

**Mayor Levar M. Stoney**

**2022 State of the City**

**February 8, 2022**

**REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY:**

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Let's all give a warm thank you to Marland Buckner, Interim Executive Director of the Black History Museum, for that kind introduction.

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My fellow Richmonders, it is with great pride and hope that I speak to you this evening.

This past year has not been easy. From the pandemic to the everyday issues facing our city, we've had to overcome immeasurable challenges and make difficult decisions.

We've had to learn to cope with circumstances beyond our control. And we've had to do it in one of the most divisive political moments in modern history.

When I look at 2021, I see resilience. I see a Richmond that was bold in the face of adversity.

I see a community that chose to thrive in spite of the challenges we faced.

I'm grateful to be here with you this evening. We may not be fully in person, but we have an audience tonight, made up of the folks who spend their hours fighting for Richmond's future.

I'd like to give my thanks to the members of the Richmond City Council, Richmond Public Schools, the Chief Administrative Officer, and members of my Executive Cabinet.

Thank you for all you do for the great City of Richmond. We appreciate you!

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If I could summarize this administration's approach in one sentence I'd say, 'We are about the fix.'

And I can say with confidence that we're making progress.

Some big things have happened in our city over the past year. We're moving forward and I want to share some milestones we've achieved, and some of what's to come.

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Let's talk about housing.

I won't sugar coat it.

We've got apartment complexes in Black and Brown neighborhoods with infestations of rodents, roaches, and bedbugs.

We've got children playing on floors soaked in waste water.

We have families sleeping under ceilings covered in mold.

These are conditions that any reasonable person would find intolerable and yet we've got tenants afraid that if they complain to their landlords it would only result in raised rent or evictions.

I remember living in an apartment with my grandmother when I was younger, and she would never complain about things that needed to be fixed because of her fear of retaliation.

As many of you know, I don't come from money. And, my story is not unique in Richmond.

I had help. There were government programs in place that changed my circumstance. Instead of being hungry, I had access to free school lunches.

Instead of dropping out, I became the first in my family to graduate high school.

And the first in my family to graduate college, which was made possible by scholarships and financial aid.

Helping those who need it is what governing is about. And right now the folks living in these conditions need our help. Which is why I am proud we've revitalized and retooled Richmond's city code enforcement team.

They are identifying and addressing neighborhood safety and code violations, ensuring landlords are living up to their obligations and being responsive to tenant complaints.

This work is also important to ensure we prevent tragedies like the recent building fires in Philadelphia and New York City.

So, if you or someone you know is experiencing these issues, please reach out to us by calling 3-1-1.

We are listening. We have your back and we want to help.

We want to work with you, your landlord, your neighbor -- and do whatever's necessary -- to resolve these safety issues. And we will.

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We've also come a long way these past few years addressing homelessness.

We've approached it with compassion, and now more Richmonders than ever before are receiving care through our Emergency Shelter.

It's a far cry from the days of housing people in the old courtrooms of the decaying Public Safety Building.

We've also instituted a homelessness liaison – Ms. Dianne Wilmore.

She's doing an amazing job connecting those in need with the resources we have available, and I want to thank her for taking care of some of our most vulnerable residents. Thank you, Dianne.

Our Homelessness Advisory Council recommended that we establish a human service resource center for residents. So we listened. This project is moving forward and will become operational later this year.

I'm also thrilled about our allocation of American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA, funds to address some of these issues. We are going to:

- Provide \$10 million per year for affordable housing projects in perpetuity. This historic funding will represent over a 1,200 percent increase for affordable housing since I took office.
- We are going to provide \$6.8 million for the Creighton Court redevelopment project
- And we're providing \$5.5 million for the Highland Grove redevelopment project.

But the housing conversation doesn't stop at fixing deteriorating living conditions. We know that in order for Richmond to thrive, we must seek more dignified affordable housing and new development.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are building a future filled with more groundbreaking and ribbon-cuttings, and dignified housing for our residents. That's what we are all about.

Which is why I'm excited that we have introduced our Equitable and Affordable Housing Plan for city council consideration.

