



Mayor Steve Williams
City of Huntington

2020 State of the City Address

Mr. Chairman, members of City Council, in accordance with the provisions of Article 10, Section 10.2 of the Charter of the City of Huntington, West Virginia, I hereby present to you the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2021.

The budget presented to you is a familiar document. It reflects the policies and priorities that we have sought to deliver in the past three budgets. There continues to be an emphasis on record spending on public safety, record spending on capital improvements, and a focused priority on economic growth, all of which have an emphasis on innovation.

Revenues are consistent and sustainable.

Expenditures are under control.

Consistent, sustainable revenue coupled with controlled expenditures yield a stable, fiscal environment. A stable, fiscal environment yields opportunity to create aggressive growth.

We have positioned the city to be fiscally and operationally sound.

President George Washington in the opening remarks of his 7th State of the Union Message, stated to the members of the Senate and the House of Representatives,

“I trust I do not deceive myself when I indulge the persuasion that I have never met you at any period when more than at the present the situation of our public affairs has afforded just cause for mutual congratulation, and for inviting you to join with me in profound gratitude to the Author of all Good for the numerous and extraordinary blessings we enjoy.”

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President Washington reporting the state of affairs of the newly-created Union – amid tenuous domestic uncertainty, fiscal and financial challenges, disorder among the frontiers, continued war and insurrection abroad – found the fortitude to express to his colleagues in the Senate and House of Representatives *“to unite our efforts to preserve, prolong, and improve our immense advantages. To cooperate with you in this desirable work is a fervent and favorite wish of my heart.”*

Those of us chosen to serve are blessed to be able to serve in a time such as this.

Furthermore, we are blessed to be able to serve in such willing company.

History will chronicle these days as the transformative moment in our community and region.

The citizens of our city have been confronted with a barrage of challenges. Such challenges have descended upon our neighborhoods, not by locally created policy prescriptions, but by market and policy forces that have national and international origins.



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The past five decades have seen international markets change the manufacturing landscape that caused jobs to be moved to foreign shores. A changing technological and digital marketplace has displaced jobs to be performed by robots. A changing energy economy has disrupted local economies in Appalachia, causing residents to seek employment beyond their ancestral homes. In turn, communities have been left with scant support to recreate a productive economy to provide for families and enterprise.

We must confront these issues with the knowledge that much of these issues are not unique to our community, but are held in common by communities and cities of all sizes. Just as well, we must face the challenges before us united with our brethren in other cities across the nation and around the world. We must face these challenges, not as victims, but as warriors ready to stand strong before the headwinds of market forces, national and international policies, and unwilling stubbornness by those who profit from the decline that is brought upon the populations they seek to exploit.

We must never allow ourselves to be seen as victims or seen as potential victims.

We have learned that life isn't fair. Rather than ruminating over these unfortunate circumstances, there are those who have determined that they can be transformed to wonderful opportunities.

This is the mindset brought by this City Council in service to the citizens of Huntington. When faced with economic uncertainty, this Council and administration found economic discipline. When faced with market despair, this Council and administration found innovation. When faced with public safety concern, this Council and administration found community collaboration.

In short, this Council, this community, has chosen to identify the solutions rather than the excuses.

A city of solutions is defined by the fortitude of the people who comprise the community.

The corporate governing structure of the city is simply a reflection of its population. Huntington has a highly-chronicled history of resilience. The resilience has been reflected in the activity within the city.

Jobs and investment are returning. Crime is declining. Roads, sidewalks and sewers are all being repaired at levels that were unthinkable in years past.

Every part of the city displays indications of rapid and various improvements.

Improvements and projects scheduled:

- \$5 million in storm sewer improvements
- \$8.8 million Hal Greer corridor improvements
- \$2.4 million in street improvements
- \$3 million improvements inside and outside of Mountain Health Arena
- Marshall University Baseball stadium construction

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- ACF Industries acquired and redevelopment

In short, Huntington is engaged in a transformational renaissance.

Our reputation has become known as a community that faces issues directly by identifying the challenge and coming up with innovative solutions through collaboration.

As we proceed forward, we do so with an eye intending to foresee how the city will evolve during the next five decades. When making such plans, the measurement of risk must be taken into consideration. To some, the assessment of risk is the attempt to mitigate the downside possibilities. Our challenges in the future are in the opposite direction, however. Market forces moving in Huntington will bring unparalleled growth. Huntington will be known as the economic gateway to the Appalachian region.

Our challenge then is how we manage the upside risk. Are we prepared to handle success?

