

2021 State of the City Address

Mayor Levar M. Stoney

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Good evening, Richmond. I'm so grateful you could join me for this virtual State of the City address.

First, I'd like to say thank you.

Thank you to the members of Richmond City Council, old and new, for joining me in our mission for a better Richmond.

Thank you to my team across all city departments, who work tirelessly every day to deliver vital city services and move closer to our shared vision.

Thank you to our community partners who never stop doing the work on the ground.

And thank you to each and every Richmond resident for calling this city home. Whoever you are, this city would not be the same without you.

2020 was a dark year. We lost too many lives. Mourned too many loved ones. Said goodbye far too many times.

As of today, Richmond has seen over 13,000 COVID-19 cases. I now number among those 13,000.

Since March, we have lost over 100 friends, family members and neighbors to the disease.

Join me in a moment of reflection on that immense, incalculable loss. **moment of silence**

COVID-19 has devastated lives and livelihoods, causing a public health and economic crisis the likes of which our country has never seen.

Many Richmonders have lost jobs. Been furloughed. Even lost their homes.

This struggle has tested our patience, our selflessness, our compassion and our strength to carry on.

My fellow Richmonders, the test is not over.

It's the hard truth. Until we ensure that every Richmonder has access to the vaccine, the test will not be over.

Yes, the struggle isn't over. But we're still in the fight, and I'll tell you why.

Because in Richmond, if you look carefully, you can begin to see the light peeking through the dark.

If you look carefully, you can see this light beginning to illuminate a promise of hope, of growth, and of justice.

Because while 2020 was dark, *our dawn is on the horizon.*

Since the beginning of this pandemic, the city has been fighting right alongside residents and businesses, taking on this challenge together.

When the world shut down in March, your city government did not.

During the pandemic, city services never lapsed, and we designed and delivered aid at an unprecedented level.

For that, we all have public servants like Kenny Hill and his team at Facilities Management to thank. They have not missed a beat, installing hand sanitizer dispensers, touchless door sensors, upgraded filtration systems and more.

Kenny and his team are the reason DPU customer support representatives can deliver utility relief. Social workers can safely administer benefits. And my staff and I can keep the wheels of government turning from City Hall.

There are thousands of public servants just like Kenny who have been fighting for you since March. And they deserve our respect and recognition.

This administration distributed hundreds of thousands in direct aid to families through the Family Crisis Fund. We fought for an eviction moratorium from the state and dedicated millions of dollars to rent and mortgage relief to keep people in their homes. We designed programs that intentionally included groups most traditionally left out of federal aid, like residents who haven't attained citizenship.

And we fought for businesses, allocating over 7 million dollars in direct aid – grants, not loans. See, we got creative, paying local restaurants to feed first responders and putting together PPE packages for pickup.

So far, this has been a test of community endurance. Of our joint perseverance.

And it won't be over until everyone in Richmond has had access to the vaccine.

Until we get Richmonders back to work and get kids back in schools. That's what I want to see before anything else here in 2021.

But the past year has made it clear we can't simply survive this pandemic. We have the responsibility to address the injustices the pandemic has illuminated.

We must learn from this crisis.

See, there's a wrong way, and there's a right way to recover.

In Richmond, we have a unique opportunity to build true healing into our recovery. That's the right way.

Especially in the wake of the Trump presidency, we are met on all sides by calls for unity, and I think that is a righteous cause. Unity is something we must work toward.

However, we must not ignore the tortured and complex identity and history of our city.

This summer, we heard the outcry of Richmonders of all races and backgrounds demanding justice. The pain and trauma of the past year and past four hundred years were tangible.

As a city, we know the depth of that pain, the extent of that trauma. We know it's not something that can be erased with a single call for unity.

Because here's the truth: unity doesn't come without healing. And healing doesn't come without action.

Today, we start with action.

With action, we can usher in the dawn.

I ask you to join me in welcoming this new dawn. In opening your hearts and embracing the next decade, and the actions required to heal our city, our commonwealth and our nation.

