

CITY OF BOWIE

STATE OF THE CITY REPORT



MAYOR G. FREDERICK ROBINSON

Presentation to the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce
February 1, 2017

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G. Frederick Robinson, Mayor

Good morning! Many thanks to the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce for inviting me to speak to you about the state of our fair City.

We gather here once again at the Bowie Senior Center, one of the gems of our City. In many ways this building is a tribute to those who came before us and helped shape a housing development into a community. Its presence highlights our debt to our history and our obligation to our collective future.

I appreciate the opportunity to look back with you at some of the highlights of the past year and discuss what we can expect in Bowie in 2017.

As some have probably noticed, change in leadership at the national level is already causing shifts in some federal priorities and programs that are affecting cities across the country. Just how those changes will affect our city remains to be seen, but two things are clear: there are a lot of federal workers living here, and federal money helps fund some important City programs. So, we will monitor developments closely.

There has also been a major change in our City government. In June, after 23 years of dedicated service to the City of Bowie, City Manager David Deutsch retired. Council named Assistant City Manager John Fitzwater interim City Manager and began a nationwide search for David's replacement.

In November, we were delighted to announce the selection of Alfred Lott as Bowie's new City Manager. Al comes to us after a long and distinguished career in the US Army, several tours in municipal government leadership, and most recently as an administrator at the US Department of Education. He has been on the job just seven weeks now and I can tell you he has hit the ground running. He is a fast learner and I know he is the person to lead Bowie into the future.

Welcome Al. We are delighted to have you on board and leading our fine team. We look forward to working together for many years to come!

And many thanks to John Fitzwater for taking on so many additional duties over the last six months. John, sometimes words don't adequately reflect our appreciation, but

on behalf of all of us, I would like to thank you for your leadership as interim City Manager and for the outstanding, top quality work you have always done for the City. So let's talk about this City that Al and John manage on a day-to-day basis.

- We are diverse. In fact, we are the strongest, most diverse, most family-friendly community in the region.
- We are financially stable.
- We are welcoming to new residents and to new businesses.
- And, we are moving forward to meet challenges head on.

In short, we remain a strong and vibrant community.

Here is what we look like by the numbers:

- We are 56,143 residents, living in almost 21,000 households.
- Our median age is 39.6.
- We are 51% African American, 45% white, 5% Asian, and Hispanics, of all races, now make up 6.4% of Bowie's population.
- Our residents are well educated. 78% have some college and more than half have at least a college degree.
- The median income is \$105,959.
- Bowie's unemployment rate was 3.7% in 2016. The national average was 4.7% for the same period.
- In 2016, the average sales price of a single-family home was \$330,000. The housing market has not returned to pre-recession levels yet, but the figures have been slowly climbing since 2011, when the average price of a house in Bowie was just \$268,000.
- The average sales price grew 1.2% from 2014 to 2015 and another 3.5% from 2015 to 2016. Let's hope sale prices continue to increase, and that the rate of growth accelerates.
- There are 1,527 businesses employing 20,295 people in the seven Zip Codes that comprise the Bowie area.

The top employers in Bowie are the Prince George's County School System and Inovalon. The top ten list also includes government facilities like the County 911 Center and the US Census Bureau at Melford, and the City, and retailers such as Giant, Walmart, and Macy's.

We remain in excellent financial shape, due to careful budgeting and management. We plan, we analyze, we save, and to the greatest extent possible, we make enhancements and add new projects only when we have the money to pay for them.

On the rare occasions when we borrow, we do it at very favorable rates. This is because Wall Street bond rating agencies like Moody's and Standard and Poors have given us their top ratings. In fact, since 2009, we have held a triple A (AAA) bond rating, one of only two cities in Maryland that can make that claim!

My colleagues and I recognize the importance of setting priorities, formulating budgets based on those priorities, and then living within the limits we set. Sometimes that means we cannot do everything that we are asked to do, or everything that we would like to do, but we always fund core services, such as public safety, streets, trash and recycling, and services for residents of all ages first, and we look at everything else afterwards.

That careful budgeting allows us, from time to time, to take on some major new projects, such as the new Indoor Sports Facility that will open in 2020 on Church Road.