Our city systems have been evolving in recent years. Our efforts have been focused among four pillars:

- Fiscal stability
- Public safety
- Economic growth
- Innovation – City of Solutions

FISCAL STABILITY

When you control finances, you control policy. Fiscal stability has been restored. Fiscal Year 2018 was focused on bringing city expenditures under control. Health care and pension costs comprised 45% of the budget. Today they comprise 35% of the budget. As a result, we are able to repair and pave more streets and invest in our most critical asset, our employees.

Our financial system is audited annually. The past two years, the city has received audits with zero findings. This is the only time in the past 40-plus years the city has had such a clean audit.

Our public safety pensions were once the subject of criticism and scorn. A concerted effort to address the pension liability has been the focus of this administration. Today, our pension payments are made on time. The pension calculations are accurate. We have collaborated with the Municipal Pension Oversight Board to assure that city contribution calculations are performed in a timely manner so that they do not disrupt a fiscal year budget as they have previously in 2011 and again in 2016. In turn, our police and firefighter retirees were able to receive an assurance from the City that the pension obligation that was made to them upon their retirement would be honored and protected.

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When I came into office in 2013, the asset value of the Firefighter Pension Fund was \$13,522,855. The most recent asset value of the Firefighter Pension Fund was \$32,310,123, or an increase of 138 percent since 2013.

In 2013, the asset value of the Police Pension Fund was \$22,413,615. The most recent asset value of the Police Pension Fund was \$43,017,808, an increase of 92 percent since 2013.

Huntington's public safety pensions were once the subject of criticism and derision. Today, they are used by the Municipal Pension Oversight Board as an example of how to successfully turn around and manage public safety pensions.

Our revenues were the focus of Fiscal Year 2019. We worked to assure that taxes and fees assessed are taxes and fees that must be paid. We have stepped up efforts to place liens on property. I personally sign off on cease and desist orders to close businesses that refuse to pay their taxes and fees. In turn, fly-by-night operations find Do Not Occupy orders posted on their property when taxes and fees are not paid. Our revenues continue to increase each year because of our aggressive collection efforts.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Residents must feel safe. Crime statistics in violent crime and property crime have reduced each of the past two years. The Police and Fire departments have had the largest budgets in the history of each of their respective departments, which have allowed significant investments in public safety, such as:

- 16 new police cruisers and 11 new detective vehicles during the past two years. These vehicles have also come equipped with new radios and computers. I am proposing to purchase 5 more police cruisers in my proposed budget for next fiscal year.
- Three new police motorcycles to update an aging fleet.
- External vest carriers for all of our police officers.
- The hiring of a recruitment coordinator to aggressively bring the best and brightest minds to serve in our department. We are also now offering \$10,000 signing bonuses to certified officers.
- Funding for a new frontline fire apparatus in each of the past two years. The first of these fire apparatuses was delivered last summer. The second will be delivered this coming summer. I am proposing to purchase yet another front-line apparatus in my proposed budget for next fiscal year.
- The complete renovation of the Guyandotte Fire Station and purchasing property and moving forward with construction plans for a new University Fire Station at 9th Avenue and 20th Street.
- 50 new sets of turnout gear to protect our firefighters from harm. I am proposing to purchase 50 more sets next fiscal year.

Staffing levels have been budgeted at 109 for HPD and 97 for HFD. Recruitment continues to be a challenge as it is across the nation.

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The principal reason crime has declined throughout every neighborhood is the hard work of the officers of the Huntington Police Department and the partnerships that we have developed. The Huntington Police Department partners with the entire federal apparatus, among which are the ATF, DEA, Appalachian HIDTA, FBI, and the U.S. Marshals.

Addiction is the fuel driving crime throughout the city and across the nation. Addiction is the greatest existential threat facing our nation. We find ourselves consumed with cutting off supply through law enforcement. We have learned that supply will continue in every means possible as long as the demand is present. As we have created strategies to interrupt supply and to diminish demand, we have also come to realize that the resulting fallout of the problem has disrupted our community, our society, and our culture in a manner that will take decades to resolve.

The level of success our community has accomplished – the results that have caught the attention of decision makers around the nation – has resulted from a collaborative community action plan. The Marshall School of Medicine, Marshall Health, Mountain Health Network, the Cabell-Huntington Health Department, the Cabell County Commission, and the City of Huntington have taken the lead to establish a comprehensive approach that I have championed during the few past years. They recently revealed a plan that creates the framework for a comprehensive, all-encompassing institute on addiction.

