



Mayor Joe Riley's State of the City address

Tuesday, January 22, 2008

Charleston Mayor Joe Riley presented his State of the City address tonight in City Hall. Following are his prepared remarks:

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

JOSEPH P. RILEY, JR.

MAYOR, CITY OF CHARLESTON, SC

JANUARY 22, 2008

I am pleased to report to you tonight on the state of your city and I thank you again for giving me the opportunity to serve you as your Mayor. The City of Charleston continues to make remarkable progress thanks to you, the citizens of Charleston and the hard-working and dedicated employees of our City.

Chief Mullen, and our Police Department are making our City safer. Last year serious crime decreased and homicides dropped by 35%. Chief Mullen's organizational changes and additional police officers approved by City Council, mean that we have 45% more police officers patrolling the streets of our City. Last year we had a 40% increase in narcotic arrests. These narcotic arrests not only help reduce the activity of street-level narcotics, but also they allow the confiscation of substantial quantities of illegal contraband, weapons, assets and monies developed by the drug trade, and reduce the violence associated with it. And DUI arrests increased by 207%, making our streets and highways safer.

Our Police Department is using technology to increase their crime-fighting success. City Council has approved \$2.5 million to upgrade our computer-aided dispatch and records management system to immediately give our police officers access to a state-of-the-art dispatch system. What this means is that our police officers will be even more mobile as they, on computers in their cars while out on the street, receive immediate information about crime and suspects thereby being available on the street for rapid response and high visibility. This system will also make it possible for citizens to search crime data via the internet and be more knowledgeable about what is occurring in their neighborhoods.

This year Chief Mullen created Police Department citizens' advisory groups allowing the senior members of our Police Department staff to meet with residents in different parts of our City on a bimonthly basis. These meetings have been extremely successful in building important relationships between our Police Department and our citizens. This past summer

Camp Hope was created by Chief Mullen involving the young people on the East Side. Fifty children from the age of 7 to 12 were given a great opportunity for a fun learning experience and being positively connected with our Police Department.

Our Police Department has increased their involvement in monitoring probation and parole, gang awareness and prevention strategies and drug-demand initiatives, that is catching those who are trying to buy drugs as well as those who are trying to sell them. People should know that whoever they are and wherever they come from, if they are in or come into the City of Charleston expecting to buy drugs, they may end up finding themselves in jail.

We will also begin using video surveillance in certain areas working with our neighborhood residents and City Council.

We work very hard, every day, on public safety. But, one thing we cannot do is pass state laws or make decisions about funding state criminal justice resources that are essential to combat violent crime. For us to make the progress in fighting crime that you, our citizens of Charleston deserve, we need assistance from the General Assembly of South Carolina in terms of strengthening a series of laws that impact our criminal justice system. Last year we developed 18 initiatives that are fair, just, make sense and are tougher on criminals. These changes in our legal system are vitally needed. I urge you to contact your legislators and ask them to support this package.

Also we are working to develop a regional police training academy because there is a lengthy backlog of training slots at the police academy in Columbia. What this means is that when our community and others resolve to invest in public safety by putting more officers on the street, we have to wait to do that because of a lack of capacity at the State's training facility in Columbia. We have proposed a regional training academy working with the law enforcement agencies in this part of South Carolina so that we can have our police recruits receive their training at the local level and be out on the streets patrolling our communities more quickly.

On June 18 we suffered the most disastrous fire in this City's modern history. Nine courageous firefighters lost their lives fighting a huge fire at the Sofa Super Store that, in the words of our post-incident review team was, and I quote, "A high risk property that exceeded the fire suppression capabilities of any fire department."

A community is defined less by the degree of disaster, natural or otherwise, and more by its response. You, the citizens of this community, again distinguished yourselves by your response to this tragic event, just as you did in responding to and recovering from Hurricane Hugo. The outpouring of generosity, support, prayers and encouragement given to the families of these nine heroes and to this community has made this response one of Charleston's finest hours.

The City of Charleston's Fire Department has a proud history, not only being the nation's first, but having courageously protected this City and its citizens. In fact, one of the reasons that this old and historic City is so remarkably intact is the skill, courage, determination and energy of our Fire Department. We challenged the Fire Review Team to guide us in taking this Fire Department to an even higher level of achievement as our way of honoring our nine fallen heroes. We have already begun taking action, pioneering new practices and

procedures, techniques and equipment. Our goal is that when there is another tragic fire in our country, that city's fire department will know to look to Charleston and learn from the nation's oldest and best, the City of Charleston Fire Department.

Last year we opened our City's newest fire station on Bees Ferry Road, insuring even speedier response to fires and other emergencies from our great Fire Department.