Last spring, we adopted a balanced budget of \$52.8 million, with a quarter of the budget going to Public Works and Public Safety. Property taxes have remained flat since 2010 and we have balanced each budget since then, all while growing our Police Department into a full-service department of 65 officers.

While keeping taxes flat is our goal, we must take a responsible look at this year's budget and examine all options to maintain our financial stability. Given the nature of the economy, we may not be able to continue indefinitely without a property tax increase.

We are committed to excellence in the delivery of core services and to keeping a watchful eye on the bottom line. A few examples illustrate that commitment.

Our 10-year-old Police Department is a great model of responsible growth. In 2016, the Police Department responded to over 20,000 calls for service. Major crimes are down, responses are fast and effective, and Bowie remains a safe city.

On October 1st, the Department launched the City of Bowie Non-Emergency Call Center. Now, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, those who live and work here have

direct access to their Police Department. While we still want callers to dial 9-1-1 in an emergency, they can now request non-emergency service directly from the Bowie Police.

The Call Center is also now the primary point of contact for residents in need of emergency or urgent municipal services after normal business hours, such as when a tree falls and blocks a roadway or a water main breaks. Since its launch four months ago, the Call Center has handled nearly 5,000 calls for service.

Also in October, the Department rolled out a body camera program for officers. All police calls for service are recorded, using in-car camera systems and body cameras worn by the officers. The Police Department's motto is "Service with Integrity" and it is their daily mission to live up to that motto. We think the body camera program enhances that commitment by providing objective data and accountability, and by creating a realistic training tool for officers.

These programs are expensive, but we believe that in both cases, the additional investment is well worth the enhanced services provided, and we believe that they will improve our accountability and responsiveness, and will maintain the outstanding police-community relationship the Bowie Police Department has achieved.

It has been a difficult and challenging year for Law Enforcement nationwide, but our Police Department has had the confidence and support of the community and will continue to earn that support each day. To that end, I would like to take a moment to congratulate Chief John Nesky, his management team, and the outstanding men and women who make up the Bowie Police Department.

While we are on the subject of Public Safety, I would like to take a minute to talk about the relationship that we have with our partners, both on the Police and on the Fire/EMS side. We value the work of both and have supported the Bowie Volunteer Fire Department with a \$150,000 grant to help remodel Station 39 at Free State Shopping Center. We are proud of the way that our Police Officers and the Bowie Volunteer Fire Department work together with their peers at the County level.

No one exemplifies that collaborative spirit more than Chief Marc Bashoor, who came up through the volunteers and has served as the head of the County Fire/EMS Department for the last several years. He understands both worlds, and he has built lasting bridges between the two groups and among departments in the region. We will

be sorry to see him depart in March, but wish him a long and relaxing retirement. As he repeatedly says, there are fish in a lake in Florida calling his name. Good luck in retirement Marc.

Let me turn now to our Community Services Department. It is one of our largest. Its scope reaches from historic properties to housing inspections, from celebrations to counseling, from parks and recreation to code enforcement, and a whole lot more in between. I would like to share two examples with you that I think are indicative of the Department's "can do" approach to customer service.

The Parks & Grounds Division is responsible for maintaining all our parks and the outside of all our public facilities. This includes the Bowie Dog Park on Northview Drive. Pet owners asked for water at the site for the animals and for pet owners. A reasonable request, but estimates to lay pipes at the site and connect to public water were upwards of \$60,000.

So employees came up with a simple solution that involved constructing a handmade water dispenser for water that is brought in daily. Their solution cost about \$1,000 to construct and takes only minutes a day to maintain. It may not be an elegant solution, but it is simple, effective, and typical of Bowie staff that always looks for the best, most reasonable and cost effective solutions.

The hardworking folks who run this Senior Center are special indeed and are always looking out for their patrons. Last year, when this building had to close for much of the summer because of major, unscheduled air conditioning repairs, they made a seamless shift of operations to the Kenhill Center.

Their programs were scaled down, and the setting was not as inviting as it is here, but staff adapted and were able to provide seniors with a place to come for companionship and entertainment, and they continued to maintain their bus transportation program for shopping and medical appointments. All this – and barely skipping a beat!

Our Public Works Department also deserves recognition for providing so many of the basic services that keep Bowie moving. They pave the roads, plow the snow, and pick up trash and recycling. They also provide water and sewer services to almost half of the City. They provide valuable services that we sometimes take for granted, but their efforts are always appreciated.