The investment and development in the downtown area and our neighborhoods are special. What has been created in our nearly 150 years of existence and in more recent years of loving care is precious. We have a lovely, vibrant community with neighborhoods that we cherish. Sadly, there are those who view our polite, caring, and compassionate approach to life as a sign of weakness. A loving heart can also be a heart of determination, passion, and fire. We must jealously protect our precious community. Pity the poor fools who attempt to destroy what we have worked so hard to create.

The criminal element has become much more sophisticated in their approach. More often, they seek to cloak their illicit enterprise within an enterprise that, on the surface, appears to be lawful and legitimate. We have every intention of supporting and assisting responsible, honest, law-abiding enterprises. We also have every intention to make it impossible for fly-by-night operators to set up shop.

All enterprises interact with every facet of municipal government. Finance, code enforcement, planning and zoning, sewer and storm water all on occasion interact with enterprises that are operating in the city. We have learned that each of our departments has the opportunity in that interaction to observe signals that could be revealing whether the enterprise is legitimate or not.

Hank Dial was hired as our city manager because he is an excellent administrator and budget manager. In turn, his insight into public safety provides all of our departments an eye-opening view that can help our Police Department and Fire Department. In short, City Manager Dial is creating an early-warning system within our departments that will enable our first responders to be proactive in preventing crime.

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ECONOMIC GROWTH

Our city has established itself as a model for revitalization for small cities across the country. The successful proposal in the America's Best Communities competition has provided much-needed capital that is driving new development in the Highlawn area, Fairfield corridor, and West End. The effort to create the plan has been 7 years in the making. Partnerships with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Appalachian Regional Commission, Federal Highways Administration, West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection, West Virginia Department of Commerce, and West Virginia Department of Transportation all have enabled these monumental projects to proceed.

Huntington has three Opportunity Zones assigned that create economic incentives combined with state Historic Tax Credits. Two of the Opportunity Zones make up the entire downtown area adjacent to Marshall University. Senator Shelley Moore Capito has provided assistance that leads us to believe that our downtown is primed for substantial investment transforming our civic skyline and downtown office and residential space.

In turn, cooperative support provided by State Senator Bob Plymale and Judge Dan O'Hanlon indicate that the digital city that we have been planning will occur through a public-private partnership in due course.

Our efforts to transform the region are more than a dream. They have now become an expectation. Partnerships with Marshall University, AT&T and the newly-constituted Mountain Health Network have provided us with necessary capacity to ensure that we move steadily toward our goals.

INNOVATION – CITY OF SOLUTIONS

Fiscal stability, public safety, and economic growth are three pillars that must be focused upon every moment of every day. Our city's growth has established the necessity to formally focus on a fourth pillar – innovation. The federal, state, private, and philanthropic partnerships have provided us with an insight to the unique opportunities that we have before us. Huntington has become an acknowledged leader in so many different fields.

At one point, Huntington was always being named as the example of how not to proceed. Now, cities across the country come to visit Huntington to observe how we address public safety, addiction, health care, and obesity. The U.S. EPA uses Huntington as an example for brownfield development. The West Virginia DEP cites Huntington as an example of a storm water management program to emulate. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recognized the Huntington Water Quality Board for its exceptional management of the Guyandotte Floodwall Levy.

Our partnerships with our congressional delegation are such that we know that we can always depend upon support from Senator Joe Manchin, Senator Shelley Moore Capito, and Congresswoman Carol Miller. The \$350,000 planning grant for the Hal Greer Boulevard Corridor

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was a direct result of Senator Manchin’s efforts. As I have already indicated, Senator Capito has been a stalwart advocate on our behalf on all efforts related to the opioid epidemic and our response to concerns related to the 11th Street Pump Station run by our Water Quality Board. We know we can depend upon our congressional team.

We receive support from numerous national organizations. One organization sought our participation and the relationship continues to pay dividends every day. The support that we receive from the National League of Cities drives all that we do. They provide us the opportunity to learn what effective programs are being developed across the nation. Whether it be addiction, homelessness, gun violence, economic inequality or, health care, we have a resource that continues to pay dividends in providing technical support and encouragement. The NLC is made up of more than 2,400 cities, towns, and villages across the nation. They have embraced us and we, in turn, are embracing them. Huntington is better because of our relationship with the National League of Cities and the nation is stronger because the National League of Cities makes our cities, towns, and villages stronger.

The judgement of the value and greatness of our city is a measurement and judgement of the value of our residents. Our city is not on the precipice of greatness. We are already there. There is greatness among us. Our city is being recognized and acknowledged across the state and nation for our innovation and determination. Of course we have challenges. The difference that separates us from most cities across the country is that city government does not have to identify all of the solutions. Our residents step forward, identify the challenge, accept their assignment, and take ownership of the solution.

Thus the title of “City of Solutions.”