Charleston is blessed with sustained economic growth and a beautiful landscape. We must do everything in our power to keep both. Many communities fail in doing that and sacrifice their natural assets for economic growth. It isn't necessary, we will not let that happen in Charleston.

To do this we must plan as a region. I am proud to be chairing our Regional Council of Governments in working with my fellow elected officials and citizens to develop our region's first land-use plan and the first in South Carolina. Working together we can develop a regional vision of how to welcome and sustain our growth and at the same time know that we will be giving our great grandchildren the most beautiful and livable region in our country.

We are wisely using the one-half cent sales tax money to help forever preserve green spaces, large and small. This is a small but very important one near Ellis Creek on James Island. We acquired this piece of land with beautiful live oaks and azaleas, saved it from being developed, preserving for all future generations. And nearby, along Ellis Creek, a fishing and crabbing dock will be constructed. Also, on James Island we are working with the school district to acquire land to connect the James Island Recreation Center to the James Island Charter High School to allow more green space and recreation fields for the school and just as important to enable the high school, in time to build a new school building for its students. Similarly, this tract of land on Woodland Road off of Highway 61 is being acquired for a small neighborhood park, forever preserving it and giving nearby neighborhoods a community park.

On a much larger scale is Long Savannah, where a combined city and county park will encompass 1,800 acres creating a permanent urban growth boundary protecting forever the Rantowles Creek Watershed and giving the citizens of our County one of the most beautiful county parks in America, as well as citizens of adjacent neighborhoods wonderful recreation facilities. These two parks will form an extraordinarily large and beautiful conservation edge for the Long Savannah community that will be the finest example in America of wise community planning and placemaking. Here will be a series of neighborhoods connected to parks with bike and pedestrian access, a small town center, schools and more. Also, the first house in this wonderful new place will be occupied only after \$15 million of road and highway improvements are made at the developer's expense, including an extension of the Glen McConnell Parkway and much more.

And nearby, in the Grand Oaks neighborhood, the new Bees Landing Recreation facility will soon be under construction. Ballfields, tennis courts, gym and other facilities will serve the families at this beautiful and growing part of our City.

The City's new Preservation Plan has been completed. We look forward to implementing this plan to guide this City and its citizens as we increasingly preserve and protect the extraordinary treasure which is Charleston.

On Johns Island, our commitment must be to preserve the character and very special sense of place of this beautiful, historic sea island. This past year, the citizens of Johns Island and the City together created a plan for Johns Island that reconfirms the fact that only a small portion of Johns Island will be developed at suburban densities and the area that is developed will be done so in a very careful and thoughtful manner that connects neighborhoods and enhances the beauty of Johns Island.

On another island in our City is the growing community of Daniel Island. Here several parks have been and will be added to the City's public realm. The residents will soon be meeting with the designers of Governor's Park, to further expand the recreational complex that includes the Daniel Island Tennis Center. Not far away the design of the Waterfront Park will expand waterfront access, include a new marina and be a beautiful and inspirational place for citizens of Daniel Island and the region. A new park and recreation facility has just been completed behind the Daniel Island Elementary School and new tennis facilities are underway as well. Here is the wonderful park and playground of Etiwan Park in the Center of Daniel Island just across from the Bishop England High School and last year Smythe Park was opened with its beautiful lake and actively used playground.

We want to continue to make more and more of our community accessible to pedestrians and cyclists. The West Ashley Greenway was extended this past year and the extension of the West Ashley Bikeway down to the Ashley River is under construction. The opening of the Ashley River Road Bike and Pedestrian trail connected neighborhoods, schools and a church. This improvement was carefully designed to weave through the tree-lined edge of this historic road and now is so wonderfully occupied with people walking, jogging and riding their bikes. There is also a plan for a 22-mile system of connected bike and pedestrian trails west of the Ashley. The new East Bay Bike Path is now under construction and will extend the wonderful bike and pedestrian facility of the Cooper River Bridge down East Bay to Chapel Street.

One of our City's oldest parks, Hampton Park, had its fitness trail renovated this year, a wonderful place to enjoy the beauty of this 55-acre park and get in even better shape at the same time. Another venerable city playground was renovated this year, Hazel Parker, on East Bay Street. There is often a beautiful sight of infants being swung and kids playing ball, families playing tennis, and so much more. And the City's newest square, Morris Square, opened this year as a part of the innovative and certain-to-be national award-winning beautiful infill development.

On a much larger scale, but certain to be nationally award winning as well is the infill development of Magnolia. This once polluted industrial area will see its redevelopment begun this year. Eventually 10,000 people will live there with a range of housing and will include affordable, infill commercial development, waterfront access and several public parks including a 17-acre recreational facility.

