

2016 State of the County Address



**P. Jason Peters, Chairman
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors
Thursday, November 3, 2016
Green Ridge Recreation Center**

“It’s All Connected”

Good morning.

It is truly a pleasure to be here this morning to talk about the State of the County.

Before I begin, let me take a moment to acknowledge my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors. We have worked together this past year to make so many positive changes for our community.

Supervisor McNamara, Supervisor Bedrosian, Supervisor Hooker and Supervisor Assaid, thanks to each of you for your leadership, your engagement and your commitment to the citizens of Roanoke County.

I offer a special word of gratitude to Supervisors Hooker and Assaid who are just about to complete their first year on the Board. They have committed countless hours serving on the Board, and have spent time with staff to learn how Roanoke County’s government functions.

I can tell you firsthand, you can’t fully appreciate the work of public servants until you run that first EMS call, complete a solid waste route, observe a 911 dispatcher help someone in crisis, or talk with a social worker about the challenges they face each day. Thank you, Martha and George, for all your efforts this year.

Let me also acknowledge the Roanoke County School Board and our School Superintendent who ensure Roanoke County Schools are among the finest in the region and the Commonwealth.

I want to recognize our colleagues from the Cities of Roanoke and Salem, the Town of Vinton, and the Counties of Botetourt, Franklin, and Montgomery. Thank you for being here and thank you for the excellent relationships we have developed as we work to improve the Roanoke Valley.

Thank you to our friends with the Regional Partnership, Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge, the Regional Commission, Roanoke-Blacksburg Technology Council, the Airport Commission, and the Water, Broadband, and Resource Authorities. I appreciate you being here and everything you do.

Thank you to our non-profit organizations that contribute to our community in so many ways. People like Annette Lewis, Wendi Jones, Afira DeVries, Annette Patterson, and so many others, have a never-ending passion for improving the Valley.

And I thank our generous business community that not only drives the economy forward, but also commits time, money and energy to this place we call home. Members of our business community take leadership roles on a number of local boards and commissions. They sponsor community events, provide guidance and feedback on our policies, and on occasion they work to ensure local concerns are heard and addressed in Richmond.

It is good to see our State and Federal elected officials here with us today as well. We appreciate your leadership on behalf of the Roanoke Valley and the entire region.

Lastly, let me acknowledge the County's employees. Without their efforts, I would not have much to talk about today. They are the reason that here, in Roanoke County, local government works.

I truly appreciate all of you and your connections to this Valley.

I hope you received a button this morning when you sat down. Take this as a reminder about all the great things happening in the County and how “It’s All Connected.”

419 Town Center, Explore Park, Broadband, and our Airport --“It’s All Connected.”

Last year, I talked about the things needed to move our community forward. I asked for the commitment of my colleagues on the Board to consider, debate and act upon those things that matter most to our future.

Today, I am pleased to stand here and tell you we have made much progress during the past year. Our County and our region have never been better positioned for the economic growth and prosperity we all desire.

Our successes this year, as every year before, are not ours alone. Let me highlight the efforts of the City of Roanoke, City of Salem, Botetourt County, Virginia Tech, and Carilion to expand our shared economic horizon.

The Deschutes announcement puts Roanoke City and the region in a national spotlight and says, “Look at us! There’s something exciting happening here! Come be a part of it.”

We all got a little more “cool” when Deschutes decided to settle here.

The Eldor announcement, like Deschutes, has greater importance than just new local jobs and investment. International companies like Eldor strengthen our reputation as a competitive location for large business and industry.

And you can’t overstate the significance of the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute’s recent announcement to expand its campus. This will bring new researchers and hundreds of new students to our doorstep. In the words of Roanoke City Manager Chris Morrill, our Valley is truly making the turn from Train City to Brain City.

Of course, we have always known our community is an exceptional place to live and work. Now others do as well.

At last year's State of the County Address, I told you about a strategic planning process that would provide a blueprint for the County's direction for years to come.

In the spring, our community came together to develop the County's first-ever Strategic Plan. Some 900 people attended meetings, took surveys, and shared their best ideas with us.

I, along with my colleagues on the Board, spent many hours discussing the County's future with our citizens. And we heard what they believe success might look like.

We heard concerns about transportation and the need to be connected as a community through better roads, pedestrian and bicycle-friendly streets, sidewalks, and greenways.

We heard desires for more economic growth. Better jobs, technology jobs, and how we need to prepare a workforce to meet the market demands of tomorrow.

We heard about education and how everything we do must be built on the foundation of public school excellence.

We heard about quality of life, and the importance of appreciating the beautiful amenities around us.

