Public Library continues to shine, and now under a new roof. The library will undergo a needs and space assessment to help with modernization and make the library more functional. This year, the lawn outside of the library will see a facelift, too. Thanks to the Friends of the Staunton Library, a patio and terrace project will get underway this year that will provide tiered seating and more accessible space for outdoor programs.

The direction our city is heading is exciting, and it's not without the hard work of city employees and citizens generous of their time and fundraising for special projects. I would like to thank all of our residents who serve on boards and commissions, guiding the city and helping to make it better and more sustainable for future generations.

Maintaining infrastructure and making sure we have a path forward for the next 10, 20, or 50 years requires work, and in some cases, funding now.

I know our community will rise to the occasion as we can look beyond just what we need right now and anticipate what we'll need down the road.

This year, I know everyone will see the work being done and will be even more proud to call Staunton home.

I'm inspired by the people and growth I see around me and I thank each one of you for making that a reality.

May Staunton continue to be blessed in 2024.