

CITY OF BOWIE

STATE OF THE CITY REPORT



MAYOR G. FREDERICK ROBINSON

Presented to the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce
January 27, 2016

Good morning. I would like to thank the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity to present the 2016 State of the City. It is always a pleasure to be with you. I appreciate all your efforts to make Bowie a great place to live and work.

We have gathered here in this remarkable Senior Center a number of times for this purpose over the years. In some ways this building represents Bowie. It recognizes those that helped guide Bowie from a development into a community and it serves as a statement of the City's respect for our history and our commitment to the future. Indeed the Center may be a metaphor for the City.

So, in light of that incredible insight, I am happy to report that the state of Bowie is strong. And I repeat the boast, we are the strongest, most diverse, most family-friendly community in the region.

We are welcoming to new residents as well as new businesses. While we are not immune to outside influences, we have been able to deal with the challenges associated with a shifting economic climate. While some economic trends continue to require attention, we are prepared to embrace the future. Like you and your businesses, we vigilantly keep an eye on the bottom line and despite these concerns we are optimistic as the economy continues to recover.

According to the US Census Bureau's latest data we have 1,473 businesses employing a total of 22,510 people in the seven zip codes that comprise the Bowie area. Bowie's business base represents 10.3% of Prince George's County business base and 9.3% of the total employees in the County.

2015 was a good year for entrepreneurs in Bowie, as the City received national recognition as a center for woman entrepreneurs and the Bowie Business Innovation Center (Bowie BIC) business incubation program continued to expand and deliver additional business support to new entrepreneurs in professional service and technology-based companies.

Money Magazine ranked Bowie 28th out of the top 50 best places to live in 2014. Bowie was named the 50th best city in the entire U.S. for woman entrepreneurs, and is the top-ranked city in Prince George's County, based on a survey conducted by Good Call.

Our active parks and recreational facilities range from athletic fields to the popular Ice Arena and City Gymnasium to quiet parks that offer a pleasant place to relax or simply enjoy a good book. They are the envy of the region.

Our dynamic senior population enlivens our city and animates the only nationally accredited Senior Center in Maryland, which offers programs, activities and services that promote active, independent and healthy lifestyles.

Our great museums offer a glimpse back at colonial American estate life and a storied Thoroughbred racing history, at historic railroad operations, at radio and television history, and we even offer a genealogy library, if you want to explore your personal history. I suggest however you search your past at your own risk!

We support beautiful public art that is visible to all and enhances and enriches our community. Public art brightens City Hall, Town Green Park, the Boathouse in Allen Pond and Main Street. Our newest addition at Veterans Park, a new Veteran's Memorial Monument was installed November 9, 2015 and dedicated on Veteran's Day, November 11, 2015, as a "visible reminder" of the real cost of our freedom and our liberty.

We are proud to have this lasting memorial in our community as a means to recall our history and to honor those that have served and protected our nation since the beginning.

Bowie is strong not only because we prepare solid plans and are guided by sound fiscal policies, but because we take that planning responsibility seriously. We plan, we look forward and we do all we can to anticipate what's coming so we will be ready - but we always save and plan too, for the unexpected.

We can and we do influence the local economy in positive ways through policies and tax rates; by creating a business friendly atmosphere and by providing a positive environment for you to run your business. We remain convinced the residential and business communities are bonded together and we do all we can to assist progress and prosperity between both these two important components of our City.

We maintain our streets and sidewalks. We plow our streets quickly and effectively. We offer recreational amenities in the form of parks and indoor facilities. We faithfully collect refuse and recycling and the City Police Department effectively patrols the City's neighborhoods and business areas. Our goal is to create and maintain an environment that is safe and inviting for our residents and one that encourages businesses to grow and prosper.

Speaking of creating an environment that is safe and inviting, last year we adopted a Climate Action Plan in an effort to reduce total community greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2020 and to reduce our cost of operation. To this end, we purchased our first electric car, and two electric motorcycles for the Police Department. LED fixtures are being installed in our facilities to save energy and reduce expenses.