As I mentioned last year, our water system was built in the early 1960s and is frankly, showing its age. There are signs that some parts of the water delivery system need replacing. A proposed plan will provide incremental replacements, cost a lot of money, and will affect our customers, but it also means that the system will remain safe and viable for generations to come.

We are working with our State and Federal colleagues, exploring any and all support or grant options to help bridge the cost of this project, but make no mistake, this is an essential public service operation and Council is committed to a reasonable plan of action that will keep this system functioning well into the future. I applaud my colleagues for taking the first step to address these concerns before they become major problems.

Municipal governments are the governments that are closest to the people they serve. In a place like Bowie that means the government can be responsive and innovative when it comes to ever changing needs. For example, when violence erupted in Old Town Bowie in 2015, it shone a light, not only on a problem in the area, but also on a lack of opportunity for some young people.

The City stepped in, and set up a workforce and life skills development and training program for 15 to 25-year olds. I am proud to say that with the help of staff and some great neighborhood leaders, 10 teens and young adults graduated from the program in 2016. After completing the program they earned jobs and are now well on their way to becoming financially independent adults.

Another place we have seen positive change in the last year has been in the local economy. After years of relatively flat growth, the housing market is on the upswing, and there is renewed interest in investing in the Bowie area. This is a good thing and something that other cities and counties struggle to attract. We continue to believe the residential community and the business community must grow together so each can prosper.

At Bowie Marketplace, a new shopping center has risen from the rubble of a decrepit eyesore. It protects the 450 Main Street corridor, brings new jobs to the City, and expands the City's tax base considerably. At Melford a new hotel and an assisted living facility are on the way as well.

There is also a project making its way through the development review process for a mixed use community called Melford Village. The proposal is for almost 1,800 townhouses and condominiums, including 500 senior units, in addition to new retail and office space.

There is new movement on the Karington mixed use project. A Preliminary Plan was approved by the County in 2004, but until recently, there hadn't been much progress on the project. The property is located just south of the City limits and is slated to include approximately 1,200 homes.

The occupants of those homes will shop in Bowie, eat in our restaurants, and support our local economy. But they will also be on local roads and it is incumbent upon leaders at every level, to ensure that the public facilities like roads and schools are improved to address the increased demand that growth places upon them.

While I'm on the subject of roads, I am happy to report that the on again/off again project for improving MD 197, Collington Road, is back on. Funding for design is in the State budget for Fiscal Year 2017 to Fiscal Year 2020. This is a critical step, but there is no money programmed for right-of-way acquisition or for construction yet.

This is our number one priority for road improvements, so we will continue to follow it closely and we will work with our Delegation and with the Governor to move this critical project forward.

We also continue to lobby for improvements to MD 450, Annapolis Road. While Council has yet to take a position on the proposal to build 400+ homes on the Jesuit property, near Sacred Heart Church, that proposal, which faces several major hurdles, will put more cars on a road that is already overcrowded. It is time to stop kicking the can down the road. It is imperative that improvements to MD 450 are funded now, rather than in the future.

Bowie has been, and will continue to be, a strong and vocal supporter of the Prince George's County School System, but it is past time for new and continued investment in our schools to make them first class centers of learning and to attract new families to Bowie. With the exception of Northview Elementary, which opened in 2007, the average school in Bowie is 50 years of age and it shows.

Children and educators should never have to worry about whether the heat will work in their classroom or that the bathrooms will function. There are basic needs in these buildings that are simply not being met, and that must change. These are solvable challenges and we continue to work with the School System to address these issues as quickly as possible. Our objectives are shared and our commitment is genuine. We are optimistic that matters will improve.

Remember our position – the three most important things in Bowie are education, education, and education!

In addition to ensuring adequate services to support growth, our local economy faces other challenges. The Waugh Chapel development is a persistent competitor to the businesses at Bowie Town Center and it has lured several retailers away with incentives and lower initial rents. But, new businesses see opportunity in Bowie and are taking their places. Despite turnover, the Town Center Mall is presently 99% leased. We welcome Simply Mac, Sardis Restaurant, and others at the Town Center; Harris Teeter and company at Marketplace; and other new retail, restaurants, and service businesses throughout the City.

