

2020 State of the County Address by Chairman David F. Radford
November 12, 2020 - "Rising to the Challenge"

Good morning. Thank you for joining us today. This is certainly a first for us in presenting the State of the County but we have experienced many firsts in 2020.

I'd like to thank Eddie for the introduction, as well as Joyce Waugh and other friends at the Chamber of Commerce for their continued support of Roanoke County and this event. Their dedication to progress in the Roanoke Valley is exceptional and we appreciate all they do.

To my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors: Vice-chair Phil North; Supervisors Martha Hooker; Paul Mahoney; and Jason Peters, I appreciate your leadership and service to the citizens of Roanoke County.

To the employees of Roanoke County, including County Administrator Dan O'Donnell, Assistant County Administrators Richard Caywood and Rebecca Owens; and County Attorney Peter Lubeck; I thank you for your guidance, public service, and commitment to our community.

At this time, I'd also like to acknowledge the passing of former County Attorney, Ruth Ellen Kuhnel, earlier this year. Ruth Ellen was a very talented and well-respected attorney, and an excellent representative for Roanoke County. We valued her leadership, guidance and expertise. She has been, and will continue to be missed.

I think no one would disagree that 2020 has been a year of challenges, but I'm pleased to say that Roanoke County remains strong, and we continue to serve our citizens throughout the global pandemic.

You'll hear today that much of our work has been impacted by COVID-19, but you'll also learn how we've adapted to manage and mitigate those impacts in order to provide the day-to-day services our residents depend on.

In March, your Board of Supervisors declared a local emergency and put into place our Emergency Operations Plan to provide guidance and direction to our employees. We also coordinated with the Virginia Department of Health and regional government leaders, with the primary goal of protecting the health of our community.

The Governor's Executive Orders closed schools and businesses in an effort to keep people safer at home and help prevent the spread of the virus.

We've had to explore new ways of conducting business to serve our community, even after closing public facilities for a time, and sending much of our workforce home to continue doing their jobs in a safe environment. Some of the ways we kept vital services going include:

- Using drive-thru windows at Social Services and Libraries to accept payments and applications for public assistance;
- Accepting building plans and development permits under a tent set up outside the Administration Center;
- Relocating the Elections Office to accommodate voters in a safer and more efficient way;
- Coordinating with the school system to help make Wi-Fi more accessible outside of Schools and Libraries for our students;
- Offering recreation and library programming online in an effort to keep citizens engaged and active;
- And keeping our parks, trails, and recreation spaces open to promote healthy, socially-distanced venues for activities.

Facing economic uncertainty, we prepared for a \$5 million dollar shortfall in our operating budget and a \$3 million dollar loss to our capital projects budget. We knew that careful planning would be needed to find savings from cut expenses, all the while hoping for better-than-expected revenues. I'm pleased to say that staff has done excellent work in managing these challenges and we are optimistic about the road ahead.

Throughout these uncertain times though, we have adapted, *rising to the challenge*, and we have made many accomplishments along the way.

As the Governor's restrictions eased, we saw how deeply impacted our citizens and business community had been. Federal CARES Act funding and other sources awarded to the County allowed us to provide aid to small businesses, grant short term financial assistance to citizens, and make important infrastructure improvements.

The County used CARES Act funding to cover expenses directly related to the impact of the public health emergency, including:

- Improvements to technology infrastructure to account for teleworking and aid the school system with additional Internet capacity for families;
- Modifications to public-facing offices to allow for social distancing and the safety of our citizens and employees;
- Enhancements to improve air circulation at County facilities and a new off-site employee health clinic; and
- Funding to help our businesses and citizens endure the pandemic and begin their recovery.

The CARES Act funded \$1.6 million dollars for local grants through our Economic Development Department to help small businesses adapt to the pandemic. More than 250 businesses in Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton received grants to cover operating expenses, respond to changing market conditions, and make improvements to ensure the safety of their workers and customers.

CARES Act funding also allowed the Department of Social Services to provide more than \$500,000 in short-term assistance to help struggling families with unpaid utilities, car payments and insurance, medical expenses, and unmet child care expenses as a direct result of a loss of income due to the pandemic.

Virginia Career Works also provided more than \$16,000 dollars in layoff aversion grants to help Roanoke County businesses purchase personal protective equipment and other tools to enable teleworking.

We also saw a number of positive developments on the Economic Development front this past year.

