

## 2019 State of the County Address



**Phil C. North, Chairman  
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors  
Wednesday, November 20, 2019  
“Exploring Innovation”**

Good morning. Thank you for being here today.

I would like to thank 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. Vice-Chair Martha Hooker; George Assaid; Jason Peters; and David Radford. I would also extend a welcome to Paul Mahoney, our newly elected Supervisor for the Cave Spring Magisterial District. Thanks to each of you for your leadership, your engagement and your commitment to the citizens of Roanoke County.

I’m also pleased to recognize Roanoke County’s elected constitutional officers. Commissioner of the Revenue Nancy Horn; Treasurer Kevin Hutchins; Circuit Court Clerk Steve McGraw; and Sheriff Eric Orange. Thank you for your many years of dedicated service to our citizens. And congratulations to our newly elected Commonwealth’s Attorney, Brian Holohan.

Let me also take a moment to acknowledge Roanoke County Administrator Dan O’Donnell; Assistant County Administrator Richard Caywood; Assistant County Administrator Rebecca Owens; and from the County Attorney’s Office Ruth Ellen Kuhnle, Peter Lubeck, Mary Beth Nash, and Rachel Lower. 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 know Roanoke County has an outstanding school system that is among the finest in the region and the Commonwealth. The success of Roanoke County Public Schools is a cornerstone that helps make Roanoke County a vibrant and stable 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 Don Butzer to join me on stage. Mr. Butzer was appointed to the Roanoke County School Board in 2016, and was selected to serve as the chairman for 2019. He was employed for 39 years as an executive with Verizon Communications. Mr. Butzer and his family have been residents of Catawba for 14 years.

Please welcome Chairman Butzer who will give us an update on the achievements being made in Roanoke County Public Schools.

*(Mr. Butzer speaks)*

Thank you, Don, for sharing the Schools' accomplishments from the past year. And my thanks to you, your fellow board members, and staff for your leadership in making Roanoke County's students "Opportunity Ready."

And now I'm sure you'd like to hear about the State of Roanoke County.

I am proud of what we have accomplished together over the last year, and the path we continue to travel. We have experienced continued growth and expansion; we have been recognized for achievements on the local and national level; and we have enhanced our technology capabilities.

Roanoke County is truly a vibrant community with much to offer and even more to explore.

Many in this room are partners with us, or have played important roles in where we are today and where we are headed tomorrow. A regional approach to meeting the needs of our community has proven to be successful on many fronts.

We are working with the Roanoke Valley Allegheny Regional Commission on studies to determine our future housing needs, exploring the potential for long haul truck diversion by rail to alleviate congestion on Interstate 81, and considering approaches to creating a regional technical school to support workforce development.

Our neighbors in the cities of Salem and Roanoke have joined us through the Western Virginia Regional Industrial Facilities Authority to develop the Wood Haven project. Construction is now underway for entry roads and utilities, with marketing of the site to begin early next year.

2020 will also see the Valley hosting Carilion Clinic's IRONMAN triathlon in June. This event will bring immediate economic benefits, while raising the profile of our community across the nation for years to come. This announcement came after efforts by Visit Virginia's Blue Ridge to elevate our region as a premier metro-mountain destination. VBR's "BE A TRAILSETTER" campaign highlights the recreational access that drives tourism and visitors to our many greenways, blueways, trails, Explore Park - and to our restaurants and hotels. But it takes more than mountains and trails to grow our community.

That's why we are working to support high technology start-ups through relationships with the Valleys Innovation Council, Virginia Tech, Carilion Clinic, and Fralin Biomedical Research Institute. Our goal is to foster new businesses to start here for the opportunities afforded by access to the healthcare field and cutting edge initiatives. And it is our intention to create a community that makes new businesses want to remain here well into the future.

These connections encourage more growth in our innovation economy.

And with these new developments comes the need for easier access to Roanoke County and the greater region. I am happy to report that the Roanoke-Blacksburg Regional Airport has announced a new Master

Plan to guide the development of new facilities and expansion. The airport now offers access to 500 plus cities, with more connections than ever before, both into the Valley and to the rest of the world.

