

2021 State of the County Address



**P. Jason Peters, 2021 Chairman
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors
Wednesday, November 10, 2021
“Investing in a Brighter Future”**

Good morning.

It is truly a pleasure to be here today to talk about the State of Roanoke County.

I'd like to thank Greg for the kind introduction, as well as Joyce Waugh and our friends at the Chamber of Commerce for their continued support of this annual event. Their dedication and commitment to progress in the Roanoke Valley is outstanding and we appreciate all they do.

I would also take a moment to acknowledge my fellow Board members: Vice-Chair David Radford; Supervisors Martha Hooker, Paul Mahoney, and Phil North. My thanks to each of you for the work you do every day on behalf of Roanoke County and our citizens.

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 dedication to our community.

As you may have heard, our County Administrator will soon retire after 35 years in public management, 21 of which have been in Roanoke County. Dan, we appreciate your service to our citizens and your leadership over the years. You have been a tremendous asset for Roanoke County and we hope you enjoy a well-deserved retirement.

This year, like last, presented Roanoke County with many unusual challenges. We never could have anticipated the greatest challenge of our generation would be a global pandemic. We have seen a gradual recovery locally, but we realize COVID-19 is still affecting our businesses, schools and families.

While the pandemic is seemingly a part of our everyday lives now, we have learned that Roanoke County is resilient as we continue along our path to future growth and opportunity. As we move forward, we must continue to make every effort to deliver on our priorities.

Five years ago I stood in this very spot, as Chairman, and spoke about what was needed to move our community forward—to build a brighter future. We had just developed Roanoke County's first-ever

Community Strategic Plan—with the input from our citizens, business community and community leaders—and established a roadmap for our future.

Many times these Plans find their way onto bookshelves and are seldom reviewed. That's not the case with Roanoke County's Community Strategic Plan. Since day one, we have used the Plan's initiatives as a guiding light in our mission to create a better community for our citizens.

It has been said that "if you succeed at your plan, your plan will succeed." Today, I'm proud to say that we *have* succeeded by putting forth our vision and bringing it to reality.

While we have enjoyed many successes since the start of our Strategic Planning process, I'd like to acknowledge some accomplishments made over the past year.

We have made great strides in prioritizing what is needed to provide a sustainable economy and high quality of life for our residents. We've seen millions of dollars in investment, the creation of new jobs, and a promising way to advance the County's economic position.

We celebrated with Richfield Living as they debuted their new Town Center and Health Center. These expansions provide residents with freedom, dignity, and the ability to live more independently. This high level of health care services and quality of life helps make Roanoke County a desirable place for seniors and their families.

Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton initiated multiple redevelopment projects over the last several years to breathe new life into underutilized properties located within the Town. These unique properties provide residential, dining, business, and lodging opportunities in Vinton, while enhancing its economic vitality. The recent expansion of Cardinal Glass, the soon-to-be re-developed Gish Mill property, and a new Bank of Botetourt branch are additional developments that bring new jobs and more opportunities to Vinton.

Earlier this year, we celebrated the ground-breaking of a new LewisGale freestanding Emergency Room, located in the Bonsack area. We saw growth in the Hollins area with interest from several businesses, including the creation of a new state-of-the-art Vistar Eye Center, offering the most up-to-date eye care technology available.

These new additions support the momentum taking place within the Hollins Center Plan which seeks to improve economic vitality, aesthetics and value in the County's highest population density area. The Hollins district is an excellent location for business investment, redevelopment opportunities, and prosperity of the community.

The Board of Supervisors also adopted the Oak Grove Center Plan into the County's Comprehensive Plan this spring. Since beginning the community engagement strategy and collaboration with Roanoke County Public Schools and the City of Roanoke, we've already seen increased development in the area, with several new restaurants and businesses opening along 419. And more future development opportunities are taking shape for the Oak Grove community.

And if you drive along Route 419 to Tanglewood, you have seen the efforts to re-energize our greatest commercial corridor. The 419 Town Center Plan envisions a mix of retail and living space—a walkable, connected style of living not available anywhere else in the County.

Carilion Children’s recently opened its doors inside Tanglewood, after investing more than \$30 million dollars to transform a 150,000 square foot space into the region’s only children’s hospital. We value the efforts by Carilion for recognizing the benefits of an investment in Tanglewood. The economic impact of this project will be realized over the next several decades.

The addition of Carilion Clinic to the 419 footprint sparked renewed energy in the area, with the announcements of new businesses and restaurants that will attract more people to visit the area. These new projects represent nearly \$30 million dollars in new private investment at the Tanglewood property, with \$40 million expected by the end of 2022.

All of these investments align with the County’s strategy to reimagine and redevelop the 419 corridor by focusing on quality of life, supporting community health and well-being, and concentrating on transportation improvements.

A key piece to the 419 Town Center Plan addresses the future transportation needs of a mixed-use and revitalized commercial corridor. The project underway in front of Tanglewood Mall leveraged \$7 million dollars of Federal and State funding. Now close to completion, the features include an additional outside lane, sidewalks, 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.