This year we will complete the design for Concord Park, a beautiful park near the Aquarium Wharf district.

And we are adding two wonderful new waterfront access opportunities connecting Brittlebank Park with the Bristol Marina and a beautiful park at the end of Charlotte Street that will also commemorate this City's Irish heritage.

These are a lot of parks, playgrounds, recreation facilities, pedestrian and bicycle lanes and planning initiatives. That is exactly how we will give future generations a place as beautiful and livable as we found it.

We need to strive to do more for our community's children and there is one thing you can do right now. Tomorrow call or write your legislator and ask them to fully fund four-year kindergarten right now. We must stop having children enter the first grade not ready to learn.

And of course there are many other ways that we can help our community's children. Like what Hands On Charleston did in providing volunteers for our First Day Festival where over 7,000 parents, children and family members came to celebrate the beginning of school, have a fun Sunday afternoon on beautiful Liberty Square, attend the South Carolina Aquarium, free boat rides and receive lots of supplies and information about school.

We will be strengthening our efforts in mentoring our children, expanding our tutoring opportunities, reading and literacy programs, lunch buddies and more. There are lots of opportunities for volunteers. This is a wonderful initiative that I am pleased to participate at Mitchell Elementary School, having the pleasure of having lunch with my lunch buddy twice a month. It brings adults into the schools, allows our children to have another caring adult in their lives and it's a lot of fun.

We are committed to making Charleston a model in creating community learning centers. We are working with Schools Out, a local non-profit, as well as working with our school district and the State of South Carolina to transform the afternoons at our school buildings from largely unoccupied into thriving community learning centers where children have diverse, fun, exciting after-school experiences and where their families feel welcome to participate with their children or to seek the opportunity for themselves to get their GED.

This year we started a summer freedom school, we developed a summer youth employment program, youth career explorer program, supported the Mayor's Youth Commission and we are working with area governments on the development of a Charleston Area Youth Master Plan and more.

The Spirit of South Carolina will be among many things a wonderful educational opportunity for our young people teaching how to master wind, tides, using the stars to guide and the essential need for teamwork.

The City Parks and Playgrounds continue to see increased participation from our children. Last year we had a 21% increase in participation in youth sports and are very proud of our West Ashley sports program partnering with the St. Andrews Parks and Playgrounds Commission allowing all families in the West Ashley area, to pay one price to participate in youth sports. Also last summer, our summer camp program served 850 children a week in a variety of camps throughout our City.

We are very proud of the work of our Office on Aging. We were quick to support the Independent Transportation Network, a volunteer system to give more flexible transportation options to our seniors. We helped develop the Senior Bill of Rights and assisted in the improvements, further enhancements of our fabulous Lowcountry Senior Center on James Island.

We completed the beautiful streetscape revitalization for Upper King Street which marked the further acceleration of the remarkable revitalization that has occurred on King Street. Last year 25 new businesses located on King Street alone.

We also completed the streetscaping along Windermere Boulevard, which beautified an older and proud suburban center.

This year we will transition to a new management team in the City's Historic Market which will bring creative ideas to further enhance this national treasure.

Our Economic Development Department provided assistance to over 800 individuals seeking help in facilitating the opening, expansion or locating of businesses to our community and as a result of that 676 jobs were created or retained in Charleston and we assisted 228 minority business enterprises and 329 women-owned firms.

We'll be working with our sister governments and the private sector to develop a Regional Minority Business Strategic Plan so we can more wisely and successfully assist the development of these important small business initiatives in our community.

The most important new business activity in our community last year was an educational one, the Art Institute of Charleston opened its doors. This national educational institution will offer culinary degrees in addition to a wide range of arts and technology programs as well. This new school has proven to be very popular, with their enrollment outstripping all projections. The Art Institute will provide highly skilled workers for the hospitality industry and are ever-growing group of knowledge-based companies. Also, the Charleston School of Law graduated its first class.

Our Digital Corridor continues to expand with 80 companies and employs almost 5,000 workers and we are working very closely with the Medical University to develop Charleston into a biotech hub.

Working with Roadwise, we have a host of highway traffic improvements that we will move forward with this year, including the intersections of Folly and Maybank Highway, Wesley Drive at Folly and Savannah Highway, Harborview Road, Folly and Camp Roads and the James Island Connector to Folly Road loop-off ramp. Also, Bees Ferry Road improvements are under design as is the West Ashley Circle and the extension of the Mark Clark Expressway.

CARTA bus service continues to see increased ridership, especially the express bus service.