And while we must never lose focus on providing access to the region, it is critical that we focus on improving connections within the Valley as well.

I am pleased with the achievements we have made over the past year, many of which we will acknowledge today.

One part of our successful series of “Reimagine” planning studies addresses how we can build stronger connections across the County.

The Board of Supervisors adopted the 419 Town Center Plan this summer that will serve as a blueprint for the area’s growth, development, and redevelopment over the next 20 years. The 419 corridor has long been a major roadway in Roanoke County with Tanglewood Mall as the focal point. This is our center of commerce, and a key economic driver for the community.

The Hollins Center Study focuses on plans for a connected, mixed-use center in the heart of the Hollins community. Last year we celebrated the completion of Phase One of the Plantation Road Bicycle, Pedestrian and Streetscape Improvement Project. The shared-use path for pedestrians and bicyclists includes street trees, a new gateway sign, and drainage improvements. The next phase is underway with improvements that will stretch from Walrond Drive to Gander Way, with construction anticipated to begin in 2021. We must continue to encourage development and redevelopment in the Hollins area, including plans for a new library and community center.

Roanoke County and the City of Roanoke have partnered to develop plans for the Oak Grove Center, with the goal of enhancing the area for residents, visitors, and employees. The Study seeks to expand housing options, increase mobility and connectivity, and upgrade existing facilities, services, and utilities.

Roanoke County recently earned a Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award for its “Public Schools Planning Workshop” portion of the Oak Grove Center Plan. Planners from Roanoke County and the City of Roanoke met with students and teachers to solicit input for the Plan, and gain ideas for involving younger generations in community planning. This collaboration has opened the door for future regional cooperation. My thanks goes out to Philip Thompson and our Planning Staff for their efforts in bringing so much of the community together to create the Oak Grove Center Plan.

Roanoke County’s planning studies are long term efforts to discover areas for growth and revitalization across major County corridors. And they will be adopted into our 20 year Comprehensive Plan when finalized. While we explore grant opportunities and other means to achieve our goals, we encourage interested commercial developers to help us advance these ideas sooner rather than later.

Other examples of cooperative planning include key transportation initiatives in Roanoke County.

Near the Tanglewood area, nearly \$30 million in transportation improvements will take place over the next several years to improve traffic flow and help reduce congestion. Largely, 95 percent of the improvements will be constructed with federal and state funds.

Starting construction next year, a project in front of Tanglewood Mall will add a third lane from Ogden Road to the Route 220 Southbound ramp, sidewalk, pedestrian crosswalks, bicycle lanes, and a bus shelter. The pedestrian and bicycle accommodations on 419 will connect users to destinations in Roanoke County and the City of Roanoke.

Soon you will also see reconstruction of the 419 and 220 intersection into a Diverging Diamond Interchange with traffic signal changes. This project had unanimous support from the Roanoke Valley Transportation Planning Organization. Through persistent efforts by our County's elected officials and staff, and assistance from Salem District VDOT staff, this project was approved by the Commonwealth Transportation Board this year. And my thanks to Dr. Ray Smoot, our region's representative on the Board, for his support. All of these projects will greatly improve safety, access, and connections along the 419 and 220 corridors.

Interstate 81 legislation was signed this year, which provides a dedicated funding source to improve the corridor between Virginia Tech and Botetourt County. In Roanoke County, a critical project to widen the interstate between Exits 141 and 143 begins next year.

Efforts are currently underway to relieve congestion along Route 460, also known as Challenger Avenue in Roanoke County. We are working with our partners in the City of Roanoke, Town of Vinton and Botetourt County to improve safety and reduce traffic on the County's fourth highest volume road. A VDOT public information meeting is set for tomorrow at the Berglund Center. The Open House runs from 4 - 6 p.m. I would encourage you to attend and hear first-hand from citizens about the challenges on Route 460.

Other partners are helping develop Explore Park into a regional destination. Public-private partnerships have helped fuel our success with amenities like Treetop Quest, the Park's aerial adventure course that provides a unique and exciting activity for all ages. Overnight stays have become popular as well, with Don's Cab-Inns, yurts, and camping that offer unique lodging experiences. Blue Mountain Adventures launched river tubing this year, a new and exciting recreational activity praised by the community. Twin Creeks Brewing is now set to reopen the historic Brugh Tavern to provide food, craft brews, and a new outdoor venue on the lawn to relax and enjoy entertainment.