This year's inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, perfectly encompassed our mission in verse:

"The new dawn blooms as we free it."

"For there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it."

"If only we're brave enough to be it."

In 2021, and in the decade to come, we must be the light.

Our shared mission will be:

To empower our communities who have experienced injustice by removing barriers. Barriers to access, barriers to success, barriers to the opportunity our city should afford all its residents.

In short, the right way to recover from the pandemic, from this recession must center *economic justice*.

Not just getting people back to work - but getting them to work in jobs that offer dignity and stability.

Not just getting people housed - but empowering them so they are able to stay in quality, safe housing.

Not just getting kids back in classrooms - but supporting them and their caregivers so they are able to excel in the classroom.

Make no mistake, the pandemic widened the gap between haves and have nots in this city. We have a responsibility to fix that.

What's more, we have to do it in the context of a harsh economic reality. Like so many localities, Richmond is feeling the serious economic effects of the pandemic. This budget season, we'll be forced to make tough decisions and do more with less.

But I know we can dig deep and recover the right way by removing barriers to economic justice.

Let me give you an example that's very close to my heart.

Tiffany enrolled in the workforce development program with Richmond Parks and Rec three years ago. Since she began her provisional work for the city, earning a living wage, her coworkers have rallied around her. They've helped her find a place to live, enroll in community college, and obtain her license.

Two weeks ago, she interviewed for a full-time position. Last week, we extended an offer of permanent employment with the City of Richmond.

See, we have this bright, hardworking, experienced person on our team because we recognize that sometimes, all Richmonders need is a chance. A chance to show their worth, unencumbered by the burden of poverty. A chance to show their will, unlimited by low expectations. A chance to show their talents, unbridled by barriers to entry.

We can and we will build opportunities like this into our recovery.

Unity does not come without healing. Healing does not come without action.

This past summer, we took action.

We removed from their pedestals men who never deserved a place of public celebration in our city, men who had championed racism and betrayed this nation.

We'll continue to remove symbols of hate from our city, taking steps to rename streets, bridges, and other elements of public spaces after worthwhile namesakes, not white supremacists.

Additionally, I have directed my administration to develop an ordinance that will prohibit the city from displaying symbols of white supremacy, neo-Nazi ideology or the Battle Flag of the Confederacy on city property.

Black Richmonders lived in the shadow of those monuments to inequity for far too long. We must ensure the city never makes that mistake again.

This ordinance is a simple, yet profound move modeled after New York state law. It shows residents of and visitors to our city what we value and what we will not stand for.

But we need to do more than dismantle the byproducts of a system built on injustice. We need to build new ones centered on equity and justice.

That plan is outlined in the city's equity agenda.

This equity agenda came from time spent listening to you, my fellow Richmonders, and members of City Council. It will guide the decision-making of our city government moving forward by emphasizing our priority areas, such as affordable housing, health, community safety, family empowerment and economic justice.

But we can't speak equity into existence. Real change requires a coordinated approach.

That's why we will be introducing our equity agenda in the form of a resolution for passage by the Richmond City Council.

Though this agenda is not exhaustive, it offers a strong starting point for the city to collectively move forward. It's a list of actionable steps we're going to take to realize our vision for One Richmond, and every single agency in city government has a role to play.

In some way, shape or form, each item of the equity agenda will help us realize true economic justice throughout our economic recovery.

You can already see this at work in the Richmond Resilience Initiative. All participants in our guaranteed income pilot program have to support their families after falling off the benefits cliff – they make too much money to qualify for SNAP or TANF, but don't make a living wage.

I know personally what that cliff feels like. When you're living on the edge, each month you wonder if this time, you'll actually fall off. And I know what my grandma would have done with guaranteed income. She would've bought more groceries for growing boys and saved the rest for a rainy day.

We hope a 500 dollar a month supplement - whether it goes to groceries, transportation, or rent - allows families the flexibility to meet their needs without sacrificing the dignity that should be afforded to all.