We provide energy audits at no charge to grantees in a Senior Housing Rehabilitation Program and we coordinate a similar program for other residents with BGE. We've established a Green Bowie Business Recognition Program that promotes energy and greenhouse gas reduction efforts of our local businesses and we would love to certify your business. We would be grateful for your input (before January 31st) on a quick ten-question sustainability survey we are conducting on our website in order to develop a solid sustainability plan for the City.

Along this line, we plan to construct a solar array on the City-owned Entzian property that will generate nearly 8 million kWh of electricity annually. This project represents over 60% of total electric consumption by the City being produced by sustainable energy sources. We estimate that this will save us approximately \$373,000 annually in electricity consumption and distribution costs!

While we are on the subject of energy, I would like to recognize one additional matter. We continue to enjoy improved BGE service delivery. Reliability investments made during the Bowie Electric Reliability Action Plan (BERAP), implemented from 2008 – 2010, continue to return value to City residents. Bowie's reliability continues to track favorably against the BGE system since the implementation of the BERAP program which is now the State standard used by the Public Service Commission.

The City continues to work with BGE in a cooperative fashion to insure that this high level of service to Bowie residents is maintained going forward. But it is appropriate to recognize BGE for their efforts in these successes; they have been a great corporate neighbor. Thank you BGE.

In terms of the City's finances, our budget is balanced, our bills are paid, and we maintain a strong reserve!

Our revenue comes from residential property taxes, shared income taxes, business taxes, licenses, fees, and grants from other levels of government. We are proud of our commitment to fiscal responsibility and to the retention of our prestigious AAA bond rating, one of only two municipalities in Maryland to have earned this status.

Bowie is a strong, growing well-educated community of 56,000 residents. The median household income is about \$106,000. The average house in the Bowie area sold for \$315,800 in 2015 up from \$295,000 in 2014.

For Fiscal Year 2017 we expect our budget to be close to what it has been for the last couple of years with an operating budget of around \$50 million dollars. Our primary focus will continue to be on core City services and public safety.

Regarding public safety, nine years after the first officers began patrols in Bowie, the Police Department has become a model for the region with an authorized sworn strength of 64 officers. The Department's newest addition, Rooster, a Golden Lab and our first K-9, graduated from Drug Detection School December 11th. He began his first shift three days later and caught a case that resulted in a drug arrest – a great first day for Rooster and his handler, Officer Robert Warrington.

Our Police Department maintains a strong relationship with residents, business groups, community groups, and its partners in the Prince George's County Police Department. Our officers constantly work to strengthen ties with these groups through education and community programs such as the Bowie Explorers, the Citizens' Academy, Shop With a Cop and Cop for a Day (recently featured on Fox News) to name just a few.

This is a reflection of strong leadership that is innovative and accessible and by an operation that is transparent. The officers reflect their community in every aspect. They are invested in Bowie, and they take crimes that threaten Bowie seriously. We are incredibly proud of the men and women of the Bowie Police Department.

This Spring we plan to launch the Bowie Non-Emergency Call Center. The new Call Center will ensure that residents can reach City offices 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The Call Center will also act as a communications hub for all City services during non-business hours. The Center will provide 24/7 access to the Police Department, as well as after-hours City support for emergency services such as water main breaks, sewer backups and down trees blocking roads. Emergency dispatch will remain with Prince George's County 911 Center, but all other calls for assistance will be handled by City of Bowie employees.

Now let's discuss a couple of ongoing major projects that illustrate how the Council, staff, other levels of government and the business community work together to achieve success for our City.

Bowie Marketplace is rising from the ashes. It is an example of public private partnership at its very best. Having fallen into decay and disrepair, the mall was an eyesore, nearly abandoned, vandalized and at times occupied by vagrants. Several developers stepped in over the past decade and attempted to execute a redevelopment plan but none succeeded, until now.