There are not a lot of remaining places to grow or to build within the City limits. What we are seeing now are proposals to build around our borders, such as at Karington to the south, at the Jesuit property to the east, and potentially at some point in the future near Bowie State University. Again, our challenge is to make sure the growth is responsible.

For the last several years, we have worked with the State to purchase the Bowie Race Track property for recreational purposes. The property owners have not been inclined to sell, but we continue to work to control what happens at this environmentally sensitive gateway to our city.

We thank Senator Peters, Delegate Valentino-Smith, Delegate Vallario, and Delegate Holmes for their efforts on this issue and especially for the recently introduced legislation that would insure that the racetrack is not sold to developers, but rather to an interested party (like us) that wants to preserve it as green and open space.

Speaking of entities with the word Bowie in their name, we are fortunate to have a major state university at our doorstep. It is not only a source of quality interns for City offices, it brings distinction to our City and provides local expertise on a variety of matters. The Bowie Heritage Trail planned for the Bowie State/Old Bowie area will eventually connect our trail system with the university. We are excited about the new trail and think that it is a good metaphor for the growing ties and collaboration between the university and the City of Bowie

As most here know, Bowie State is also home to the Bowie Business Incubator or Bowie BIC, another one of our innovative and collaborative projects. With City and County money, and space on the Bowie State campus, the BIC provides young businesses with a place to learn and to grow. And, when they do spread their wings a little, they can now set up shop in “BIC graduate space” at the former city hall, with a manageable lease. This program, called Bowie BIC NEXT, keeps them operating and growing in the City of Bowie.

Last year, the twelve companies in the incubator generated \$3.1 million in revenue and 70 jobs. An additional 655 area entrepreneurs participated in business counseling, training, and networking events at the BIC, including the Dolphin Tank Practice Pitch event. At that very well received event, a panel of early stage investors and audience members critiqued the investment pitches of Bowie BIC clients. Another Dolphin Tank Event is in the works for 2017.

So, what is the state of Bowie? We remain strong. Today’s Bowie is a well-run, progressive community that continues to evolve. There is a deep pride of place here that is evident when people speak before the Council or when they contact us. Whether they are 50-year residents or 5-year residents, they are proud of their hometown and are enthusiastic about preserving it and finding ways to improve it.

Bowie remains a great place to live, to grow, to raise our families and to do business. We are thankful for that and we are thankful to the Bowie business community for all you do to help keep us strong. Your investment, your support, your advice, and your interactions with the City are noted and appreciated.

Our challenge as elected officials is to maintain and nurture our sense of community and to engage each new generation of residents and business owners to work together for the benefit of all, to keep Bowie economically viable and moving forward.

Over the last several months we have been celebrating the 100th anniversary of the City government. The Centennial celebration has taken many forms – from a tour of houses of worship in Bowie, to various historical programs at our museums, to the publication of a Centennial cookbook, to a retrospective movie about the early days of Levitt Bowie, to honoring Bowie’s oldest businesses and organizations.

But, at the heart of it, the celebration has really been about looking back and looking forward. We have looked back with a 21st century eye to the people who shaped our city and to the things that happened here in the past. It wasn’t always perfect, but they built the platform on which we stand today. It is our history and it is our duty to tell it, to be proud of it, and to learn from it.

As we close out the Centennial year in May with the burying of a time capsule and an old-fashioned outdoor celebration, we will also be looking to the future – to where we are going as a city and a community, and to making sure that we are preserving what is best, while always continuing our efforts to improve.

During this year of Centennial celebration, I believe that it was appropriate that the City wrote and adopted a Sustainability Plan and a new Strategic Plan for our city. Both focus heavily on living responsibly within our means, as individuals and as a government, and in making our little piece of this great earth, the best that it can be. They will be our guiding documents as we move through the next several years.

My Council colleagues and I are honored by the trust you have placed in us and each day we endeavor to meet your expectations. The decisions we make are not always easy or popular, but they are made with that same intention of moving us forward and making Bowie just a little bit better all the time.

I thank you for your time this morning and for all you do to support and strengthen the Bowie community. As always, I ask you to keep those who serve us in the US military around the world and their families in your thoughts and prayers, particularly those serving in harm’s way. We sincerely hope that they will return to us quickly and safely.

Thank you to all here. May God bless you and keep you safe.