This would not be possible without our partners. I want to thank Robins Foundation, the Center for Guaranteed Income Research, and Mayors for a Guaranteed Income.

We designed our guaranteed income program this way for a reason – to show that in 2021, a living wage is non-negotiable. It's a core element of economic justice.

That's the intersection between economic development and economic justice – and where great possibility awaits Richmond. Especially in opportunities like the redevelopment of Greater Scott's Addition, downtown, or the development of a resort casino, our priorities must be providing living wage jobs and growing city revenue to fund vital investments in public education, affordable housing and infrastructure.

That is why we will develop an Equitable Economic Development Scorecard. This scorecard will reflect standardized expectations of all economic development projects, based on community input and industry best practices.

By developing a scorecard, we'll create a transparent process by which to evaluate economic development projects to ensure they will bring greater equity for Black and brown businesses and families.

The right way to recover means we must use every tool in our toolbox... without placing any additional burden on Richmond households, especially during this public health and economic crisis.

To make that happen, Richmond has to grow.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me be frank: if we don't grow, the financial burden falls on all of us - from our wealthiest residents to those who are living on a fixed income.

Yes, Richmond has a history of maintaining the status quo. But we literally can't afford to think that way any longer.

From the old Oak Grove Elementary School, Fulton Gas Works, to the Coliseum downtown... Every empty parking lot or blighted property hinders the growth of our city.

But with the right approach, those same properties are tools at our disposal to improve the economic health of our residents. Especially in times of economic strife.

We must embrace progress and we must embrace the dawn of a new era of economic justice in our city.

Throughout my first term, I learned that you want to come to the table and help build a better city. You want to be part of the action, and I want to make that happen.

This year, a simple town hall meeting would not cut it. We had to get a lot more creative, hosting virtual townhalls, offering online surveys, and even door knocking.

As a result, we have a couple of outstanding community engagement models to build on:

Richmond 300 engaged thousands of Richmonders to build a master plan reflective of neighborhood needs and a progressive future. The master plan passed Richmond City Council unanimously in December.

The Task Force to Reimagine Public Safety convened community members and subject area experts from the legal, academic, law enforcement and advocacy communities to define what public safety really means, and how to make that a reality. They showed us that even on the most contentious of issues, we can still find common ground.

Our Community Ambassadors, a team within the Office of Community Wealth Building, is comprised of familiar community faces tasked with outreach to our high need neighborhoods. Under the leadership of James Davis, a native Richmonder given a second chance, they knocked on doors throughout the pandemic, providing thousands of desks to students and connecting families to childcare.

See, we're building on the solid foundation laid in a year of trials and triumphs, expanding your opportunity to provide feedback and our capacity to respond to it.

The next step is to standardize our approach to ensure that every department in City Hall has the tools necessary to engage and communicate with Richmonders on projects and plans you care about.

That's why I'm creating Richmond's Office of Public Engagement, a first of its kind team dedicated to designing and executing 21st century community engagement strategies that enable all Richmonders, regardless of zip code, preferred language or internet access, to get involved.

This office will work across all departments to ensure that the city is implementing creative engagement techniques, both virtual and in-person, communicating effectively on city programs and policies, and sharing the city's story for others to celebrate.

You want to get engaged, and I'm dedicated to building a reliable yet flexible vehicle for you to do just that.

Throughout the past year, many Richmonders lived with the fear or reality of losing their only place of refuge during a pandemic. With this new dawn, we must address the housing crisis.

Last year, Ms. Smith of the Department of Social Services was assigned the case of a Richmonder who was living in housing that was unsafe. Ms. Smith coached this individual through the displacement, working with a housing counselor and local landlord to mediate a permanent housing arrangement. Ms. Smith saw this case through to the end, never leaving this client's side even as her workload piled up.

After securing permanent housing for his family, this Richmonder kept insisting Ms. Smith went above and beyond, that she was his guardian angel. To this, Ms. Smith simply replied: It's just what I do.

