

2018 State of the County Address



**Martha B. Hooker, Chairwoman
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors
Tuesday, November 13, 2018
Holiday Inn - Tanglewood**

Good morning. Thank you for being here today.

Let me offer my thanks to Joyce Waugh and our friends at the Chamber of Commerce for their support of this annual event. Their dedication and commitment to progress in the Roanoke Valley is outstanding and I thank them for all they do.

Let me once again 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. Vice-Chair Jason Peters from the Vinton District; George Assaid from the Cave Spring District; Joe McNamara from the Windsor Hills District; and Phil North from the Hollins District. Thanks to each of you for your leadership, your engagement and your commitment to the citizens of Roanoke County.

I would be remiss in not offering a special congratulations to Supervisor McNamara for his election win last week. He has served the citizens of Roanoke County well for many years while on the Board of Supervisors. And I know he will use his expertise and leadership to work hard for his constituents while serving in the House of Delegates.

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. I'm pleased to recognize Roanoke County's constitutional officers. Commissioner of the Revenue Nancy Horn; Treasurer Kevin Hutchins; Commonwealth's Attorney Randy Leach; Circuit Court Clerk Steve McGraw; and Sheriff Eric Orange. Thank you for your many years of dedicated service to our citizens.

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.

Let me also take a moment to acknowledge Roanoke County Administrator Tom Gates; Assistant County Administrator Richard Caywood; and Assistant County Administrator Dan O'Donnell. And there are many other staff members in attendance today, all of whom work every day to improve the quality of our community. Thank you for being exceptional public servants.

As you may have heard, it was announced last week that our County Administrator has decided to step down from his position. He has spent 34 years working in local governments, four of which have been in Roanoke County.

Tom, we appreciate your service to our citizens and your leadership. I know that you will be successful in whatever opportunity you choose to pursue next, and we wish you the very best.

As you know Roanoke County has an exceptional school system that is among the finest in the region and the Commonwealth. Their success attributes to the livability of our community. I am proud of the partnership we have with the School Board and staff.

At this time, I would like to invite Roanoke County School Board Chairman Jason Moretz to join me on stage. Mr. Moretz is a native of Roanoke. He was elected to the Roanoke County School Board in 2015 and served as Vice-Chair in 2017 and Chairman in 2018.

Please welcome Chairman Moretz who will give us an update on the work occurring in our school system.

(Mr. Moretz speaks)

Thank you, Jason, for sharing with us the accomplishments achieved over the past year. And thank you for your leadership.

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

In preparing my remarks for this Address and considering what we have accomplished in the past year as well as what our future may hold, I found several thoughts repeatedly coming to mind: new opportunities for growth, expansion and regional cooperation. And above all this, I have found an overwhelming appreciation of the teamwork it takes to make our community a better place to live, work and raise a family.

This year I have personally focused on meeting with business leaders in the community and getting feedback about Roanoke County. It is important to understand what we are doing well

and where we can improve. I enjoyed meeting with these individuals and I'll be looking for ways we can implement many of their suggestions going forward.

I am proud to report that we have seen many achievements in our community over the last year, many of which are worth acknowledging this morning.

We continue to use innovative technology to better serve our constituents. Our staff has created an award-winning suite of GIS applications which offer easy access to our services while actively promoting government transparency. Our Open Data Portal provides publicly available data to our residents and prospective businesses, enabling a deeper view into Roanoke County on a variety of levels.

Our new Mobile Incident Command application allows our public safety personnel to coordinate during emergencies with real-time data in the field. This technology not only save lives, it also helps our Police, Fire & Rescue, and other agencies to work together, work smarter and work safer in times of crisis.

And our Library system continues to elevate technology education through the use of cutting edge programs for children and adults. Our Library system has even become the first in the country to recruit a humanoid robot to help serve patrons and enhance technology-based programs for all ages.

The Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport has been successful in attracting new air service with discussions to add five destinations. Passenger traffic has increased by nearly 30,000 trips over the past year and new infrastructure enhancements make users' experiences more appealing and more convenient. The success of bringing Amtrak service back to our region has provided additional modes of travel beneficial to our business leaders and residents.

As Chairman Moretz spoke about earlier, we've taken strides towards increasing school security as well. Two Sheriff's Deputies in elementary schools will supplement the ten Police Officers serving in our middle and high schools. Protecting our schools is a priority and a common goal we all share.

Through teamwork we will continue to support the efforts of the school system to provide a safe and secure environment for our children.

In another display of teamwork this year, the new Roanoke County Public Safety Academy featured the combined efforts of our Police, Fire & Rescue, and our Sheriff's Office. The new academy educates citizens with a comprehensive view of each agency and how each department works in cooperation with the others to keep our community safe.

Roanoke County Police's new Regional Threat Assessment Team is a cooperative effort with regional law enforcement partners, local businesses, higher education institutions, and health

care facilities to help businesses and large organizations identify and report potential threats before an incident occurs.

This team effort also extends into our community to help those most in need. Roanoke County's Department of Social Services efforts to increase foster care awareness in the community has led to a series of Community Conversations meetings in this past year, and resulted in 106 new inquiries about foster parenting opportunities.

This renewed focus has saved hundreds of thousands of dollars in treatment foster care between 2016 and 2018. But more importantly, we are making a positive difference in the lives of these children.

The growing success of Explore Park is another example of teamwork that is helping the park to become a distinguished destination in our region. Thanks to public-private partnerships, new and unique recreation opportunities are being created and gaining attention.

With the addition of a top-rated disc golf course, a variety of camping options for visitors and equestrian programs, Explore Park is quickly becoming a daytime destination for residents and an attractor for visitors to our region.

While Explore Park's river access and biking trails have long been enjoyed by residents, these amenities are being re-vamped to attract a greater audience. And soon a one-of-a-kind aerial adventure ropes course will draw even more people to Explore Park.

These new businesses all contribute to our economic growth by attracting visitors and creating a destination experience in the region.

A recent joint partnership with Roanoke City to develop Jae Valley Park provides more recreation opportunities for everyone. Our outdoor spaces and greenways continue to be an important part of our quality of life.

I would like to thank the many volunteers in our Park Partners program and in the Pathfinders organization for their commitment to improving and expanding our outdoor amenities.

These volunteers commit thousands of hours each year to keep our outdoor spaces attractive to citizens and visitors alike. This is just another value-added quality that makes our region stand out.

Teamwork requires communication, and our "Reimagine" series of planning studies has excelled in opening dialogue within our community. Positive feedback received through the 419 Town Center Study led to new planning studies in the Oak Grove and Plantation Road areas. These plans provide opportunities to engage with the public to reimagine the potential for these major corridors.

The Oak Grove study involved stakeholders of all ages and professions, including students and teachers from Roanoke County Public Schools who have a great interest in the area's short term development as well as its future progress.

The Hollins area is a strategic gateway into our community, and many citizens, businesses and students from that area also came out to share their ideas on ways to make this area safer and more attractive, while adding to the economic base of the County with new retail opportunities.

We must continue enhancing the livability of Roanoke County by focusing on the creation of mixed-use developments, varied and modern housing options, sidewalks, bike lanes, and diverse and unique commercial centers that create a "Sense of Place."

We are particularly thankful for the partnership with Roanoke City in the Oak Grove planning process. This is a great example of collaboration across jurisdictions that makes planning and economic development more productive.

And we are seeing results with the redevelopment of the former Allstate building by Metis Holdings. This former corporate headquarters has been transformed by a \$6 million redevelopment into a multi-tenant facility which is expected to bring nearly 600 new employees to the Oak Grove area.

This is just one of many successful redevelopment stories we look forward to sharing in the future.

We also continue to make great strides on the economic development front. Our progress is due in part to a successful collaboration with our neighbors to encourage growth in our region.

