

CITY OF BOWIE

STATE OF THE CITY REPORT



MAYOR G. FREDERICK ROBINSON

Presented to the Greater Bowie Chamber of Commerce
January 30, 2013

State of the City
Mayor G. Frederick Robinson
City of Bowie Senior Center
January 30, 2013

Good morning and thank you all for coming today. As members of the business community you make many important contributions to this city and your efforts are recognized and greatly appreciated. You are not only our neighbors, but our valued partners.

I would like to especially thank President Len Lucchi for his outstanding leadership of the Greater Bowie Chamber, and for his dedication and involvement in all things Bowie, and particularly for convincing me to join him at an Eagle Scout Review Board the Sunday before Christmas, during the Redskins game. Thank you, Len.

Thanks too, to your Executive Director, Mrs. Kelly Pierce. Kelly represents the Chamber exceptionally well. We value her experience and her sage advice on Chamber issues. Thank you, Kelly.

Getting right to the point - I am pleased to report to you today that the State of the City of Bowie is strong. Our budget is balanced. Our bills are paid. Our reserves are strong. We are home to some of the best folks and the best businesses in the State of Maryland. Our citizens are talented and hard working, and our businesses are energetic and engaged. We are bound together as a community of caring individuals and organizations that support each other and are always willing to come to the aid of a neighbor in need.

Together we have weathered financial storms and natural disasters. We have seen the effects of recent economic challenges, but we are moving forward.

In 1990, Census figures showed that 37,000 people called Bowie home. In 2000, the population was 50,000 and today 55,000 people live in our fair city. We don't often look back that far, but since the early 1990s there has been a 329% increase in square footage for retail and a 200% growth in office space. As a result, there are many more job opportunities in Bowie than there were in 1990. Our choices for housing, shopping, and dining out are also greater and more varied. The housing inventory ranges from entry level to million dollar homes and did you know that today there are over 90 places in this City where you can grab a bite to eat?

The average age of our residents is 43 and over 10% are over 65. Interestingly, many of our younger residents who could never find anything to do in Bowie as teenagers are now returning to Bowie, buying homes and raising their children here. No doubt, despite all the expanded amenities, their children will be complaining in a short time "there is still nothing to do here."

We have a stable economy, a well-educated work force, and involved residents who expect first rate services from their government. I'm proud to say that, no matter what the job, our employees meet or exceed expectations every single day.

Having travelled extensively across the state over the last several years I can say without reservation that Bowie continues to set the bar that others seek to emulate.

This incredible building hosting today's event is a fine example of that boast. The Bowie Senior Center is the only senior center in Maryland and one of only 10% of all senior centers in America to be accredited by the National Council on Aging and the National Institute of Senior Centers. For that honor, we thank the members who offer suggestions and support and the outstanding staff that manages this facility. Our staff is not only effective, but they genuinely enjoy what they do. Manager Kathy White and Assistant Manager Laurel Raymond are here today and I applaud them for this Center's success.

Before you leave today, I hope you will take a good look around the building. I am sure the more you see, the more you will like what you see. Who knows, some of you might even be eligible for membership.

While there is a lot to admire about this building, it is also typical of many City initiatives:

- We began with a need
- We defined a vision
- We sought guidance and participation from enthusiastic supporters
- We carefully analyzed data and developed a plan
- We took feedback on that plan, refined it and then appropriated the necessary funds to accomplish our goals; and
- Lastly, we built it and assembled a dedicated staff that worked with our residents to bring the project to life.

We have followed this road map to improve Belair Mansion and the Ice Arena, to establish our Police Department, to make neighborhood improvements in Old Town Bowie, to expand our parks and athletic fields, and to build our landmark City Hall. We have worked hard to be responsive to community needs, but we are always mindful that we are stewards of the public's trust and that we are spending taxpayers' money.

We have been able to accomplish so much because we are committed to a thoughtful, conservative approach to budgetary matters, something I think we have in common with the business plans you understand so well.

- We operate on a "Pay as You Go" Plan.
- We maintain strong reserves.

- We do not use long-term borrowing to finance current operations.
- We proudly maintain a Triple A (AAA) Bond Rating and are one of only two cities in the state that can claim that accomplishment.

Speaking of being stewards, Bowie has also become a leader in environmental stewardship. It has always been important to us, but I am proud to say that our progress in this area has grown substantially.

When we build a new facility or make a major renovation, the environmental impact and the energy efficiency of the building are a central component of the plans. This strategy earned us a LEED Silver rating from the US Green Building Council for our Parks and Grounds facility in 2008 and most recently a LEED Gold certification for our new City Hall in 2012.

We have adopted a series of green policies to guide us and we are setting goals for continued improvement.