Another key transportation project is Interstate 81, the major artery that lies in the heart of the Roanoke Valley. The expansion underway is on track to improve the connections between the separate communities within Roanoke County. And it will also improve highway safety, ease congestion, and provide better access to the greater Roanoke Valley for residents and visitors alike.

Each year, we see more visitors coming to explore outdoor recreation in Roanoke County.

This year’s IRONMAN 70.3 Virginia’s Blue Ridge drew more than 16-hundred athletes from all fifty states and seven countries to the Roanoke region. The race’s estimated \$3.8 million dollar impact to our community highlights how outdoor recreation can strengthen our economy.

Our investments in the outdoors have also helped attract new tournaments and races, like the CIAA Cross Country Championship that recently signed a four-year extension to host its race at Roanoke County’s Green Hill Park.

And we have continued to see a return on our investment at Explore Park, with improvements that have made the park into a regional outdoor recreation destination. New paving, street lights, and improved access to the Roanoke River support our citizens’ desires to be active outside while making access to the park’s amenities easier.

Roanoke County also opened a new mountain bike feature at Explore Park in June. The Blue Ridge Bike Center at Explore Park features a progressive bike skills park and a new advanced mountain bike trail constructed with the help of Blue Ridge Off-Road Cyclists. This new Bike Center complements other Explore Park amenities like Treetop Quest, lodging options and rentals from Don's Cab-Inns and Blue Mountain Adventures, and greater access to the Roanoke River.

And let's not forget about Explore Park's award-winning Illuminights event. Despite COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing, more than 40,000 people came out last year to experience the Winter Walk of Lights.

I would like to personally invite you to bring your families out to this year's Illuminights event, starting November 20th, and running through December 30th. On your tables you will find a complimentary ticket and light-up lapel pin we hope you will take and enjoy.

Let's face it - our world depends on connections, whether it's a connection with family, our community, or connection with your local government and the greater world beyond Roanoke County. Connection to high-speed Internet access has become a quality-of-life measure that enables virtual learning, telehealth, and remote work options for citizens.

Whether it's a matter of geography, customer base, or distance, many homes in the County remain "hard to connect" and unprofitable for commercial Internet providers. The Roanoke County Rural Broadband Initiative provides the infrastructure to help make new Internet connections possible.

In the past year, we've partnered with local Internet providers to expand their networks to new customers in several outlying parts of the County. Because of this initiative, 112 homes and small businesses now enjoy high-speed Internet access, with connections to more than 300 households and businesses coming soon.

The only good thing about the pandemic so far has been the flow of state and federal dollars into Roanoke County. Our broadband projects have been made possible by leveraging \$2 million dollars in CARES Act funding and \$1.1 million dollars in Governor's Fast Track Funding to make these partnerships a reality.

Future local funding from the federal American Rescue Plan may also provide additional opportunities to expand broadband to unserved or under-served parts of the County in the future. And in October, the Virginia Governor's Office announced that a \$2 billion dollar broadband investment has Virginia on track to become one of the first states to achieve universal broadband access by 2024.

But at the local level, access to high-speed Internet is not about bragging rights. Roanoke County's broadband projects support continuing education and the growth of home-based and small businesses, all of which help make a more resilient economy in times of crisis. Investment in broadband is an investment in our lives, our children's education, and our local economy.

Like Broadband, our investment in Roanoke County's Public Schools is money well-spent for our children's future of lifelong learning.

In October, the Board of Supervisors approved a \$22.4 million dollar bonding measure that will enable Roanoke County Public Schools to begin much-needed renovations to William Byrd High School.

Working together, the Board of Supervisors and the School Board have created an advisory committee, comprised of 10 citizens, which have been appointed to investigate and make recommendations regarding the needs of our students in the Career and Technical Education program. Specifically, the committee has been tasked with exploring the construction of a new facility, including its size, location, and the potential incorporation of solar technology—a modern facility in which students can learn and grow.

Investments in CTE ensure that our students are “Opportunity Ready” and have the skills to take their place in tomorrow’s ever-changing workforce.

Roanoke County’s Public Library System is also dedicated to lifelong learning, and throughout the pandemic the Library System has pivoted to meet the needs of our community. Library staff have helped people register to vote, enabled drive-through tax payments for the Treasurer’s Office, and assisted the Virginia Department of Health with registering citizens for vaccine appointments. And librarians gathered resources for those needing health, unemployment assistance, and other critical information.

Throughout all this, the many innovative outreach programs our Libraries created have continued to serve citizens.

By adapting its services, Roanoke County Public Library has strengthened its connections with patrons and furthered its reach into the community.

In Roanoke County, we are fortunate to live in a safe community. It may be one of the most important reasons people come to live and work in Roanoke County.

As many of you may know, I hold a special place in my heart for Public Safety. I’ve been a volunteer EMT with the Vinton First Aid Crew for nearly 30 years. Citizens value the well-being of their community, and the staffing levels of our public safety agencies have always been a great concern.

To ensure that Roanoke County Fire and Rescue is able to address the growing needs of our community, the department launched a new hiring initiative this year to recruit career staff into its ranks. As a result of these efforts, 16 new candidates began their academy training in October. Soon these new recruits will take their place in the field alongside academy graduates from this past Spring.