My fellow Richmonders, that's how we must approach getting people permanently, safely, affordably housed in this city: with creativity, with compassion, and with a fierce dedication.

Because here's the truth: Nobody can truly call Richmond home until everyone in Richmond is housed. To reach that very ambitious goal, we're all going to have to be as creative and hardworking as Ms. Smith.

In 2020, we met our goal to construct 1500 new affordable housing units three years ahead of schedule. Now it's time to pick up the pace.

So we must create 1000 new affordable housing units each year for the next ten years. That's right - Richmond needs 10,000 new units by 2030.

This is the decade of housing justice, and Richmond will lead the way!

We've already taken great strides in reaching the 10,000 unit need outlined in our Equitable and Affordable Housing Plan:

Our biennial real estate plan proposes conveying dozens of parcels of city property to the Maggie Walker Community Land Trust, affordable housing nonprofits and private developers for the renovation of single-family homes and creation of affordable housing developments with multifamily units.

And we have secured a source of dedicated funding to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund to help us execute this goal. Richmond City Council passed our ordinance to provide a secure annual allocation to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund on top of the recent budget allocations, which have tripled since 2016.

Based on current projections, by 2025, the revenue to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund will be an unprecedented 10 million dollars.

I greatly appreciate the city council's support of these efforts.

Still, many Richmonders are unsheltered or live in unstable housing, not knowing where they'll sleep from one night to the next. Not only does this situation call for our community's humanity, it also deserves our urgent attention.

Our partners at the Greater Richmond Continuum of Care have sheltered thousands of individuals since March, but we know that there's work to be done along the spectrum of services to prevent homelessness.

The Homelessness Advisory Council, a diverse group of Richmonders including a number of residents who have experienced homelessness, is currently meeting to create actionable steps to strengthen homeless services in Richmond. I look forward to hearing their recommendations.

The bottom line is this: There is nothing simple about America's affordable housing crisis. That's why we have to get innovative, stay compassionate, and empower people like Ms. Smith in their tireless quest to serve.

The right way to recover offers a unique opportunity to build Richmonders a transportation system that works for them.

Regular transit users, who are overwhelmingly people of color, are some of our most hardworking residents. They shouldn't have to suffer longer commutes or less flexible transportation options. That's the vision of the Office of Equitable Transit and Mobility.

The office, founded in 2020, has already earned the city a number of grants to bring this vision to the streets:

First, I am pleased to announce that the city has won a grant from the Department of Rail and Public Transit to paint the Pulse lanes red, a practice many cities have used to keep riders safe from vehicular traffic and keep buses running on time.

We'll introduce the ordinance to accept that grant money at the February 22 meeting of City Council.

Second, the city has the opportunity to work with the Governor's Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment to improve the City's accessibility measures.

This opportunity will allow us to explore what it really means to build a multimodal city and develop actionable steps toward removing barriers to transit use.

We're also creating a new Bike Share Program focused on equitable access. We want to provide a low-cost transit alternative, because everyone deserves the dignity of choice. We plan to pilot the program with bike share stations near the most populous public housing communities after robust community engagement.

Alongside our responsibility to consider equitable transit is a responsibility to highlight environmental justice. Put simply, while climate change affects all of us, it is taking a greater toll on Black and brown communities in Richmond.

This past summer, a Richmond resident named Sparkle couldn't help but notice which areas in her city had greenery and which didn't.

Sparkle walks thirty minutes from her home in Gilpin to a park in a more affluent neighborhood with a shaded playground, where her children can play out of the sweltering Richmond heat. Her trek across the city is emblematic of how far we have to go in realizing equitable climate justice.

To serve residents like Sparkle, we're working to make sure all Richmonders are within a 10-minute walk to a park. Last year, my Green Team, a group of experts in climate action and green spaces from around Richmond, identified five parcels of city land in our city's hottest neighborhoods to transform into usable green space.