We heard the importance of connecting every struggling child and family to the resources they need for success.

And we heard about public safety, and how community partnerships can better protect everyone's right to a peaceful life.

Our citizens have told us what their vision of success for Roanoke County looks like. We are working now to make that vision a reality.

Last year I promised we would focus on economic development by concentrating on projects that trigger new investment and become catalysts for growth.

Our priorities have been clear:

- First, implement Broadband in the County.
- Second, move Explore Park from concept to reality.
- Third, redevelop the Tanglewood Mall area.
- And fourth, work with our partners and do what we can to improve the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport, and other transportation options, both into and within our Valley.

Because of the Board's investment in the Broadband Authority, Roanoke County will soon see 25 miles of communication fiber along its major transportation corridors. When complete, our region will host 75 miles of high-speed data infrastructure for business, government and education.

Soon our community will be positioned to offer new businesses and entrepreneurs reliable, redundant, and cost-effective communications.

It is undeniable that demand for data services will grow exponentially in the coming years. It is also clear that data infrastructure is no less important to tomorrow's economy as transportation infrastructure is to today's economy. With this investment, our County and our region stakes its claim in the marketplace of tomorrow.

This past year we also saw the development of Explore Park's Master Plan. The plan is the most thoughtful and achievable proposal that we have seen for this property to date.

In short, the Explore Park Master Plan has something for everyone. Runners and hikers, mountain bike enthusiasts and disc golf players, horseback riders and backwoods campers, will all find a place at Explore Park.

The Plan envisions some \$60 million in private sector investment from outdoor adventure companies, concession providers, and event organizers. At completion, the Park is conservatively expected to generate in excess of \$240 million annually for the region in meals, lodging and tourism-related revenue.

Explore Park will be the capstone for recreational tourism that brings both distinction and economic growth to our region. With foresight and strategic local investment, Explore Park will finally be what so many have envisioned and worked for – a place that blends the financial benefits of tourism with our region’s focus on outdoor recreation.

In the past year, Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton have worked to redevelop former public facilities into commercial ventures desired by the community.

The former Roland E. Cook School, William Byrd High, and Vinton Library demonstrate the importance of redevelopment to our economic progress.

And as you surely know by now, Tanglewood Mall has recently been sold.

The Board endorsed an idea to reimagine the Tanglewood area this past January. The 419 Town Center Plan envisions a mix of retail and living space to re-energize our greatest commercial corridor.

As the Plan came together, something interesting happened. We received phone calls from companies experienced in mall development and redevelopment. They asked us about Tanglewood Mall and started talking about our market. Shortly after that, it was announced that Tanglewood Mall was up for sale.

The announcement of the sale in September was long-anticipated and we are thrilled that the new owners, Blackwater Resources, share our belief that redeveloping this property can spark new investment in the County. The addition of a redeveloped Tanglewood Mall to anchor the 419 Town Center brings possibilities for a walkable, connected style of living not available anywhere else in the County. It will also give us a new model for future planning in our community; a model that brings commercial and residential development together, supported by modern transportation and communication infrastructure.

In September we held our kick-off event for the 419 Town Center Plan, and I listened to nearly 150 people describe the kind of place where they would want to visit and live.

We heard that many of our citizens are attracted to places that allow them to easily access shopping, restaurants, entertainment, and recreation. We heard about a “connected” lifestyle where we can move about safely on foot, in cars and buses, and also on bikes.

Now being a responsive elected official, I’ve learned to give folks what they want.

The 419 Town Center Plan will incorporate South Peak, Tanglewood Mall, and other undeveloped properties. The plan will emphasize connectivity and convenience while positioning Roanoke County for future economic growth.

There is no question that if our region is to continue to grow, we must solve the challenge of our airport. Dependable, reliable, and reasonably-priced air travel is available in every prospering community in our country. For our future, we must also have an airport that serves the needs of residents and businesses alike.

Through the excellent work of the Airport Commission, along with Airport Director Tim Bradshaw and his staff, we are making progress. In September, the FAA awarded the airport a \$4 million grant to improve key infrastructure. Still, there is more that can be done.

I know Tim and his staff are working diligently to expand service at the airport. They are traveling around the country, meeting with the airlines and talking about how we can improve air service in Roanoke. I also know they are meeting with local businesses to see how we can tip the economic scales of airline decision-making in Roanoke’s favor.

We all have to work on the demand side of the equation. Only increased numbers of business and leisure travelers will persuade the airline industry to offer more connections at competitive rates.

So when you’re traveling for business or for leisure, check the flights and compare prices. Fly Roanoke first.