Our biggest announcement of the year came in January when Mack Trucks selected Roanoke County to serve as its Roanoke Valley Operations to produce a new line of medium duty trucks. Governor Northam was on hand to applaud the first automotive project completely established in Virginia, from prototype to production. The \$13 million dollar investment by Mack Trucks will bring 250 new jobs to the area. According to an analysis by the Roanoke Regional Partnership, it's estimated that Roanoke County and the region will see an annual economic impact of \$364 million dollars from this project.

This year the Hollins Center Plan was approved and adopted into the County's Comprehensive Plan, which will guide the growth and development of the area over the next 20 years. With the highest population density in Roanoke County, the Hollins area is an excellent location for business investment and redevelopment opportunities. The area saw many developments during the year, including:

- Harris Night Vision being acquired by global technology leader Elbit Systems, one of Roanoke County's largest companies with over 500 employees.
- Ongoing improvements to the Plantation Road area, including a new traffic signal and a pedestrian crosswalk at Lila Drive make this area more convenient and safer for the many workers that travel this road every day.
- Ardagh Group became Trivium Packaging this year in a \$2.5 billion dollar sale of their metal packaging business, creating one of the largest metal packaging companies in the world.
- First Team has nearly completed a \$3 million dollar state-of-the-art Volkswagen sales and service center. This new 15,000 square foot facility is the ninth expansion of the First Team Automotive Group in Western Virginia over the past 30 years.
- And SpringHill Suites by Marriott has announced plans to construct an all-suite hotel on Gander Way, representing a \$12 million dollar investment near Gander Outdoors.

While we celebrate the new developments in the Hollins community, we are excited by the prospect of new opportunities coming to other parts of the County through our Community Planning efforts.

Roanoke County's Oak Grove Center Plan has been another successful effort in gaining insight to future development, transportation and public amenities in the area. A joint partnership with the City of Roanoke and Roanoke County Public Schools solicited public input through small group exercises within the community, including students and teachers from nearby schools to involve younger generations in future planning for this community.

Recently, the National Association of Counties recognized Roanoke County with a prestigious Achievement Award, and the Virginia Chapter of the American Planning Association awarded the Old Dominion Innovative Approaches Award, for the joint planning effort. The Roanoke City Planning Commission and the Roanoke City Council will join the Roanoke County Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to review the Oak Grove Center Plan and move the project forward. This collaboration has also opened the door to future regional planning efforts that can improve everyone's lives.

Roanoke County has also received a \$15,000 dollar Community Development Block Grant for Opportunity Zone marketing. The County's zone is located in the Wood Haven Technology Park, near the intersection of I-81 and 581. The zone area contains 200 acres of undeveloped or under-developed land with a great potential for growth. The Grant will allow the County to create a professional marketing plan to showcase the area and its potential for industrial, commercial, or multi-family development.

The County was also the recipient of a \$20,000 dollar Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development Fund Grant for the Catawba Sustainability Center. This Grant provides an opportunity for immediate aid to landowners and farmers impacted by COVID-19, while meeting the demand for herbal medicines such as goldenseal.

A few more Economic Development news items from the past year include:

- The addition of Hanover Insurance Group at the Metis Plaza in the Oak Grove community was announced earlier this year. Hanover will be occupying more than 13,000 square feet of the building's second floor and will bring the occupancy of the facility to nearly 80 percent.
- A new Firestone (light automotive) facility is under construction at Valley Gateway in the Bonsack area. This will be a 6,200 square foot facility with a \$2.5 million dollar investment.
- Construction of the \$65 million dollar AEP Substation and Operation Center project in the Center for Research & Technology began this year that will employ 50 people.
- And Plastics One celebrated its 70th anniversary this year with a name change to P1 Technologies. With over 350 employees, it is one of the largest employers in Roanoke County. Congratulations to P1 Technologies, and their 70 years of continuous operation in Roanoke County!

This growth strengthens our local economy and reinforces that Roanoke County is a vibrant and innovative community in which to work, live and raise a family.

But innovation is hard to achieve without access to technology. Access to Broadband Services has been and continues to be a challenge for many rural communities. At the end of last year, our Communications and Information Technology Department launched a Broadband Study to pinpoint areas in the County with inadequate high-speed Internet access. The study revealed that 33 percent of the County was either under-served or unserved. Identifying these areas has enabled staff to explore strategies to expand services across the County, including grant opportunities and public-private partnerships. While some of these strategies will show progress rapidly, others could take one to two years to be completed.

