

State of the City Address

by Mayor Timothy J. Adams

October 26, 2020



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Good evening.

I would like to start by thanking the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity to present the 2020 State of the City. Thank you for your efforts to make Bowie a great place to live and work.

I'd also like to thank city staff members for their behind the scenes work to make this event a success.

And lastly, but most importantly, thank you to the Bowie residents for watching. It is a great honor to speak directly to the over 60,000 residents of Bowie to give my first State of the City Address.

“The state of our city is strong” and we are standing stronger together.

2020 has been a year of unimaginable change for Bowie.

Tonight marks almost one year since a new Mayor and three new City Councilmembers joined our city's leadership.

And then came, the world-wide COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted all of our lives, and changed our community in so many ways.

But even with so much change, some things remain the same.

The spirit of the City of Bowie has been that of community, but I believe the current COVID-19 pandemic has actually reinforced the idea that, when we stand together, we are stronger and able to overcome all adversities.

I want to start tonight by speaking about the unprecedented health crisis that has impacted our lives in various ways and highlight the city's stellar response to it.

The COVID-19 global pandemic is one of the most dangerous challenges that our city has ever faced.

Everyone listening has been impacted in some way by this virus:

- The worst way is from having lost a loved one during the time of the pandemic, my heart goes out to you.
- Many more have also lost their job or had their incomes greatly reduced as the result of the economic downturn.
- And all of us have been impacted by the stay-at-home orders, face mask requirements, tele-working, and social distancing.

While we are all united in experiencing the impacts of COVID-19, we are also all united in our efforts to overcome the virus too!

I am so proud of our city staff, particularly our Office of Emergency Management, our Public Works Department -- and our front line workers: police, fire fighters, and medical professionals – who have all risen to the challenge to take care of our residents and ensure our city remains at peak operations.

Working closely with our federal, state, and local partners, our city government has taken significant action in various ways to help residents in need that are suffering from the financial impacts of COVID-19, including:

- Ensuring families have access to food by hosting food giveaways with the local foodbank and working with Employ Prince George's to distribute gift cards to hourly workers who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. In fact, the city made a \$20,000 donation to this fund.
- Additionally, the city has worked with our Office of Grant Development Administration to coordinate food drives, where non-perishable food items will be available to Bowie residents. Each weekend from now until November 14th, Bowie residents will be able to drive through one of our various locations and pick up their food package.
- Thank you to the city staff, our Bowie Police Department for assisting in traffic control, and the Department of Community Services for assisting our residents.
- Our city's Grants Office is also working diligently to secure grant funding to help the homeless and to provide legal counsel to tenants and landlords regarding their legal rights under state and local moratoriums on evictions.
- Our city has also created a program to help renters who have been affected by the pandemic to stay in their homes by assisting in making rent payments directly to property owners.

But in addition to providing direct support to residents, the city has provided assistance to keep businesses that employ Bowie residents afloat during these difficult times.

The Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce is at the forefront of helping our Bowie businesses adapt to the current challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Chamber's motto is "educate, advocate, and connect" and now more than ever the Chamber is demonstrating leadership in the Bowie business community by

- Educating business owners,
- Advocating for government resources,
- And connecting local businesses with the tools to not only survive but excel in the current economic climate.

One example is the launch of the Chamber's "Commerce Business Resource Center" that serves as an online virtual "one-stop-shop" for providing educational resources to Bowie-based businesses seeking strategies and resources to address their COVID-19 business recovery needs.

The Bowie Chamber is also delivering a series of online business education and resilience webinars to help keep our business community thriving during the current economic downturn.

So many Bowie residents are employed by or operate small businesses. It is essential that private sector organizations like the Chamber continue to work with the city to support local businesses during these difficult times.

The city also has a longstanding partnership with the Bowie Business Innovation Center, on the campus of Bowie State University, and it has always been a tremendous resource for businesses that are just starting out.

In response to the current economic and health crisis, they have adapted their services and expanded their mission to become the “go-to” source to help Bowie businesses navigate through COVID recovery and support programs.

I want to thank the entire Bowie BIC team for their valuable services provided during this crisis.

Working with the Bowie BIC Incubator, the City Council created a program to work with the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce to assist local small businesses. The City has allocated \$200,000 for this fund.

Through another BIC partnership, this one between the Bowie BIC, the Prince George’s Economic Development Corporation and FSC First, county businesses are receiving support and they are learning tools to help them to stay afloat and to thrive.

These are just some of the ways our city government has partnered with the business community to provide support for our residents.

But I have also witnessed a tremendous outpouring of support from city residents and neighbors helping neighbors.

Numerous non-profits, temples, synagogues, and churches have stepped up during this crisis to provide volunteer relief to those impacted by the virus.

Demonstrating yet again that we are standing stronger together.

Just one prime example is our Neighbors Helping Neighbors Program that shifted from being primarily a house fix-up program to one that works with volunteers to provide masks to seniors, go grocery shopping or pick up prescriptions for them, and provide rides to doctor’s appointments. Over 100 residents have volunteered for this program.