Although we were initially disappointed that Berman Enterprises originally saw the project as an investment for possible future development, we quickly assembled a full array of City officials, City staff, County officials and staff, local business support and an energized community to encourage Berman Enterprises to move forward on the project. They did and the nearly 150,000 square foot retail center is coming out of the ground like gang-busters.

We are looking forward to shopping at Harris Teeter, AutoZone, Petco, and Firehouse Subs, among numerous other businesses and we look forward to receiving creative plans from Berman for the design of a residential component to complement the site.

We would like to thank Berman Enterprises for having the courage and foresight to invest in our community and for their fortitude in getting things done in a very timely manner. Well done!

I would also like to take a moment to congratulate the City Council for having the courage to embrace the creative public/private enterprise that served as the foundation of this success. Courage and conviction combined with a solid sense of the future paved the way to this success. Thanks to the City Council. Your commitment to this project speaks well of you and of the City.

This same willingness to look at a lingering project with fresh eyes can also be seen in the Council's approach to development at Melford.

For some time many believed Melford was Latin for contention or disagreement. While there has been some history of challenge at this site, ownership and the City are now clearly on the same page, and we are moving together successfully.

In 2013, the City Council took a bold step to alter some site covenants to allow for the development of a significant mixed-use project of office, retail and residential, all subject to control and review by the City. That agreement set a new direction for Melford.

In 2015, a Conceptual Site Plan for mixed use development Melford Village containing up to 2,500 single-family attached and multi-family residential units, 260,000 square feet of office space and 268,500 square feet of retail space was approved by the City and by the District Council. While there is a Circuit Court appeal currently pending we are hopeful the matter will be resolved soon and this outstanding project will move forward.

We offer our congratulations to St. John Properties on their outstanding efforts to bring Melford to this point. We look forward to continued progress as they develop this site into a preeminent multiuse center.

The Preliminary Subdivision Plan and Special Exception for 180,000 square foot Wal-Mart Superstore at Mill Branch Crossing across from the existing Walmart on Rt. 301 was approved by the City and by the District Council in 2009. An appeal of the approvals by some neighbors was heard on January 16, 2016. As we await the results of that hearing, a detailed Site Plan is being prepared for a 365,000-square-foot mixed use commercial center, including 13,000-square-feet of restaurant space, and a 150-room hotel.

The Preliminary Subdivision Plan and stormwater management concept plan for redevelopment of the existing Melvin Motors site leading to construction of a new 31,000 square foot Lidl Grocery Store was submitted to and approved by the City in 2015 and we now welcome this new business to Bowie.

The last several years have witnessed much discussion, substantial agreements and some action on transportation issues. The City approved a curbed four-lane roadway expansion of MD Route 197 featuring sidewalks and street trees from Kenhill Drive to MD Route 450. Design and engineering funds of \$11 million have been approved for the project. However, no funding for right-of-way acquisition or for construction has as yet been approved. Anyone driving this section knows how important this project is to the community. We acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of our State delegation but continue to encourage completion and hope to see continued movement on this critical roadway project.

The City continues to support and encourage advancement of an improved MD Route 450. This project consists of design and engineering to upgrade MD Route 450 as a multi-lane divided roadway from Stonybrook Drive to MD Route 3. Planning studies were completed for this segment back in 1988. Preliminary design is currently underway. Engineering is 90-95% complete but the project is on hold. No right-of-way or construction funds are programmed in the State Consolidated Transportation Program (CTP).

We continue to work with County and State officials for enhanced priority and funding for Route 301 improvements. This matter consists of the planning and preliminary design of a new interchange at Rt. 197 and a continuous, fully integrated frontage road system. This project was only funded for planning purposes through FY 2009. The project is on hold. Planning funding was programmed through FY 2015 however, no engineering, right-of-way or construction funds are included in the State CTP.