"Illuminights" is also coming to Explore Park this holiday season. Roanoke County and Center in the Square announced a new partnership to host the annual holiday light show at Explore Park beginning November 29. "Illuminights" is a walking tour featuring over 500,000 lights. Visitors can journey at their own pace along a half-mile wooded path filled with displays celebrating nature, adventure and Christmas traditions.

This fall, Roanoke County also celebrated the opening of the 235-acre Hinchee Park that connects two of the region's most important recreational assets: our greenway network and Carvins Cove. The park's two-mile trail connects the Hanging Rock Battlefield Trail with Roanoke City's Carvins Cove Natural Reserve. The new park provides pedestrian, mountain biking and equestrian access to more than 60 miles of trails within the Cove.

I applaud Doug Blount and his staff in our Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department for the hard work they do to make Roanoke County a destination for exploration.

We also continue to explore new and innovative ways of improving citizen and customer service, while making it easier to do business in Roanoke County.

The County unveiled its new website which features a modern and responsive design, while highlighting our community's natural beauty and amenities. The Economic Development department also launched a new website focusing on recruitment, business services, and other programs vital to economic growth. The project also allowed Roanoke County Public Library to redesign its website to showcase its community classes and technology education programs.

Our Library system continues to excel in the world of education through innovation. The Library has stepped into the challenge of providing public access to technology. Roanoke County's Public Library became the first in the nation to recruit Pepper, the humanoid robot, launching the library system into the national spotlight. Technology education programs for children, adults and businesses have established our Library as a leader in Artificial Intelligence, robotics, and coding.

The Virginia Association of Counties awarded Roanoke County Public Library the "Best Large County Achievement" for its program, "Meeting You at Your Wonder." Our County's program has shown more than 7,000 participants the amazing things that can be accomplished through Artificial Intelligence and Coding. In October, the Urban Libraries Council also recognized Roanoke County Public Library as a top innovator among all of the nation's public library systems for its cutting-edge approach to transforming public libraries through the use of Artificial Intelligence.

Director of Library Services, Shari Henry and her staff are to be commended for their commitment to promoting lifelong learning through new technology programming for all ages.

As we all know, technology isn't much use without connection. This year we saw the launch of Mountain Net, a new internet service provider for the Bent Mountain community. Working off the Roanoke Valley Broadband Authority's open access network, Mountain Net provides high-speed Internet service previously unavailable to residents in this rural area of the County.

Roanoke County continues to excel in giving citizens access to County data whenever, and wherever, they choose. FloodView application provides a vast array of public data about flood plains, building values, flood certificates, and flood zone status. Our GIS team earned prestigious awards from the National Association of Counties for its innovative approach to showcase flood-related data in an easy-to-use, mobile solution.

Roanoke County is also making strides in using technology to enhance public safety throughout the region, and earning a Governor's Technology Award for its efforts. Roanoke County and its partners, the City of Roanoke and City of Salem, have recently integrated the agencies' separate 9-1-1 systems. This translates into better response times for not only our citizens but also to surrounding localities. Developments like this are critical in preparing for future NextGen 9-1-1 services to assist public safety responders in the field and provide better emergency services to all.

Over the past year, continued training was provided to our Police officers and Roanoke County Public Schools staff on emergency procedures to further ensure the safety of our students. Technology projects are being implemented to help school staff and Police monitor activity in the schools and improve public safety communications.

Roanoke County's Communications and Information Technology Department is also working alongside Roanoke County Public Schools on a multi-year plan to bring schools into the Roanoke Valley Radio System. This will ensure first responders have uninterrupted radio coverage in all of our schools, a vital part of keeping our schools and children safe.

Our thanks to Comm IT Director Bill Hunter, and his talented staff, for ensuring our public safety agencies have the tools they need to protect our students and community.