- We are increasing the overall tree canopy in the City. It currently stands at 42.5% and we are working toward a goal of having 45% of the city covered by trees.
- We have installed solar panels at the Radio and TV Museum, virtually eliminating the need for outside electric resources.
- We are evaluating the use of these panels at other city facilities to save money and reduce our dependence on the electric grid.
- We have planted over 42 acres of new woodlands and have kept much of area at Church Road Park and Jericho Park undisturbed and in its natural state.
- We have increased the rate of residential recycling. In fact, the new large carts provided to every household in last two years are making a marked difference.
- In 2005, we recycled 25% of the solid waste stream. In 2012, it was 38% and we expect it to be even higher in 2013.
- Last year, recycling actually saved taxpayers more than \$600,000 that would have been spent on landfill fees.
- We are buying more hybrid vehicles and more Energy Star equipment, and we are working with the Environmental Advisory Committee, the newly formed Green Team, and a staff Green Team to examine ways to reduce our carbon footprint and to educate the public and employees about the benefits of green and sustainable approaches to construction, gardening and every day living.

We have an exceptional record in this area and we are exceedingly proud of the dedicated City employees, who are implementing these strategies, managing our facilities and parks, collecting our recycling and refuse, and making energy efficiency and sustainability a cornerstone of our organization.

We are making great progress in other areas as well.

The Bowie Police Department continues to grow in experience and in stature. We have successfully met the goals of our original plan for the department and are building a strong reputation and tradition for outstanding police service. We have a growing Neighborhood Watch Program and a Business Watch Program. We have an effective presence at Bowie High School and our officers frequently visit other schools in the City to discuss safety issues with students and faculty.

While the department has grown in size, it has been careful to maintain its “small town” approach which provides quick response, public visibility, and community focused actions. We are duly proud of the men and women of the Bowie Police Department. They are preventing crimes, solving cases, and making a difference in our community every day. They have proven that the choice to create a Bowie Police Department was indeed a wise one.

It is important to note, we did all this and more while keeping the combined City/County property tax rate at the same rate it was in 2003. I don't expect that to change this year. In fact, I am confident that Council and staff will produce a budget this year that covers our core services and general operations, without an increase in the City's property tax rate. Don't know about you, but I think that in this day and age that is a significant accomplishment.

Keeping taxes constant is one way we help your business. We also work to strengthen the local economy by working closely with the Chamber and by focusing on economic development.

Our Business Incubator Program at Bowie State University is up and running. The ten new companies participating there have generated 25 new full time jobs; 6 part time jobs, and 2 intern jobs for a total of 33 new start-up jobs. Not bad! Not bad at all. We look for more successes there in the coming year.

- We promote Bowie at every opportunity, including conventions and trade shows, and we actively engage with commercial real estate brokers to highlight Bowie and make sure they are always exploring “the Bowie option” with their clients.
- We nurture new projects that will enhance the variety of housing options in the City. Harmony Place, with its 286 high-end units, now under construction on Health Center Drive, is a good example of how we work to ensure the best possible offerings in our city. We look forward to the opening of the first units there this spring.

- In the last year or so we have also welcomed TD Bank, the Goddard School, Peach Preserve, more homes at Ashleigh, Woodmore Estates, the Hamptons at Woodmore, and Page Court into our city.
- We are proud to be one of a small number of municipalities that has initiated an incentive fund to attract new businesses to Bowie. We believe our actions, working in concert with new County moves in this direction, will prove helpful in expanding our business base.
- We continue to partner with the Small Business and Technology Development Center to provide training programs for Bowie businesses. By hosting the CEO Accelerator program, we helped to invigorate 12 local businesses. Another 12-week session of that program begins in February.
- Under the Procurement and Technical Training Assistance or PTAP Program, we host counseling and training programs to teach businesses how to do business with the federal government.
- And as I said before, we are always looking at ways to improve the local economy by expanding the city's tax base, a challenging task at present.

Let me speak for a minute about annexations. In 2006, the Council adopted a policy to support controlled annexations that increase the City's tax base. Expansion of our current borders occurs only after a careful cost/benefit analysis has been performed.

Some recent annexations have included the Mill Branch Crossing project on the east side of Route 301 that will eventually bring an additional 600,000 square feet of mixed commercial development and employment opportunities to the City and the West Bowie Village annexation, which included the Spring Meadows subdivision, the Dixon Crossing subdivision and over 33 acres in the Woodcliff Road commercial area.

We recently met with ownership of the approved, but as yet, pending Karington Project at Route 214 and Route 301. The developers seem quite interested in becoming part of the City and that too, will be mutually beneficial, if it occurs.

There's also a plan in the works for a CVS and a car wash at Route 301 and Mitchellville Road. We hope to eventually bring these new businesses and the car dealerships on "Automotive Row" on Southbound Route 301 into the City as well.

In the same general neighborhood, the former Tia's Restaurant site is being redeveloped as a medical/dental building that we hope will soon be under construction.