People who volunteer do not do it for the glory and their work often goes unnoticed. But we want them to know that their volunteer efforts are needed and extremely valued during this crisis, so the city established the faces of kindness program to recognize some of the hardest working volunteers:

Some of the honorees so far include:

- A retired nurse who has made more than 1,000 masks to give away

- A fourth grader who started her own mask making campaign
- A leader of our local Girl Scout troop who stepped up to the plate to keep the organization running.
- And several others who selflessly sacrificed their time and money to support those in need.

I believe these examples and others underscore that we must remain united to overcome this pandemic.

As we continue our efforts to monitor the situation and prevent the spread of the virus, we also have to continue our efforts to safely reopen our city to provide for the needs of residents.

Today we remain in Phase II of the reopening plan as ordered by our County Executive Angela Alsobrooks.

However, our recreational facilities have reopened with social distancing and safety precautions in place.

City Hall has opened four service windows to assist the public with Code Compliance, Animal Control, Permitting and bill paying services.

All internal meetings are being conducted virtually and all city staff that can telework continue to telework.

The city continues to follow strict CDC guidelines for social distancing and personal protective equipment and we encourage all residents to do the same.

Our best bet to keep everyone safe in the weeks and months to come is to layer on all the protections we have available.

Masks and social distancing remain our most effective mitigation strategies. We must remain vigilant and we cannot let down our guard as we continue to follow the science and reopen our community safely.

While our city has navigated through the initial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, health experts are warning that a resurgence is possible later this winter, as well as the onset of the flu season. The City will be releasing information regarding our upcoming drive-through flu clinics.

So please go out and get your flu shot, it is more important this year than ever before.

I am reminding residents to remain vigilant and I am confident that our city staff, working alongside our county, state, and federal partners, are prepared to keep Bowie residents safe and healthy until this crisis is over.

We are committed to ensuring that our city government has access to all the resources they need to get this virus under control, stop the spread, and save lives in our community.

While I cannot tell you when this pandemic will end, I will tell you that we have all overcome challenges before, and that we will get through these tough and difficult times together.

I believe we will also come out of this pandemic with a new sense of community and a better understanding of how dependent we are on each other.

I now want to discuss a related topic regarding COVID-19's impacts on our city's finances.

From Washington D.C. to Annapolis, government leaders across the country are grappling with the significant economic impacts of COVID-19.

The City of Bowie is no different.

The mandatory shutdowns and stay-at-home orders were necessary to save lives, but they also had an unfortunate ripple effect of greatly reducing government tax revenues including revenues here in the City.

Given the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and expected decrease in state and local tax revenue, the City Council is carefully examining the city's entire long-term financial outlook.

The latest estimate from the city's finance team shows that city revenues are down approximately \$1 million dollars below budget and are expected to continue to run below estimates for at least several more months.

While the negative impacts to the city's budget are real, the city remains in a strong fiscal position and I, along with the rest of the Council, remain committed to being responsible stewards of taxpayer funds.

One reason we are currently in a strong fiscal position is that we currently have 19 million dollars in our unassigned fund balance. This healthy fund balance will be tremendously helpful in minimizing any potential budget shortfalls.

Another reason our city will be able to weather the current COVID-19 recession is due to the City Council's decision to cancel the IcePlex project.

The IcePlex project was the largest single project in Bowie government's history and cancelling it was by far the toughest decision made by the new City Council to date.

It was a decision that we did not make lightly, but only after spending months reviewing the financial and operational data and receiving public feedback.

The latest data from the city finance team reveals that a total of \$10 million dollars was spent on the IcePlex project by the prior City Council.

However, by cancelling the project we saved the city a total of \$17.3 million in additional funds that can now be repurposed for other expenses, including helping during this pandemic.

The City Council understands that many residents and visitors to our city were greatly disappointed by the decision to cancel the IcePlex project.

That decision does not mean the City of Bowie does not support users of the current ice arena.

We can enhance the current ice amenities offered in the city while also keeping the financial burden on taxpayers low, especially in light of the economic downturn caused by COVID-19.

The entire City Council supports the ice community and we look forward to working with them on a plan to address their needs in a way that makes sense for Bowie residents.

That is why the City Council created an Ice Rink Task Force to give input to the Council as future decisions are made on the ice rink.

The task force includes five Bowie residents and one ice rink staff member.

Their task will be to work with the City Council to advise and assist in developing plans to ensure that Bowie continues to provide stellar service to users of the ice arena.

We are also looking into alternative uses for the former site of the IcePlex project.

Over the coming months, the City Council will be working to develop potential ideas, and with resident involvement we will make a decision for the use of the site that benefits all Bowie residents.

Every time we make a decision, we want to emphasize that we are putting your well-being first.

One of the ways we do this, is by making sure that each and every citizen is valued and appreciated.

