

State of the City Address

Given February 13, 2020 by Mayor Carolyn Dull

Tonight, I'm pleased to reflect on the many accomplishments and actions taken by residents, City staff and City Council to enrich the Queen City over the last year.

Each year, we strive to do better for our community, and 2019 was no exception. Many of you worked together to make improvements, small and large, for our community – from supporting a major renovation our high school to volunteering your time on City board to voicing your thoughts at a City Council meeting — your activism, advocacy, and efforts are vital and appreciated.

It's our collective work that makes it possible for me to report that the state of our City is strong.

- Unemployment in Staunton is currently at 2.3%, which is slightly lower than the rate at this time last year of 2.6%.
- We issued almost 2,500 business licenses last year. Approximately 14% were licenses for new businesses, most of which were small, home-based businesses.
- Visitors and residents alike enjoyed lots of leisure time in Staunton in 2019, providing more than \$5.3 million in revenue from meals and lodging taxes. The two new hotels at Staunton Crossing and the Blackburn Inn have boosted our lodging tax revenue, which increased 39% year over year.
- We adopted a \$120 million budget last spring and maintained an Aa2 bond rating from Moody's Investors Service and an AA rating from Standard and Poors. These ratings show strong creditworthiness.
- We also continue to add to our reserves so that we can be prepared for potential funding challenges.

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As I reflect on 2019, several moments stand out as highlights of the year:

- Renovations of Staunton High School began last summer and are ahead of schedule. If you've driven by the school lately, you can see the progress. It's impressive! Council continues to support investment in our youth and teachers and believes that funding this project is one of the most critical ways to ensure students are prepared for the future.
- City Council expressed its commitment in December to providing matching funds for the development of the Afton Express, a transit line between the Valley and Charlottesville. The bus routes would begin next year and would make four trips each morning and evening between locations in the Valley and Charlottesville, carrying up to 32 passengers for a \$3 fare. We're proud to support this new line as it will serve as another transportation option for people who need to get to work and medical appointments.
- The Talking Book Center at the Staunton Public Library—which serves people who are unable to read standard print materials due to physical disabilities—was named the Sub-regional Library of the Year by the Library of Congress. The national award is a rare honor bestowed on just two libraries in the nation last year. The Center's focused attention on outreach and engagement over the last year earned them the honor.
- We began an informal sister city friendship with Çair, Skopje, North Macedonia with an exchange of visits. The friendship began over the summer after a delegation from North Macedonia visited the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum to recognize President Wilson's contributions to peace for their nation following World War I. They returned last November to experience our local government and participate in a special meeting of City Council. I then visited Çair with a Staunton delegation a couple of weeks later and experienced their local government in action. I'm excited to continue the exchange of ideas and

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cultural experiences in the years to come.

- We wished happy trails to former city manager Steve Owen as he retired last summer and promoted Steve Rosenberg to the position. We also welcomed a new Assistant City Manager, Leslie Beauregard, who left the city of Charlottesville to join us. Staunton is fortunate to have two experienced leaders at the helm to manage city operations and serve our citizens.
- The historic Beverley Hotel reopened as a five-floor apartment complex, bringing new life to the bustling corner of New and Johnson streets. That's one of several buildings that are being revived in our downtown, including the downtown extension of Stuart Hall School on Beverley Street and the Staunton Innovation Hub in the old News Leader building.
- The City again earned recognition as a destination for great food, theater, culture and leisure activities in high-profile publications and on coveted national lists, including Oprah's magazine, Vogue, Southern Living, USA Today, and The Washington Post. We even made Expedia's list as one of the "Best Places to Propose in the U.S." I thought I'd mention that one specifically since tomorrow is Valentine's Day. You're in the right city if you're planning a grand proposal!

I want to take a moment to put a couple of other plans and activities on your radar for the coming months. These activities will play a vital role in the City's growth and direction:

- Staunton became a HUD Entitlement Community last year, which means the City will receive approximately \$354,000 in annual grant funds from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The funds will help us fulfill a variety of community development needs this year and in the coming years, including the revitalization of neighborhoods, economic development, and improvement of community facilities and services,

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particularly for low-to-moderate-income residents. We look forward to sharing that grant funding with several organizations in Staunton that help residents with housing, homelessness, and disability services. The City will use some of the funds for infrastructure projects and public facilities in high-need areas as well.

- A stream running through Gypsy Hill Park will soon be restored to improve water quality, reduce erosion and beautify the area. Keep an eye out for the project to get underway soon.
- City Council released its 10-year vision and priorities for the next three years, and City staff will be working diligently to achieve our priorities throughout 2020 and into 2022. Our vision and priorities focus on economic development; inclusiveness; efficiency and responsiveness as a government; the preservation of our precious and natural resources; sustaining the culture and vibrancy of our City; providing a stellar education for our future leaders; and maintaining a good quality of life for our citizens. I encourage you to visit City Council's page on the City website to learn more and share your thoughts with us.

In closing, I want to express our sincere gratitude to the people who make meaningful contributions to our City every year:

- The many volunteers and organizers of festivals and events who make Staunton a hub for culture and excitement;
- The devoted citizens on boards and commissions who volunteer their time to advise City Council, City departments and area agencies;
- The 450 dedicated City employees and first responders who keep this city going every day;

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- The City employees who retired in 2019 after giving a combined 162 years of service;
- The departments that have earned the City awards and recognition for their excellence and dedication. Among them, our Finance, Parks and Recreation, Police, Fire and Rescue and Public Works departments and staff and the Staunton Public Library.
- And finally, we remember those we lost in 2019, including Joseph White, the storied sports journalist turned owner of Cranberries Grocery & Eatery, who left an indelible mark on our city and our hearts.

Our work is far from done, but I am ever encouraged by the innovative and exciting things happening in Staunton every day. I'm also proud of the friendly and warm spirit that our City continues to demonstrate for visitors and residents alike. Thank you to all who contribute to our charming, artistic and vibrant community. May Staunton continue to be blessed with success in 2020.