Development of the 113 acre Wood Haven Technology Park brings together community leaders who desire new opportunities for prosperity and economic expansion across our region. This investment in new property for economic development places our region in a better state of preparedness for future investment and employment, which is critical to our future.

We very much appreciate the cities of Roanoke and Salem, who are partners in this project through the Western Virginia Regional Industrial Facilities Authority. I would like to thank Beth Dougherty and John Hull for their leadership to help make this project a reality.

Connections made through the Oak Grove planning process and the Wood Haven Project are excellent examples of regional partnering for success.

We must keep pace with advancements in other sectors in our region by embracing the forward momentum of the Virginia Tech Carilion Research Institute and its potential impact on our shared future.

The initiatives underway at the VTCRI and the great work of Dr. Michael Friedlander and his team are transforming our regional economy and providing opportunities to make connections far beyond our borders.

The 419 Town Center Plan and upcoming 419 interchange improvements promise greater connections and easier access to VTCRI, yet another reason to plan together to encourage collaboration along a shared corridor that crosses the borders between County and City for the success of all involved.

Other transportation improvements are also key to our future economic success. It has been said that I-81 is the economic lifeline for western Virginia that connects Roanoke County to major cities along the east coast.

I'm pleased to see that VDOT has fully funded the first major improvement on I-81 in the Roanoke Valley which will include additional lanes between exits 141 and 143. And we are working with our regional partners to secure VDOT funding for widening between exit 140 and 141. These much-needed improvements will help with congestion and increase safety along this vital corridor between the Roanoke and New River Valleys.

To plan the future, we need to take stock of where we are now. In 2017, Virginia was ranked 19th in job growth, 22nd in wage growth and 19th in GDP growth. The top factors for companies considering new investment are quality of life and proximity to suppliers.

Virginia has improved its quality of life ranking from 10th to 4th and improved its proximity to suppliers from 20th to 12th. Overall, Virginia is ranked number 4 this year in Best States for Business.

In Roanoke County, we need to think more about "Place-making" and building "Quality of Place," not only to attract new corporate investment, but also in support of new population growth.

Today's businesses recognize that attracting and retaining a proper workforce is the key to success. With current unemployment numbers at a low 2.9 percent, hiring and keeping smart and well-qualified employees has become a challenge. Manufacturing didn't leave America; we actually produce 143 percent of what we did 20 years ago but we do it now with 30 percent less people. We have become much more efficient in what we do.

At the local level, we are trying to balance slowing birthrates and an aging workforce, while advances in automation are changing the very nature of the work we do.

The McKinsey Global Institute recently completed a report on how automation and Artificial Intelligence will impact the workforce. They have concluded that if it's routine, it will be replaced. Routine manual work will be replaced by machines and routine cognitive work will be replaced by software or automation. The growth will be in technical skills – specific job skills

such as machinists, HVAC experts, electricians, engineers, and even mechatronics. Simply put, we need to grow our population of young and educated technical workers in the region.

Our partnership with the school system to emphasize Career and Technical Education programs has been a successful step in filling the need for younger workers. Roanoke County Schools has also continued to grow the student registered apprenticeship program that allows high school students to work as paid apprentices while attending school. And these apprentices are working on real life projects in conjunction with businesses and organizations across the region.

Our Economic Development staff is expanding its involvement with Roanoke County Public Schools, area colleges and workforce development organizations with a focus of keeping younger workers in our community. They are the leaders of tomorrow and we must stay committed to providing them with skills and opportunities they need to be successful.

The registered apprenticeship program can help provide answers to the workforce issues we face today. I invite you to help us expand our worker pipeline from public schools to long-term employment here in this valley and increase our population of younger workers ages 25 to 44.

Addressing the housing needs of younger workers has become an important part of our retention strategy. Millennials want housing that is different and flexible, with easy access to amenities in walkable neighborhoods. New developments, like the Retreat Apartments that opened in October 2017, offer mountain views but also provide easy access to both the Appalachian Trail and Interstate 81, and everything beyond.