It should be a surprise to no one that the hottest areas of Richmond, those most vulnerable to climate change, are also those with the greatest history of redlining and underinvestment.

That's why we've made an intentional effort to designate the first new parks space since the 1970s in communities of color. And we're asking the community what they want to see in those spaces.

I'm particularly excited about the engagement work we're doing at Broad Rock Creek.

Parks and Rec and the Office of Sustainability have partnered with local nonprofits Southside ReLeaf and Virginia Community Voice to facilitate meaningful, on-site community engagement.

A trail through the 17-acre property allows residents to envision the park's future without limits, whether they're a young man who would like a soccer field or a young mom who would love a walking path.

When it comes to climate action, we must stay engaged and act urgently.

In 2017, the city launched RVAGreen 2050. Since then our Office of Sustainability has lead this innovative process, centering racial equity and embracing community input to develop strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero. We need to help

our city adapt to the local impacts of climate change, which will change life in Richmond as we know it.

Looking forward, we will develop and implement a comprehensive energy management policy to make city facilities and operations as efficient as possible, minimizing waste and reducing our reliance on non-renewable forms of energy in favor of renewable alternatives.

When it comes to climate change, we know the stakes are high. That's why our goals are ambitious: by 2023, we will complete purchases for 50 percent of our electricity usage to be in off-site renewable electricity. By 2025, we will complete purchases for our electricity usage to be entirely renewable.

Our city as a whole is threatened by the impacts of climate change. What's more, our Black and brown communities are feeling the effects most significantly. We can and must take a coordinated, equitable approach to building a more sustainable future for our city.

Building a cleaner, more livable city for our kids.

Yes, so much of what we do comes down to building a better future for our kids. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning. And the pandemic proved a unique challenge in that mission.

When the city started allocating funding to childcare organizations to serve more kids more safely, Blacktop Kings and Queens did a lot more than provide students a safe, secure place to plug in their computers. Program Director Manny Harris brought in barbers and held holiday celebrations. Bottom line: he made sure those kids felt loved.

City funding enabled this community organization to create a joyous, stress-free space for children and lighten the burden of hardworking caretakers as well.

Blacktop Kings and Queens provided what so many of our students need right now. They need a community, and they need continuity.

Despite the uniquely difficult burden the pandemic has placed on our school system, I have never been prouder of RPS.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Jason Kamras, RPS continues to weather this storm with resilience, innovation and compassion.

For the good of our kids, the city is dedicated to empowering, not hindering, the work of our school system. And it certainly doesn't hurt that my administration and RPS leadership are on speaking terms.

In 2021, we'll continue to serve Richmond families, supporting our kids and their caretakers alike.

Our new Office of Children and Families got right to work this year. We stood up an emergency childcare apparatus for essential personnel within two weeks of school closures.

When need skyrocketed at the beginning of the school year, we started the Emergency Childcare Initiative to provide funding and other support to a network of childcare providers. We increased the capacity of existing childcare providers to serve families safely and worked with trusted partners to set up new sites in school buildings.

Something became increasingly clear during our work to provide emergency childcare: an investment in the caretaker is an investment in the child.

That's why I'm committed to making preschool free in Richmond.

The first step is to do a formal landscape analysis to determine what Richmonders need, and what our current capacity looks like. I'm excited to announce we're working with two trusted partners – Smart Beginnings and VCU – to do this important groundwork.

We're dedicated to helping Richmond families - whether we're supporting kids, moms, dads or grandmothers, it all comes back to the dignity and safety of Richmonders.

In 2020, we learned that the definition of public safety varies widely, depending on who in Richmond you ask.

When listening to the members of the Task Force to Reimagine Public Safety, I was struck by the stories I heard: stories of community preservation and personal accountability. Individuals were mediating arguments in corner stores, leading healing circles with youth, and caring for each other's children.

It quickly became clear – in our city, the charge of public safety does not rest entirely with the police, and that makes sense. We all have a role to play in reimagining a Richmond where everyone feels safe.