I am very pleased to be chairing our regions Commuter Rail Study. We will be working hard to move this project from its now conceptual study phase to reality. It uses existing rail corridors and develops a train system that is in operation during the commuter times. This would remove cars from our clogged highways during the commuter hours and give our residents a safer, easier, less stressful and more economical way to get to and from work. And we will reduce our community's production of harmful greenhouse gases.

Large-scale traffic improvements are essential. Small-scale pedestrian improvements are just as important. We successfully competed for a \$200,000 grant which will make it easier

for children and their families to walk to Stono Park Elementary School. We also provided additional pedestrian crossing signs for all of our school crossing guards who do a wonderful job in helping our children get to and from school safely.

We also developed this flag system at the busy intersection in a hospital neighborhood to help the motorist be aware of pedestrians crossing this busy thoroughfare. We also are working on plans to add pedestrian facilities to the Ashley River Memorial Bridge on Highway 17 and the World War II Memorial Bridge connecting Cosgrove Avenue to West Ashley.

We continue to make progress improving our City's drainage. To date, \$37 million have been invested in the improved drainage system. The City is designing a new pump station to serve the Forest Acres, Washington Park and Magnolia neighborhoods west of the Ashley and drainage improvements are also underway to serve Shadowmoss Plantation and Hickory Hill neighborhoods. We will begin the construction of the Market Street drainage improvements this year and are busily working on the engineering plans for the Spring/Fishburne/Highway 17 drainage basin. Also, last year our fine stormwater crews cleaned 109 miles of ditches and their jet vac crews cleaned out almost the same length of storm drain pipes in our City.

We continue to address the important challenge of affordable housing. Currently we have 293 affordable housing units in production. You see here examples of the City's affordable housing work creating new rental and homeownership opportunities for our citizens. We are very proud of the City's \$10 million affordable housing bond issue which has produced renovated units at Simmons Commons and beautiful new homes and apartments at the historic Enston Homes and Blakeway Apartments on Daniel Island. In addition, also on Daniel Island the beautiful new Humanities Foundation apartments are very successful. Soon the Longborough Homeownership initiative will be under construction and we are working hard on the plans for the Cooper River Bridge Redevelopment Area for a neighborhood of 350 new residential units, 50% of which will be affordable.

The City's population is now at an all-time high of 121,000 as our City continues to grow and citizens increasingly annex into the City of Charleston because of our low tax rate. Last year the total value of construction in the City of Charleston was an all time record of \$583 million.

Our City continues to be in an extremely strong financial condition. Our general fund and designated fund balance available to the City for emergency situations or to cover unexpected one-time costs was at \$18.3 million at the close of our last City audit. This is the highest level of fund balance in the City's history. In addition, Charleston continues to hold the highest credit rating of any municipality in our state with a Standard and Poor's rating of AA+ and a Moody's rating of AA1. These ratings are independent validation of the City's superb financial condition.

Our newly formed Charleston Green Committee is busily at work. We have a growing fleet of hybrid and alternative fuel vehicles. Right now over 55% of our traffic signals are lighted via LED lights which use 83% less energy, and this year we will complete this transition to 100% LED. For the past six years, working with Johnson Controls to improve our energy efficiency, the result has been a reduction of 19,000 tons of greenhouse gases and other improvements which have the effects of planting 171,000 new trees. This year we will

bring the action plan of the Charleston Green Committee to City Council, which will give us specific measures on how we can take steps to insure a sustainable Charleston and come up with recommendations for you on what you individually can do as well.

This year, working with the Charleston County Library, we helped sponsor a national first where citizens can come to watch live telecasts from the Metropolitan Opera on eight Saturday afternoons at no charge. Our historic Dock Street Theatre is now under renovation. This, the site of our nation's first theater, is being painstakingly restored so that we can give it, in beautiful and sustainable condition, to future generations. Also, Memminger Auditorium is currently under renovation and will be open in time for Spoleto Festival U.S.A. this May. The City worked closely with our School District and Spoleto Festival U.S.A. to allow this theater to be renovated.

The old Slave Mart Museum was opened this fall. We worked very hard to acquire and preserve this building which was known as Ryan's Mart and was one of a number of slave marts in operation in the City in the 18th and 19th centuries. We have a responsibility to present this history. We worked very hard to present this history honestly.

We proudly reopened your historic and beautifully restored City Hall last year. This is your building and it is special in America. It is the second oldest City Hall Council Chamber in continuous use in our country, exceeded only in age by New York's City Hall. Great care was taken with the design and construction of this renovation. We are very proud of it and I know that you are too.

I am proud to say this is only a partial report on the state of our City. Even more work is going on and even more work remains to be done. We are proud of our progress and excited about the opportunities we have together to make this City even more beautiful and an even more wonderful place to live, work and raise our families.

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