

Hello, I am Mayor Sandy Roberson and I am here on behalf of the Rocky Mount City Council to give you an update on the State of the City.

I would like to start with a thank you to all who have worked together in what has been a tough year since I took office as your Mayor. I am proud that we have rallied together:

- To get through a year of this pandemic;
- Supporting a moratorium on utility cutoffs for those in our community who are struggling;
- Receiving an investigative report from the NC State Auditor;
- Surviving flooding events;
- Providing food to our neighbors in need;
- Participating in peaceful protests, and the removal and eventual sale of the Confederate monument;
- Dealing with Suddenlink issues across the board;
- Handling a City computer shut down; and maybe most importantly,
- Developing an understanding that Black Lives Do Matter.

Before I continue, please join me in a moment of silence to remember all those we lost to COVID-19 and to keep their family and friends in our prayers. (*moment of silence*) Thank you.

The pandemic came at us quickly and unexpectedly. And the City responded:

The Budget and Evaluation Office under the leadership of Ken Hunter

- Finished FY 2020 with a net gain in fund balance despite the pandemic; and
- Found more than \$13 million in necessary reductions to offset the ongoing impact of the pandemic on City revenues to maintain a balanced budget.

The Business and Collections Services led by Latasha Hall

- Developed a more robust customer facing website making it easier to navigate; including the ability to place service requests, view and pay your bill, and manage multiple accounts;
- Launched the Utility Assistance Program in partnership with Community and Business Development to allocate funds from the CDBG-CV funding ensuring that eligible customers exhibiting financial hardship related to COVID-19 can get payments up to \$500 applied to their utility accounts, and
- Continued the City's partnership with the Salvation Army on the WARM program to support eligible customers with up to \$300 applied to their utility accounts. This program is funded 100% through donations and fundraising.

The Communications, Marketing and Public Relations overseen by Dorothy Smith

- Quickly overcame technical issues to successfully broadcast City Council meetings to the general public through Facebook Live and an upgraded CITY TV 19 on YouTube.

The Human Relations Department directed by Archie Jones

- Managed the difficult task to implement the 2020 Census while dealing with COVID-19 restrictions, and
- Partnered in a number of relief projects supporting our community during the pandemic.

When the City experienced a ransom wear attack **Technology Services and its newly hired director Greg Cotten**

- Increased the threat detection and responses across all network devices and storage systems to keep the City's computer systems safe.

Thank you to each one of you and your staffs. *(pause)*

When I ran for Mayor, I did so because of the love I have for my hometown and, realizing that talk was cheap and if I wanted change, together we had to be the change. These are the issues that you wanted me to focus on, and many will be the subjects of upcoming virtual town halls led by our City Manager:

Improving Public Safety

I have heard you that the safety or our neighborhoods is of the utmost importance.

In the last year, my team led by Bill Farmer, and I worked with UNC Chapel Hill students on a capstone project collecting data regarding crime, researching how other national and statewide communities and police interact, discovering successful initiatives on how to differentiate violent offenders from those suffering mental health crises, the overall impact of mental health on our crime statistics and diving deep into analytics to predict high crime areas.

My hope is that through this data collection, not only to pinpoint where crime happens most often and then utilize technology and other City assets to not only predict where crime will occur, but better utilize our police force and community resources to combat it. I have forwarded this report to the City Manager and Police Chief. Thank you, Bill, for your leadership on this initiative.

In our efforts to improve communication, thanks to the City Manager for identifying this technology, we hope to soon explore an exciting smartphone application, developed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, that allows the public to be alerted of crimes in real time that are happening close to their homes, schools or workplace. Citizens can also use the app to easily report crimes, complaints or compliments. In addition, the app alerts the public about traffic accidents and road blockages. We think it is a better way to share information and look forward to bringing this technology to the City and discussing its implementation.

I have partnered with ADT Blue to provide us with free doorbell cameras to place in high-crime neighborhoods as a test, so as to assist RMPD with video of criminal misdeeds. Thank you, ADT Blue, for your help in finding solutions for crime.