We aim to accomplish this by having open dialogue and discussions regarding racism in America.

When George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis earlier this year, the footage of his head on the street, under a police officer's knee, reignited a long simmering national conversation about unresolved issues of race and equal justice under the law in our country.

That conversation is ongoing in Bowie as well, and I believe that we must acknowledge that Black Lives Matter.

Most of the reforms that are needed to prevent the type of violence and injustices that we've seen take place are at the local level.

I am extremely glad to have an ally in this effort in Bowie Police Chief John Nesky.

His leadership and the professionalism of the men and women of the Bowie Police Department are a model for departments across the country.

He has made it crystal clear that the Bowie Police Department is committed to engaging in meaningful and honest discussions surrounding not only racial inequalities, but all facets of policing and continuing to build the relationship with the community.

Chief Nesky has demonstrated that he is a progressive police chief by supporting the effort to develop the first ever citizens review board in the city, something that Chief Nesky supported before the recent national conversation on the subject.

The City Council has also taken steps to reaffirm our city's commitment to advancing our common goal of equity and justice for all by passing a Black Lives Matter resolution that was proposed earlier this month.

The resolution calls for the city government to undergo a full review of all policies with assistance from a professional consulting firm, report findings to the Diversity Committee and City Council to ensure ongoing best practices in non-discrimination and promoting intersectional equity and social justice.

All residents deserve to be treated fairly, with dignity, and to have their humanity, existence, and contributions valued.

We are making sure to continue to have conversations regarding equity, through the actions of our city's Diversity Committee and Community Outreach Committee.

Tomorrow, October 27th at 7:00 pm, both of our city's committees will be teaming up to bring a discussion on social justice to the Bowie community.

The conversation will be moderated by committee members and will include panelists from Bowie state University, the Prince George's chapter of the NAACP, and the Prince George's County Human Relations Commission.

This conversation will take place via Zoom. Attendees may submit comments/questions during the event using the Q & A feature of Zoom. Please be sure to register online.

By creating opportunities for open dialogue, and by working together as a community, I am hopeful that together we can make strides to ensure that the legacy of racial injustice in our nation does not remain a stain on our society.

Part of what has made me so hopeful is the fact that so many young people have been galvanized, activated, motivated, and mobilized.

We have seen peaceful, mostly young protestors across our region using the power of advocacy to call for change in our society.

As Mahatma Ghandi once said: "we must be the change we want to see in the world".

And one of the central ways to effect change is to vote for elected leaders that share the values and principles important to us all.

We are at a very important juncture as a nation. We face many challenges ahead. One of the most important things you can do as a citizen is to vote.

That is why I want to end my remarks by calling attention to the very important election taking place next week.

We all know that a Presidential Election is taking place, but that is not the only office on the ballot next Tuesday.

Next week's election will also determine who represents us in Congress, on the Prince George's County Board of Education, and also who serves as Circuit Court judges to ensure equal justice under the law.

There are also important ballot questions that will determine whether betting on sporting events will be allowed in Maryland and other important topics.

No matter who you vote for or how you vote on these topics, the critical thing is that we all vote!

The universal right to vote did not come easily. If you haven't already, make your plan now to exercise that right in this year's election.

In light of COVID-19, there are now more voting options than ever before:

- Vote by mail. - if you have requested a mail in ballot, complete it, sign it, and seal it. Then mail it back to the Board of Elections or drop it at one of the 42 drop box locations in Prince George's County. Including five in our area. (1) Bowie Gymnasium, (2) the south Bowie Community Center, (3) Bowie High School, (4) Glenn Dale Community Center, and (5) Bowie State University.
- So far 15,000 plus Bowie residents have voted by mail or drop box.
- The Early Voting period began today and will continue through November 2nd. The Bowie Gymnasium is one of 11 early voting sites in the county and is open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.
- Due to the pandemic, there will be just 42 places to vote on Election Day in the county. Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. for in-person voting and to accept ballots.

But, please remember that due to the heavy turnout expected, you may have to wait in long, socially distanced lines outside to cast your vote. It is not necessary to stand in these lines, to drop off your mail-in ballot.

Presidential elections are administered by the county and state Board of Elections. The city has no official role in this election, but we are providing important information about the process.

And if you are a senior, the Bowie Senior Center is standing by to help you navigate the voting process this year and they can help arrange a ride to a voting center on Election Day, although again, we encourage you to vote by mail instead. Please call the center at 301-809-2300 with your questions.

Let me conclude my statements on voting by saying casting your ballot demonstrates your resolve to have a say in your government. It is the patriotic and honorable thing to do.

If you have not already done so, I urge you to make your voice heard by voting in the upcoming elections.

In closing, Bowie is great because of the work we do together.

From the Mayor and City Council, to city staff and employees, to local businesses and non-profits and our faith community, to the most important element: each and every resident of our city.

As long as we're standing together in common purpose, our future is hopeful, and the state of our city will always be strong.