We are seeking opportunities for the West Bowie Village area and we continue to explore potential improvements along the Route 450 business corridor. Hilltop Center recently completed a major revitalization. Hopefully market conditions will improve to the point that Market Place can be redeveloped. We believe that Market Place and Free State Shopping Center are opportunities for mixed used development, bringing retail and residential together in the same area.

Perhaps the most significant development issue before us this year will be discussions on possible changes to the covenants at Melford to allow for some limited mixed use development on the site.

St. John Properties has put forth a creative vision for Melford that includes a substantial number of age-restricted, active-adult housing units and related amenities in the park. In March the Council will consider a covenant change in light of current market conditions and this proposal.

This area of the City is unique in that the City retains complete control over how the property is developed. Obviously, this is not a matter without controversy. It would represent a significant change in direction at the site. Over the years there have been numerous plans and proposals there, some successful, and some not. I believe that we have a responsibility to examine the options here as a way to maximize the potential of this park and I look forward to this necessary discussion.

You may have read in the local press that the Maryland Jockey Club wants to sell the race track property. We are working with our colleagues in Upper Marlboro and in Annapolis, and particularly with the Governor's office to explore the possibility of the City acquiring the property. This would be an incredible environmental jewel to acquire and could provide more recreational opportunities and expand our inventory of protected green space.

Our longstanding partnership with the Chamber and its members is a critical component to the overall economic health of our community.

- In May, we will jointly announce the Bowie Business Incentive Awards and host the Business Awards luncheon to recognize and celebrate businesses in several different categories. This will be a great opportunity to showcase some of the many impressive businesses that call Bowie home.
- We are also grateful for your support and hard work on our National Night Out Against Crime, which, by the way, won another national award last year, for co-hosting the Public Safety Awards luncheon with us, and for organizing the Home Expo at Bowiefest each year.

Now, some may call me Bowie's eternal optimist, but my comments here this morning do reflect the reality of what's happening in Bowie. But, there are economic challenges before us as well.

- We believe that some effects of the recession will linger in our area for several years.
- We are concerned that ongoing federal budget issues will have a detrimental effect on those that live and work in Bowie.

- We would like to entice more small grocery stores to open spaces in Bowie but we are limited because they want to sell beer and wine and State law prohibits beer and wine sales in most grocery stores in our County. We will be working with our district team in Annapolis to revisit this issue.
- Our share of State Highway User Revenue, which comes from the gas tax and motor vehicle titles, is intended to help local governments pay for road maintenance. It was slashed by the State in each of the last five years. In fiscal year 2007, we received \$3.1 million. This year we will receive only \$400,000, but I am happy to report that the Governor's Proposed FY 2014 Budget does include additional funding. Under the plan we would receive a \$1 million increase, which would restore us to almost 50% of 2007 levels. This is progress indeed, but we will continue to push for full restoration of our share of these funds.
- Property values continue to lag although there are some signs that improvements might reasonably be expected.
- City unemployment numbers are moving in the right direction but still hovered at 5.3% in December, while the national average remained near 8%.
- Major federal requirements of new stormwater maintenance programs remain undefined in scope and projected cost and that issue looms significantly over our future well-being.
- Some of our long-term City employees are retiring after incredible service. Our challenge with these staff changes here will be to maintain the outstanding level of service and institutional knowledge that these career employees provided over the years.
- Given our recent history we remain alert to possible natural disasters –In the last 18 months we have experienced an earthquake, a hurricane, a tropical storm, a derecho and most recently a “super storm”. The storms brought down trees, created power outages and telephone service interruptions, but our staff performed well in each event and we learned from each incident. While we prepare for the worst, we certainly hope this year will be a bit less challenging, but if I see hordes of locusts moving this way, my concerns will heighten.

So, what can we expect in the upcoming year?

- We will maintain our core city services and we will look for creative ways to improve those services.
- We will continue to work effectively with the Chamber to enhance our position as a business-friendly city.
- We will continue to lead by example on environmental issues and we will continue to identify and develop those community amenities that define Bowie as a great place to live, to work, and to do business.

- We will continue to work with our colleagues in Upper Marlboro and in Annapolis to guide Bowie to a strong and prosperous future.
- We will engage with the community and we will continue to operate as, what I believe to be, one of the most open and most transparent city governments in the region.
- We will continue to do the best we can for everyone that has made the choice to make Bowie their home, and as I mentioned earlier, I expect we'll do this without an increase in our tax rate.

We remain strong because we remain committed to Bowie and her future. While we may have occasional disagreements, we are far more together than most communities and governments. I know our commitment remains solid – to do what is best for Bowie even if at times those choices are challenging or difficult.

As I close this meeting, I want to thank you for all you do to help make the state of Bowie strong. I would also like to take a moment too, to thank all our neighbors currently serving in the military forces of the United States. For wherever they go, our flag goes with them. I ask you for your thoughts and prayers for those men and women serving in harm's way today and I know you join us in hoping they return home safely and soon.

Thanks again for coming today. Enjoy the rest of the day.