Each of us on the Council have heard you and are focused on improving public safety as we take positive steps in the right direction.

Strengthening Education

Until every child in Rocky Mount graduates from high school, Rocky Mount will not reach its full potential. We have spent a great deal of time in the community discussing education.

In fact, we will have an initiative soon in Rocky Mount that embraces the Obama Foundation's *My Brother and Sisters Keeper* program that aims to increase the number of youths of color who have access to the tools and opportunities needed to reach their full potential. This team effort has been led

by Bill Farmer, with help from Ron Green of the Boys and Girls Club of the Tar River Region. Thank you, both for your leadership of this important initiative.

I also want to applaud and recognize the efforts Peacemakers is making in the Southern part of our City. They recently announced the launch of kindergarten and first grade classes that will grow over the years to include higher grades. Peacemakers has proven through their summer and after school programs that they can get results. Thank you, Jesse Lewis and Lemanuel Williams, for your commitment to our community.

I formed a Schools and Jobs Task Force, led by Kevin Jones, noted in their final report that Rocky Mount was featured as one FOX Business's "Top 5 Cities Where Manufacturing is Thriving" giving us the opportunity to expose our City's young people to successful manufacturing careers as an alternative to college. Thank you, Kevin, for joining with me to solve the problems our City is facing. You are a true servant leader.

I also want to thank Dr. Ellis and Dr. Bridges for their commitment to our children. We are blessed to have two such qualified individuals leading our area schools.

It truly takes a village to raise our children and the community is responding to ask how they can help.

Together, we have researched strategies that have provided technology and training to low performing areas. We have connected with our local public education systems to understand the challenges that are confronting our community and we are continuing to work together to strengthen education in Rocky Mount.

Job Creation

Our median household income is about \$40,000 per year. This number is about \$20,000 below the statewide median. We have to do better. And I believe we can!

We have taken the initiative to talk to our largest employers, as well as companies looking to relocate to Rocky Mount, and these are the challenges they are facing (that are not necessarily unique to us):

- a. Low educational achievement, meaning we need to improve the high school graduation rate;
and
- b. Unreliable job attendance, most likely related to unstable transportation and childcare issues.

Other input from existing area businesses is that they have the jobs, but they do not have the skilled labor force to fill them. Another reason for our community to focus on Workforce Development.

These are all things we can change together.

In addition, together, we must develop and support downtown. The heartbeat of any city is its downtown and it is the first place any new business looking to relocate visits. Ours must become an economic engine of entrepreneurs, artists, thriving businesses, and downtown residents who support those businesses—all wrapped in the historic architecture of our buildings.

I want to applaud **Amy Staton who leads the Finance Department and Candice Kurtz, Purchasing Manager**, for their efforts to increase MWBE participation in City contracts from .84% to 2.91% of eligible spending.

Of note, I have worked with community leaders recently to sell Rocky Mount to these new companies launching in the next few months – FCR and Wolf and Flow X-Ray. I will continue to work to bring new jobs and companies to our area. More announcements are coming soon!

In addition, we have been meeting with an advisory council of Rocky Mount business leaders, led by Mark Frohman and Tina Taylor, and UNC Chapel Hill's Public Policy department to support local businesses and economic development through identifying resources for capital and training, as well as showcasing how businesses and communities across the state have been adapting to this pandemic as examples for inspiration. We recently partnered with the City to research data on how contracts are awarded with the goal to ensure that all businesses have access. Thank you, Tina and Mark, for utilizing your business savvy and expertise to help our small businesses launch, grow, and thrive.

I continue to have ongoing discussions with our small businesses on their needs, their ideas and how we can evolve and come out strong from this pandemic.

Affordable Housing

Affordable housing has more to do with the median household income than the cost of the housing. But it also has to do with housing that is available. And I have heard you—we need good jobs that pay a good wage so people can afford housing. Higher median incomes help our citizens afford housing.

We also have a shortage of good housing to offer. Fortunately, residential real estate developers see this need and are starting to focus on Rocky Mount for investment. We welcome their investment into our communities.