For many residents of Richmond, chiefly the Black community, the number one priority is addressing the gun violence that has traumatized our communities for generations.

Last year, we lost 60 Richmonders to gun violence.

Every time I hear “I just want the shooting to stop” from a mother or a grandmother, my dedication is renewed: we MUST address gun violence for what it is - a public health crisis deeply rooted in systemic racism and inequities.

My office is working in partnership with VCU, Richmond City Health District, the Department of Human Services, community partners and residents to build a framework to address the factors that lead to lives being taken far too soon.

Our goal is to help build up and strengthen our communities so that every single person can live their life to the fullest. Addressing gun violence for good will require systems-level change.

Thankfully, that's language our Chief of Police understands. In the wake of a nationwide outcry for accountability, I know he's a proponent of change, change that will benefit his officers and his community alike.

The Marcus Alert will be a feature of the City of Richmond's emergency response. Individuals experiencing a mental or behavioral health crisis should not be criminalized. They should be met with care and compassion, and we're working with mental health professionals and community advocates to prioritize de-escalation and crisis intervention, in alignment with state guidance.

Per the recommendation of the Task Force on Reimagining Public Safety, RPD is reevaluating its training practices, implementing a community-based training model that encourages civilian feedback on language, demeanor and cultural awareness. Officers will go into the job with an understanding of and respect for the communities they'll serve.

Also at the suggestion of the Task Force, we're taking practical steps to encourage accountability. Chief Smith has founded the Office of Professional Accountability in the Richmond Police Department, led by Victoria Pearson, a former Deputy Attorney General. The office is dedicated to working with officers to support their professional development and to address accountability concerns raised by the community.

For example, police will now carry and distribute business cards with their names, precinct information, space for filling in the report number, and contact information for filing complaints or offering compliments.

The RPD Use of Force policy will be updated to prioritize de-escalation and outline RPD's philosophy and values.

And we're further strengthening our Duty to Intervene Policy, modeling it off of best practices in other cities to ensure every officer feels comfortable stopping a fellow officer, even a supervisor, from engaging in unacceptable language use, force or harassment.

Finally, I'm calling on Council to complete the work of a Civilian Review Board this year. It will be a vital element of our reimagination of community safety.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the members of the Task Force to Reimagine Public Safety for their hard work on these recommendations. I look forward to our ongoing engagement

Public safety means something different for everyone, but I guarantee you, we are listening and learning to make Richmond a safer city for all.

Each year, the activities on the General Assembly's Lobby Day make it clear that stricter gun safety regulations are necessary in the Commonwealth's capital city.

We are a hub for engagement and debate, a place where residents from all over Virginia should feel comfortable convening. Using their words, not their firearms, to advocate on issues close to their heart.

But we're different from cities like Washington, D.C. that have reasonable limits on the open carry of firearms. In other cities, these limits empower residents and allow law enforcement to keep guns off the streets. In Richmond, state law allows visitors to this city to openly carry rifles through the streets of Downtown.

Each year, Richmonders are threatened and intimidated. Like many Richmonders, I find that unacceptable.

That's why I'm calling for the General Assembly and Governor Northam to ban the open carry of firearms in all public spaces. Period.

My fellow Richmonders, the darkness of this pandemic has devastated our communities and our economy.

However, we are on our way to recovery. But I want us to recover the right way.

I hope you can see that every person working in City Hall, serving at our parks, community centers and libraries, operating refuse trucks and fixing your water mains, every public servant on my team has a little bit of light to offer in these most challenging times.

That's just a little bit of light to drive out the darkness and to usher in the dawn.

Join me in welcoming that new dawn. In opening your heart and embracing the next decade, and the actions required to heal our city, our commonwealth and our country.

Join us in our mission of removing the barriers to so many Richmonders built over centuries of oppression.

Join us as we welcome the dawn of a renewed city dedicated to justice for all.

Because *"there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it."*

“If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

Thank you, stay safe, and God bless the City of Richmond.

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