One recurring issue of serious importance to the City is Highway User Trust Fund support. Pending decisions at the State level regarding shared revenues cause uncertainty for us.

For Bowie, these funds are critical to the maintenance and repair of our 190 miles of City streets. The impact of the cuts has been dramatic over the past years. In 2007 Bowie received \$3.1 million, in 2011 it was \$400,000, then half a million one year and approximately \$1.5 million in the current fiscal year. The good news is that it appears to be on the upswing and we look forward to what the new fiscal year will bring. We strongly support State Delegation efforts and the Governor's efforts to restore full funding as quickly as possible.

As we get into budget planning for this year, the City Council will participate in a strategic planning exercise to update the City's Strategic Plan adopted ten years ago in 2005. This process will be facilitated by an outside consultant and will involve Bowie residents and City staff. The intent of this effort is to establish major goals and to set implementable objectives to accomplish over the next five years. It is anticipated that Council will conclude this process before the end of the current fiscal year on June 30th. We expect to produce an updated strategic plan by this summer.

A matter of concern that will most certainly be a part of that plan is a review of the City's Water and Sewer Infrastructure. It is aged and in need of replacement.

The wastewater treatment plant is the most modern facility in our system. The plant was built in 1982 but upgraded in 2009 to implement Enhanced Nutrient Removal technology. That upgrade, largely funded by the State of Maryland, makes our treatment plant state of the art from the perspective of nitrogen and phosphorous removal.

We've also improved our water supply system in the past, adding one well in 1988 and replacing two older wells in 1989 and 1990. The water filtration plant has also been improved in the past to reduce operating costs.

While the plants have received several improvements in the past, the water distribution piping and sewage collection piping is aged and in many cases in need of repair or replacement. City Council has asked staff to prepare an overview of our water- sewer system this year with a focus on short-term, mid-term, long-term and unexpected emergency conditions that could occur given the age of the system.

This is clearly a significant issue that will be dominated by structural and economic concerns.

There is a finite number of system users so methods of improvement, timing and cost will all demand serious public attention.

However, it is important that we take a serious planning and cost determination review sooner rather than later. As the process continues Council will keep residents and businesses up to date on our progress.

We will also restart plans for a new Indoor Sports Center project that has taken longer than hoped because of the difficulty in locating a suitable site to construct the facility. The City-owned sites that are of sufficient size have complicating factors that disqualify them. But we are looking at sites that show great promise. We are now making very positive progress which we believe will put this project back on track.

Importantly, 2016 marks the 100th anniversary of the incorporation of the town, now city, of Bowie. We're going to celebrate Bowie's life as a Centenarian! 100 years of Growth, Unity and Progress!

A committee of staff and citizens has been meeting biweekly for over six months. There's going to be a lot of celebration, so get ready! A calendar will be issued shortly with major events – Heritage Day, a special Heritage Day community picnic and singalong at Allen Pond, the traditional Memorial Day Parade, and Bowiefest will all enjoy a centennial theme. Special “100 programs” are planned at the Mansion, Senior Center, Ice Rink and Gym. Fun activities will take place, as well, in Old Bowie, acknowledging Old Bowie/Huntington's role as the birthplace of Bowie. Our kick off will be in April 2016 and conclude in April 2017, with the City's biggest birthday cake ever! So we look forward to your active participation in this celebration.

I would like to thank you for being here today and for supporting Bowie and our many programs. I cannot tell you how vital your role is in the City's operation and our future. We truly appreciate all you do to make Bowie a great place to live, to work, and to do business. As I said at the opening, the state of the City of Bowie is strong. We are excited about the present and we are eager to embrace the future. You and your hard work have been key to that success. Thank you!

So as I close, thanks for this great day. As you leave and return to your businesses, I ask that you keep in your thoughts all of the young men and women serving in the US military forces around the world and particularly those serving in harm's way. May they return home quickly and safely.