I'm pleased to announce that Roanoke County was recently awarded \$976,000 dollars from the Governor's new Fast Track Broadband program, enabling us to advance our broadband initiatives in the most rural parts of Roanoke County sooner, rather than later. This funding will establish new service to 275 homes in the Cave Spring and Mount Pleasant areas. I'm happy to report that work began this week! And we anticipate by December, service will become available along Blacksburg and Newport Roads in the Catawba area.

Staff has also applied for a \$3 million dollar Virginia Telecommunications Initiative Grant to help extend our broadband infrastructure. This matching grant program incentivizes public-private partnerships to create Broadband access in rural areas that would otherwise be unprofitable for private businesses. Grant award announcements are expected to be released in January 2021. If awarded, 317 additional homes in Roanoke County will gain access to broadband services.

Broadband projects are just one way we continue to build connections among ourselves and to the world at large. Transportation projects have continued to move ahead in Roanoke County this year as well. Construction on Electric Road began this summer, with work to add another southbound lane between Ogden Road and Route 220 to ease traffic congestion along the busiest road in Roanoke County. Additional improvements for this \$6.5 million dollar project include pedestrian crosswalks, signals, consolidated bus stops, and bicycle lanes.

Construction along Interstate 81 in Roanoke County is also underway to widen the busy stretch of highway between Route 419 at Exit 141 and I-581 at Exit 143. The \$62 million dollar project will reduce congestion and provide safer access to the I-581 interchange by adding a third lane in each direction. Additional lane miles will be widened throughout Roanoke County over the next ten years, thanks to the Interstate 81 Corridor Improvement Plan and associated funding.

VDOT is currently concluding a study to identify ways to reduce the congestion along the Route 460 corridor starting in the City of Roanoke at Williamson Road and continuing east through the County to Cloverdale Road. This study resulted in the submission of seven Smart Scale applications for funding to improve safety and reduce congestion. Traffic signal coordination between VDOT and the City of Roanoke completed last December is already keeping vehicles moving, with less waiting at red lights.

These and other improvements will increase our ability to travel through the valley, while providing an extra measure of safety for all motorists.

On our streets and in our neighborhoods, our public safety departments are vital to ensuring our citizens can enjoy living in a safe and healthy community.

Additional pressure has been placed upon these departments as they seek the right balance of protecting themselves and their families from the virus while providing public safety services to citizens. These are trying times for our personnel as they carry out their duties, and I and my fellow board members fully support all the important work these men and women do to protect our citizens.

Much has been said about law enforcement across the country and the standards by which they operate. I am proud to say that our police department has received national accreditation since 1992, meaning that they are held to the highest standards of integrity, transparency and accountability. Chief Hall, in his capacity as President of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police, has spoken about the importance of policing across the Commonwealth.

And our Fire and Rescue Department recently received nearly \$3 million dollars from the Department of Homeland Security for fifteen additional firefighter positions. This will ensure adequate emergency response capabilities and improve coverage to further protect our community from fires and fire-related hazards.

Throughout the pandemic, many people have flocked to the County's outdoor recreational attractions to find entertainment, relief, and relaxation.

We kicked off 2020 on the heels of the first Illuminights event at Explore Park with more than 43,000 visitors experiencing a dazzling world of 500,000 lights.

Thanks to Center in the Square, community and media partnerships, Illuminights became an instant success, even winning a prestigious Virginia Association of Counties award for excellence in local government programs.

And I'm pleased to say tickets are now available for purchase online for this year's signature event, which will include 41 nights from November 20 through January 2. I hope everyone will join us for what will surely become an annual holiday tradition.

Explore Park's vendor partners saw continued growth throughout the year.

- Twin Creeks brewpub had a successful launch during Illuminights and later opened to serve visitors throughout the summer;
- Blue Mountain Adventures expanded services with nearly 1,000 tube rentals and 600 campsite bookings this season;
- Don's Cab-Inns booked nearly 2,300 nights in camping reservations;

- And in its first year of operation, Treetop Quest saw over 10,000 visitors despite an unexpected three-month closure due to the coronavirus.

In other parks and outdoor news, Roanoke County received \$650,000 dollars from the Read Mountain Alliance and Virginia Outdoor Foundation to acquire 300 acres that will double the size of the Read Mountain Preserve, known for its hiking trails and mountaintop views.