Public Safety data and research doesn't just end with the IT Department in Roanoke County. This year, Police Chief Howard Hall and Assistant Police Chief Jimmy Chapman were inducted into the Evidence Based Policing Hall of Fame at George Mason University. They were recognized for implementing innovative approaches to helping persons in mental health crisis. This shows how important research can translate into meaningful changes in the field, where it matters most to our citizens.

And Roanoke County is working to move public safety into the sky as well, through Fire and Rescue's enhanced drone programs that have added thermal imaging that enables personnel to better respond to search and rescue missions, brush fires, and large scale incidents. Fire and Rescue Staff also worked with the National Weather Service and other agencies to earn Roanoke County's StormReady designation. StormReady is a nationwide program that helps communities take a proactive approach to severe weather preparation.

Chief Hall and Chief Simon, you and your staffs should be proud of these accomplishments that ensure the safety and well-being of our community.

Through Roanoke County's most recent community survey, we heard that the most important issue over the next five years is Economic Development. And our goal is to position the County for future economic growth. Significant growth we have seen over the past year comes from the redevelopment of vacant and underutilized space.

One notable project is Carilion's \$30 million investment to create Carilion Children's facility at Tanglewood Mall. This project will serve as a catalyst for additional future developments in the 419 corridor and bring renewed energy to the area. This investment aligns with the County's strategy to reimagine the 419 corridor by focusing on redevelopment, leveraging transportation improvements, enhancing quality of life, and supporting community health and well-being. We appreciate Nancy Agee and her team for making this possible.

Metis Holdings, with the vision of Chris Carey, redeveloped the former Allstate building into a multi-tenant facility in the Oak Grove area. The 165,000 square-foot building on Electric Road gained several new tenants, providing a multitude of services to Roanoke County citizens. This represented a \$10 million investment and secured more than 500 jobs for Roanoke County and the region. The redevelopment also lies in the heart of the Oak Grove Planning Study corridor.

VFP, Incorporated continued to expand its footprint in Roanoke County by moving to the former Cox Communications facility, supporting the redevelopment strategy of the 419 Town Center Plan. That project represents a \$5 million investment with the addition of 55 new jobs.

Appalachian Power plans to construct a transmission operations center and substation in the Center for Research and Technology. The transmission center will house equipment and employees responsible for

monitoring and operating AEP's transmission facilities. Approximately 50 employees will work at the new location, which represents a \$60 million investment.

Projects in the Town of Vinton such as The Billy Byrd and Vinyard Station continue the trend of repurposing underutilized facilities, breathing new life into the area. The \$12 million Billy Byrd project transformed the 90-year-old former William Byrd High School into a unique 82-unit apartment building. And the future Vinyard Station project promises to bring new dining and business possibilities to the busy corridor. Leveraging public facilities for redevelopment projects is a winning proposition for everyone. These projects and others represent nearly \$30 million in new investments for redeveloped facilities within the Town of Vinton over the past five years, all contributing to a vibrant commercial business district.

All totaled, we have announced more than \$200 million in new business investment in Roanoke County, bringing more than 800 new jobs to the Valley. And our Economic Development Director is actively working on business developments we hope will lead to new possibilities for Roanoke County.

Roanoke County is also focusing efforts on embracing innovation within the region. The Fralin Biomedical Research Institute is rapidly transforming the region's economy, expanding research, and adding to the growing medical services cluster taking shape in the Valley. We recently heard from Dr. Michael Friedlander of Fralin Biomedical Research Institute who spoke about the impact the Virginia Tech-Carilion enterprise will have on the area. The City of Roanoke's planned Innovation Corridor is expected to have an estimated \$460 million regional impact over the next eight years, while bringing 500 graduate and undergraduate students to the area over the next decade. Connecting the 419 Town Center to the City's Innovation Corridor will bring opportunities for growth and new development.

Long-range strategic planning and targeted investments are generating sustainable results through public property redevelopment, new business creation and expansion, and employment growth. It's a winning combination for the future.

I was pleased to see several Roanoke County businesses honored at the Roanoke Regional Chamber's Small Business Award ceremony. Our small businesses and their investments play a vital role in our local economy and to the future prosperity of our community. And we must also re-emphasize the significance of our legacy companies that contribute to our economy. These companies demonstrate how a diverse business base gives us a stable economy. And by their longevity, they establish Roanoke County as a place where businesses can thrive for many years, even over generations.