The millennials have an attraction to the outdoors and are moving to Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Idaho, and Alaska. We have a unique opportunity with our outdoor adventure qualities in the Appalachian Trail, Blue Ridge Parkway, Explore Park, our Silver Ranked IMBA bike paths, our many greenways, and the Roanoke River. And millennials are also civically minded and want to be engaged – and they want you to engage them.

The workforce is shrinking and there is a skills and education imbalance. Our workplace is changing and we need to focus on regional cooperation – like our GO Virginia region. We need to focus on talent attraction. Our Economic Development team helps businesses address these needs through customized assistance from several programs such as Get 2 Know Noke, Virginia's Blue Ridge Works, and Virginia Economic Development Partnership programs.

So how do we use this information and influence to adjust to changing market conditions and to ensure community growth and stability? The answers are Place-making, Quality of Life. New housing that is attractive to younger populations, and a focus on talent attraction and retention.

In 2017, Roanoke County received the designation as a top 10 mid-size Community in the Nation through the National Fourth Economy Community Index. Roanoke County also ranks as the 99th healthiest community in the U.S. according to the U.S. News Healthiest Communities

Rankings. And we made number 12 on the list of the top 25 cities that millennials can afford and want to live in. Although cities are mentioned here, it is important to note that Roanoke Valley Greenways, Explore Park, and an outdoor lifestyle were all mentioned as things millennials care about.

We must support infrastructure improvements such as broadband to help businesses grow and attract a younger population. We should strive to create walkable and highly mobile neighborhoods where people want to live and a community worthy of business investment.

Regionally, we continue to invest in fostering entrepreneurs and innovation through the HIVE, RAMP, The Gauntlet, Small Business Development Center, and Small Business Supplier Diversity.

Roanoke County has increased the threshold for BPOL taxes to help support our small businesses. Now some of Roanoke County's small businesses can make 25 percent more before paying BPOL taxes to the County. This gives these businesses more flexibility and helps save their first earnings for reinvestment, inventory, and new employment.

As we consider our new entrepreneurs who often kick-start their businesses from home, we also need to consider the impact of home-based businesses on our local zoning, and be agile in our approach to helping small businesses succeed while preserving the character of our neighborhoods.

Much of our growth on record can be attributed to the recent expansion of local businesses who are invested in continued growth within the County. The LSC Communications Building was sold for \$6.5 million dollars and Camrett Logistics is repurposing this property for their operations. Magnets USA – a \$1.5 million dollar expansion was supported by retraining assistance from the Virginia Economic Development Partnership. Ardagh Packaging invested \$4.2 million dollars in continued growth in the County. Harris Corporation added 50 new jobs this year and secured workforce training assistance from the State of Virginia. Legacy company Blue Ridge Beverage announced a 40,000 square foot expansion with a \$2.5 million dollar investment.

New activity can be found in the Town of Vinton as well. The decision to build a new library in the downtown set off a chain of activity resulting in the redevelopment of Roland E. Cook, the former William Byrd High School and a new Macado's location. Vinton is becoming a vibrant downtown with new people moving in and new businesses starting up.

These are the things that matter most to our future, the things that are needed to move our community forward.

On your tables you will find Roanoke County's Community Strategic Plan Annual Report which represents what our citizens want for their community. I invite you to take this document with

you and read about all of the progress we have seen over the past year. We should be proud of what we have achieved, together, and look forward to what can be achieved next.

Again, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors and Roanoke County's staff. We have been able to make so many positive changes for our community this year by working together.

Thank you, to all of you, for coming this morning to hear about the state of Roanoke County. I hope you'll reflect on both the achievements and the challenges you heard this morning, and begin thinking of more ways we can make Roanoke County an even better place in the years to come.

And I hope you have a great rest of the day.