Eradicating blight is one avenue to strengthen neighborhoods, increase safety and create a vehicle for home ownership for individuals within these community.

Realtors say the time for this initiative is now as we only have approximately 105 houses for sale in our community and the rental housing market is over 95% occupied. There are approximately 300-400 houses that are currently boarded up. Redevelopment in blighted areas can be a place where home ownership is promoted and enabled. Gentrification can be harnessed in a way that keeps ownership within the community and allows current homeowners to participate in gains in housing values.

For developers looking to invest in our community, **Development Services, spearheaded by Will Deaton,**

- Has launched the One-Stop-Shop to provide developers, realtors and other real estate professionals the opportunity to easily speak with City professionals involved in each aspect of a project, and
- Has received three awards from the NC Chapter of the American Planning Association.

City Manager Small-Toney and her team have rolled out an aggressive plan to expand Affordable Housing and I back it 100%, including the option of asking the public to participate through a General Obligation Bond added to an upcoming ballot. Her team has done an outstanding job of showcasing the need, suggested solutions and the direction our City needs to move forward in.

Key Measurements

The bottom line is that the City needs a written plan to guide our journey to prosperity. There are a lot of great ideas out there, but too many for us to accomplish right away, so we must agree on how we are going to improve Rocky Mount together in a plan. Any successful plan requires an accountability factor or measurable outcomes that allow, in this case the City Manager and Council, to navigate in a way that creates success within the confines of the plan.

In business, we call these measures Key Performance Indicators or KPIs. KPIs keep everyone engaged in the success of the plan and allow our elected and appointed officials to be accountable. Together, we should work to produce unity around a comprehensive plan for the City, with a focus on redevelopment. This plan should allow us, as a community, to be opportunistic when able and calculated when needed.

Several Eastern NC municipalities are utilizing KPIs to improve performance with help from the UNC School of Government Performance Measurement project. I have spoken with the lead professor at UNC, introduced him to Mayor Pro Tem Richard Joyner, and hope that Rocky Mount can become a part of this innovative program at the next opportunity.

Again, I believe continued success and recognition for Rocky Mount, as with any municipality, starts with a solid, written plan so we can all work together toward Rocky Mount's continued success.

Finally, I would like to also commend:

Fire Chief Corey Mercer for leading the Rocky Mount Fire Department to achieve the highest rating of Class 1 to become part of an elite, but small group across the country to do so.

Human Resources spearheaded by Kena Cofield Jones for implementing a wellness program to support the health, morale and general well-being of the City's employees while find a cost savings in workers comp.

Parks and Recreation ably directed by Joel Dunn that installed eight large banners for the Black Light Project on buildings around town to counteract negative perceptions of black men by revealing the authentic, unsung heroes in our communities and connected with stakeholders and the community to adopt a Battle Park Renovations Plan.

The Rocky Mount Police Department for initiating a Police Athletic Program to improve relationships between the police and youth within the city through coaching of youth baseball, softball and basketball teams. I would like to welcome our new Police Chief Robert Hassell to Rocky Mount. We expect great things from his leadership.

Internal Audit led by Abdul Baloch for keeping the City in compliance.

Public Works directed by Brad Kerr for their focus on keeping our community functioning and beautiful; including the completion of the Parker's Canal Drainage Improvement project, resurfacing our streets, designing bike boulevards, and inspiring volunteers to Keep America Beautiful.

Water Resources led by Brenton Bent for upgrading the Sunset Avenue Water Treatment Plant, relining approximately 10,000 linear feet of the 27-inch Beech Branch sewer outfall from the Wastewater Treatment Plant to Seven Bridges Road, and transitioning our water treatment to safer methods.

As we emerge from this year of COVID-19, I urge you to get vaccinated, continue looking after your neighbors and know that I am always working for you. Often it is behind the scenes and unacknowledged, but always ongoing. I am not here to generate attention, but to listen to you to help put Rocky Mount on a path to its highest potential.

Thank you for your time today. I hope you will join me and be the change here in Rocky Mount. It is my honor and pleasure to serve as your Mayor. Thank you.