Our Economic Development office continues to expand its involvement with Roanoke County Public Schools to help match local businesses with students through the Registered Apprenticeship Program. This program gives meaningful opportunities to our students, provides trained employees that our businesses need, and keeps these students in our community.

We are proud of our track record of success and the many partnerships that have led us to where we are today.

*Roanoke County is open for business and gives a green light to innovation!*

The state of Roanoke County is solid.

Roanoke County is fiscally conservative, well-managed and proud of our accomplishments. We have sound financial management practices such as reserve policies, debt limits and a funded 10-year capital improvement program. Roanoke County's strong bond ratings are a direct result of our excellent financial management practices. We have comparatively low debt and have had a stable real estate tax rate for 13 straight years. And for the last two years we have reduced the business license tax as well.

This responsible stewardship has allowed us to continue meeting the educational needs of our children. Sound policies are in place to support both the operations and capital needs of our School System. Today, we prepare for the future and wonder how shifting age demographics and a declining enrollment in the County will impact our future schools. The Board of Supervisors has consistently prioritized school funding in our budget process. We will continue to work cooperatively with the Schools to provide the education that Roanoke County's children deserve.

Look at all we have accomplished in the past year alone.

Where do we go from here?

We continue on our path of exploring the future and its possibilities. Our strategy includes recruiting new businesses and supporting existing ones, encouraging growth in the innovation economy, supporting our schools to create successful students, and attracting young professionals to our region.

The Roanoke Regional Partnership reports employment growth is strong, and we currently enjoy a low 2.2 percent unemployment rate. And at 2,100 new jobs added to the region, our growth rates exceed Northern Virginia, Richmond, Hampton Roads, Lynchburg, and Blacksburg.

Weldon Cooper projects that in 10 years our County will see a 3.3 percent increase in population, or approximately 3,100 more citizens. This signifies positive direction going forward and will lead to a stronger overall economy.

We should explore how a regional technical education center can better train our up and coming workforce to meet employers' needs. Those who do not wish to attend a four-year college may choose to learn a trade to meet local job demand.

We must continue to support the Regional Partnership's talent attraction efforts to improve the retention rate of high school and college graduates. Let's seek additional ways to connect students and businesses to one another, to show what each has to offer, and promote permanency. Retaining employees for longer than five years is important for career growth, and should be our top priority.

U.S. census figures have shown a decline in the millennial population in big cities. Nearly 30,000 residents between the ages of 25 and 39 left cities such as New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. for the suburbs. They are seeking more affordable housing, good paying jobs, walkable, mixed-use, and interesting environments – all of which we can offer here in Roanoke County.

We continue to look at our own infrastructure. It's a challenge for every local government, every school system, to maintain aging facilities. Capital maintenance and improvement projects are large expenses that require long-term planning. Roanoke County recently conducted an assessment to better understand the present condition of our facilities, which helps us plan future budgets. Our sound financial policies ensure that our needs can be addressed.

And Roanoke County is pursuing a rural Broadband Availability Study as the next step in Connecting Roanoke County to the World. The study will identify areas of Roanoke County that do not have access to high-speed Internet services. This will prepare the County to make the most of state or federal grant opportunities, public-private partnerships, or other ways to bring high-speed Internet service to underserved parts of the County. Look for more details about this study in the coming weeks.

On your tables, you will see the latest Community Strategic Plan Annual Report. I encourage you to take one with you to read about all of the progress Roanoke County has experienced over the past year. We should be proud of what we have achieved, together, and look forward to what can be achieved in the future.

As we conclude today, I'd like to share the words of architect and urban designer Daniel Burnham that are inscribed above the façade of Union Station in Washington, D.C.:

*"Make big plans; aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble diagram once recorded will not die, but long after we are gone be a living thing, asserting itself with ever growing insistence..."*

This should serve as a reminder to never stop exploring what possibilities lie ahead.

Thank you, to everyone, for coming this morning to hear about the State of Roanoke County. And I wish you all a blessed Thanksgiving.