Fire and Rescue also celebrated the graduation of its first Volunteer Fire Academy in collaboration with Botetourt County Fire and EMS. Eleven volunteer firefighters completed the academy and are now serving their community.

Our Police Department has seen similar challenges when it comes to attracting new staff. As criticism of Law Enforcement across the country continues, our Police Department’s ability to attract qualified candidates has reached an alarming level.

My fellow board members and I fully support the important work these men and women do to protect our citizens every day.

To address the challenges of recruiting and retaining police officers, the Board of Supervisors has approved a new pay scale for Police based on years of service and rank. The department is already seeing the benefits on the new pay structure, which offers competitive pay to attract experienced, certified officers into the ranks of Roanoke County Police.

Similar pay structures have been implemented for the Sheriff's Office and Fire and Rescue Department as well.

Our investment in professional, highly trained personnel is the reason that Roanoke County remains a safe and healthy community.

Although we have enjoyed many successes over the past year, there is more we can do.

We set out five years ago to define the path we wanted to travel, with a vision of our desired future. So, how do we plan where we might be in the next five years? And how do we get there?

Today, I challenge our citizens, our business community, and our State and Federal elected officials. If our community—and our region—is to continue to grow, we must work together to invest the time and resources to make it happen.

Data released by the U.S. Census Bureau reflects our continued growth, with Roanoke County seeing the region's largest population growth *at 4.9 percent!* This proves that the livability and desirability of our community matters.

Let's use this momentum to concentrate on projects that trigger new investments, improvements to our quality of life, and prosperity for everyone.

To our partners in the business community—how many of *you* will promote your interests in Roanoke County to drive future growth?

Our desire is to bring high-quality projects and high-wage jobs to enhance the region's economic base. New opportunities exist at the Wood Haven Technology Park right now. The gateway property at the intersection of Interstates 81 and 581, helps fill the void for larger developed sites, and offers high visibility along the region's most traveled corridor.

We need skilled labor—and *you* can take a lead role in working with our schools and colleges to define how Career and Technical Education programs are tailored. Let's make sure our students have opportunities beyond high school for meaningful, well-paying jobs.

Healthcare, modern manufacturing, and STEM-related careers are available NOW and will remain some of the largest drivers in our economy. Creating a modern CTE program, and a new CTE facility to educate our students, will certainly be a major, but critical investment in Roanoke County's future.

How many of you in this room are ready to help prepare our students for the future?

Now, I'm sure many here today have taken part in our future economic strategy by providing input for the County's ELEVATE 2026 Strategic Plan. When finalized, this Plan will be a roadmap to grow Roanoke County's tax base, retain and attract businesses, provide a sustainable economy for our businesses, and ensure a high quality of life for our citizens. The results will help create a next-generation Roanoke County that attracts new talent and new business and industry, while providing for its citizens.

To our State and Federal elected officials—I call on you to remain strong advocates for our future Broadband and Transportation initiatives.

We must continue to grow our multi-modal transportation network to encourage better connectivity through bus and bike systems, pedestrian, mass transit, and motor vehicles.

Through the collective efforts of our Board Members, partner agencies, and staff, millions of dollars in transportation improvements in the Tanglewood area will take place over the next several years, to complement the 419 Town Center Plan. And it's important to note that 97 percent of the improvement costs are provided through federal and state funds, amounting to over \$60 million dollars.

Changes to our transportation network will remake existing areas to reduce the risk of collisions, mitigate congestion and improve safety along the County's roadways.

Improving broadband connectivity in residential areas and for the business community remains a top priority for the Board of Supervisors. In order to keep Roanoke County economically viable in the future, we must continue to expand access to high-speed Internet services.

Roanoke County has submitted more than \$3.7 million dollars for the Virginia Telecommunications Initiative, or VATI grant program, for more than \$7.7 million dollars in proposed projects. If approved, these projects have the potential to provide broadband service to more than 1400 homes in outlying areas. We look forward to hearing more news from the VATI grant announcements by the end of the year.

And I call on our citizens to tell us what matters most to you. Tell us what investments we must make to help set our community above others.

American writer Margaret Wheatley said, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

Over the last several months, hundreds of citizens and community leaders have participated in public meetings for Roanoke County's 200 Plan, a 15-year update to our Comprehensive Plan.

The 200 Plan will define a vision and goals for 11 community planning areas and the Town of Vinton. It will provide guidance for policies about land development, housing, public services, and more. And it's not too late to participate in Roanoke County's 200 Plan.

Join us for our final community meetings at South County Library on Wednesday, November 17, or here at Green Ridge Recreation Center on November 18. Add your voice to the many citizens and stakeholders who have already spoken about their desires for Roanoke County's future.

Long-term planning today will pave the way for tomorrow's success.

As Chairman of the Roanoke County Board of Supervisors, I am committed to moving Roanoke County forward. We already know that when we work together, plan well and commit to our efforts, anything is possible.

Let's invest in our future by pursuing the possibilities before us.

We want people to know that Roanoke County is a great place to do business, raise a family and enjoy a vibrant, quality of life.

Thank you, to all of you, for coming today to hear about the State of Roanoke County.