Parks, Recreation and Tourism also received a Governor's Environmental Excellence Award for the Hinchee Park and Trail. The award recognizes innovative ways to improve the environment that also preserves a pristine landscape for recreation and conservation of the land. The Park is a new 235-acre woodland preserve consisting of a two-mile trail that connects Hanging Rock Battlefield Trail to Carvins Cove.

With all of its attractive outdoor amenities, Roanoke County has become known as a destination for exploration.

Another amenity citizens have come to rely on during the pandemic is our Library system. While the buildings were forced to close for a while, staff found creative ways to further connect with individuals and families. Library staff shifted their services online by:

- Increasing electronic resources such as e-books and databases;
- Providing popular virtual programs for children and teens like Storytime and Drama Club on You Tube and Zoom;
- Developing a phone program to help those at home with reference questions or provide assistance with technology or reference databases;
- And even the popular Summer Reading Program went virtual with more than 15,000 books read by participants.

Curbside services became available for patrons to return materials and pick up new ones. Staff worked diligently inside the Libraries to incorporate sanitizing stations and barriers to allow for adequate social distancing. And they were pleased to invite the community back as they reopened the larger branches, one at a time.

Roanoke County Public Libraries has also been recognized with the prestigious Innovator Award from the Virginia Library Association. The Innovator Award recognizes library staff who make an outstanding contribution to advance the mission of the public library through an innovative project, program, or service. Our library staff has embraced the world of artificial intelligence, robotics, and coding through its technology programs to help build a community of strong digital citizens.

Technology during the pandemic has been especially important for our families.

When the governor closed all Virginia schools in the Spring, Roanoke County Public Schools shifted to online instruction. Understanding the limitations for some students to access high-speed Internet services from their homes, the County and the School System's Information Technology staff worked together to ensure additional Wi-Fi access was available for the community, outside of all County and School buildings. The Library system also procured Hot Spots for patrons to check out at the Glenvar Library to help teachers and students finish out the school year.

And with the return to school in August, Roanoke County employees and teachers had to consider how their own children would be cared for, so they could return to work. Our Parks and Recreation staff stepped in to offer a childcare program for children of employees in grades 3 through 7. The program would be recreation-based but also assist students with virtual learning assignments as part of the daily childcare curriculum. This has been a valuable service for employees and their children.

I'm so impressed by how our School System has adapted to the challenges of the pandemic, while balancing the needs of students and teachers. They have remained steadfast in providing in-person and virtual instruction, even expanding online course options so students can now complete their high school experience completely online.

They were even recognized with the distinction as being a "School Division of Innovation" by the State Board of Education for designing and implementing alternatives to traditional instructional practices.

Roanoke County is fortunate to have an outstanding school system that is among the finest in the region and the Commonwealth.

I am proud of all that we have accomplished this year, and how we have Risen to the Challenges we've faced.

The lessons we learned have shown that we must remain flexible, adaptable, and creative when dealing with uncertain conditions. We've been able to offer some relief to those who need it most, and our staff has been able to adapt to find solutions to maintain and even improve delivery of our most vital services.

And we continue to find creative ways to go above and beyond the expectations of our citizens. Now we must ask the question: what lies ahead for us in the coming year?

As an author once wrote, "Challenges are what make life interesting. Overcoming them is what makes life meaningful."

For years we have understood that high-speed Internet services were vital to promoting economic diversity, but now we know that Broadband access is critical to maintaining our way of life.

We must continue to prioritize access to Broadband services to help keep our economy moving through tele-working, tele-medicine and distance learning. We will advocate for:

- New federal and state joint funding programs to advance coverage for a stronger economic development impact;
- A pilot program for local broadband authorities to pursue projects without a private sector provider;
- And we will support efforts to streamline the permitting of the VDOT broadband infrastructure in the VDOT right-of-way.

As we look to the future I'm certain that our Community Planning efforts will bear the fruit of new developments for the Hollins and Oak Grove areas, and an upcoming Economic Development Strategic Plan will help strengthen the foundation of our community for years to come.

As a County, we must be flexible enough to embrace new opportunities as they present themselves, with an eye toward the future envisioned by these plans. And we must have the courage to adapt our services to help our community thrive and prosper.

While coping with the changes brought on by COVID-19 may have been our greatest challenge this year, in the days to come our largest obstacle may be overcoming our conventional mindset of how things are done.

While the future may be uncertain, I have faith that we have all learned that we can be resilient, even in the toughest of times.

Thank you for listening.