The opportunities to work together, connect with each other, and make our region more exceptional have never been greater.

Several weeks ago, we announced with our partners in the City of Roanoke and City of Salem, the purchase of 106 acres near the intersection of Interstates 81 and 581. Our three jurisdictions, working through the Western Virginia Regional Industrial Facility Authority, have agreed to jointly purchase this gateway property. Future development at this site will target high-wage, high-value projects that raise the County's profile, while strengthening the overall economy.

In just this one project we demonstrate how, by working together at the regional level, we can achieve more than any one of us acting alone.

"It's All Connected."

And although our region has enjoyed many recent successes, there is still more we can do.

When the Board of Supervisors approved the Broadband effort in the County last spring, we did so with an eye to the future. That same kind of forward-thinking has to be applied to other areas of our community as well.

Southwest Virginia has struggled for years to win the State and Federal funding to meet our transportation needs. Other areas in the Commonwealth do not struggle as we do because they have taken matters into their own hands.

Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads, the two biggest economic engines of our State, have been granted the ability to raise revenue for transportation projects. These localities can leverage their local dollars with additional State funding to make significant improvements to their transportation networks.

In southwest Virginia, we do not have the authority to raise revenue for our transportation needs. But we should.

The playing field for transportation funding is not level – it's all uphill. And while we have some strong advocates in the General Assembly and on the Commonwealth Transportation Board, there are others who dismiss the idea that we can and should have a greater ability to address our own transportation issues.

How can we effectively and fairly compete for State transportation dollars in a system that allows only a select few areas to raise local revenue for projects?

A system that rewards the investment of local funds must also make it possible for local funds to be generated. Not for just a few jurisdictions, but for all jurisdictions.

Our region must insist that Richmond give us the ability to locally invest in our transportation needs, the same ability granted in other parts of Virginia.

Another challenge from the State that has affected local government is the delivery of mental health services.

Our current system is a mixture of many programs, built on the idea that local governments and private providers will effectively meet the mental health needs of our communities.

The system is fractured, underfunded and favors emergency services over early intervention. Our public safety agencies have been forced to play ever-increasing roles in delivering front-line support for citizens in crisis.

By not addressing mental illness as a medical condition deserving of effective treatment, we are left with few options to help the individuals and families who suffer.

Our law enforcement, corrections and legal systems are not the tools we should be using to help individuals in crisis. Yet these are the only tools we have, as more appropriate treatment options are just not available in our community.

I applaud the State's recent efforts to look at how the mental health system functions and how it might be improved. However, I caution that any solution that claims to fix the problem by shuffling around beds, programs, and staff is no solution at all.

Can the mental health delivery system become more efficient? Certainly. But not without thoughtful reform and a commitment of resources to ensure those with mental health issues are helped, not ignored.

And we will keep doing our part to make the system better. But until meaningful reform takes place, our police officers will continue to receive Crisis Intervention Training, along with our Social Workers, our Paramedics, our Sheriff's Deputies, and our staff who work with the public each day.

Beyond the challenge of Mental Health Services, another ingredient to our future success must be a continued emphasis on education. I am excited for all the attention Career and Technical Education has received in the past couple of years. I am grateful to members of our legislative delegation, especially Delegate Chris Head, for keeping this issue at the forefront of discussion. They have worked to develop a quality CTE program that includes our local schools, Virginia Western Community College, and our business community.

For us to deliver tomorrow's workforce, we must place more value on career and technical education by showing students the many CTE opportunities for them in our new economy.

Let's make sure that we develop the high school curricula necessary for our students' success. Whether that success takes the form of a certificate program, a credential program, a two-year technical degree, or a four-year bachelor's degree.

Our business community must take a lead role in working with our schools and colleges to define how our CTE programs are tailored. I know that our educational system provides exceptional learning opportunities. Let's make sure those learning opportunities produce the workforce our businesses need.

The shortest path to retaining young people in our community is to make sure they have meaningful, productive, and well-paying jobs available after high school.

Our prospects for the future are bright. Our citizens want positive change for Roanoke County. This desire is reflected in every citizen who works with government to make our community a better place.

It has been my pleasure to serve as the Roanoke County Board Chairman for the past two years. I have enjoyed a front row seat for the significant changes that are happening even as we speak.

As a lifelong resident of the County, I am excited to see the energy and enthusiasm in our community, and how it's growing and changing for the better. Let's continue working together and let's stay connected to each other as we make the Roanoke Valley even greater than it is today.

Let's not just be open to change, but let's embrace our future and the possibilities before us.

And let's remember that every positive thing we do, every effort we undertake for the good of our community, connects us to the future we all want to see.

Thank you.