This plan is several years in the making and takes into consideration the input of residents, housing experts, advocates, and landlords, to ensure we create a diversity of housing stock.

Our aim is not to just have a place for everyone to live in this city.

It's to have an affordable, dignified, clean and safe place to live in this city.

That's why we are so bullish on our Richmond 300 plan. A guide for growth that creates a more equitable, sustainable, and beautiful future for ALL Richmonders. The goal is to achieve this vision by 2037, the 300<sup>th</sup> birthday of our great city.

Picture this: In 2037, 6-year-old Isabella lives in a home that is affordable to her single parent, Alex.

Her baby sibling, Miguel, attends a nearby daycare. Isabella attends a highly rated socio-economically diverse public elementary school.

Alex has a job that pays a living wage and has the option to commute by transit.

Isabella's uncle Jack and his fiancé Mel just moved to Richmond from D.C. to work in the robust start-up scene. They live in a nearby apartment.

Isabella's grandparents, Jerome and Tonya, recently downsized and now live in an apartment above Isabella's garage.

Our goal is to have all members of Isabella's family thriving in Richmond because they can easily walk, bike, ride the bus, or drive to see friends and family, shop at stores, go to work, play in parks, and go to school.

That's the kind of future we are working towards here in our city.

And the big bold moves in the Richmond 300 Master Plan are going to get us there.

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We can't continue to think of transit, the economy, housing, education, safety, healthcare, growth, etc. as issues in silos.

They are all interconnected, and when you start to think about them in that way – you really start to see the whole picture.

That's why it is paramount Richmond continues on a forward path, on a planned and purposeful path.

As I mentioned earlier, I was lucky enough to be part of a school lunch program that kept me fed when my family didn't have the resources.

There was also an afterschool program that I was eligible for.

But unfortunately, in a home with only one vehicle, in a community with no public transit options, I relied on the generosity of friends and their parents to get from school to home.

Having the afterschool program wasn't enough. Because despite the program existing, it wasn't accessible to everyone.

The beauty of our vision for Richmond families is that we can clearly see how equity and sustainability centered actions can result in a city where all Richmonders have every opportunity to flourish.

And working together with city council, we will get there.

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Richmond is growing, and that is overwhelmingly a good thing for our city.

There were over 32,000 new residents between the years 2000 and 2019, and if the current trajectory continues, we'll have another 30,000 by 2037.

But a perpetual problem with growth is that far too often the community's poorest residents get left behind.

Poverty remains very concentrated in certain areas of our city. We must work to ensure that every Richmonder enjoys the benefits of our prosperity.

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Growing our economy is one way we do that.

Despite another year in a global pandemic, Richmond-area employers added about 3,000 new jobs from November to December 2021.

And according to the recent Virginia Employment Commission report, Richmond's unemployment rate dropped from 5.6% in December 2020, down to 3.1% in December 2021.

We lost a great opportunity last year to bring 1,500 good-paying jobs to Richmonders who needed them the most.

But we will not despair. We will continue to push forward and fight for opportunities for economic mobility and prosperity.

And to that end, I commend City Council for passing a resolution to revisit the Casino Project this November.

And if the referendum is successful, we will utilize revenues from that project to modernize city and school infrastructure and provide a two-cent reduction on the real estate tax!

Let me remind you what the One Casino project offers:

- Capital Investment over \$560 million which can be spent on improvement projects in Richmond City Schools and the City of Richmond
- Influx of 1,500 jobs for those who need them most
- \$16 million to support local community organizations which assists with decreasing the wealth gap
- \$325,000 to support transit mobility solutions which creates more access
- Requirements to put money aside to help support those with addictions.
- And all without a dime of city funding!

Tonight, I urge members of the General Assembly to remove any legislation that would prohibit Richmond from acting on this great opportunity.

This project is about the people of Richmond. It is about providing security, relief, jobs, and investment which leads to a brighter future for our entire city.

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But, our efforts to grow and create economic opportunity do not stop there. Our City Center Plan is also moving forward.

We are redeveloping downtown Richmond to create an innovation district, anchored by institutions like VCU and the bio-tech park.

We were recently awarded grant funding that will allow us to invest in our city's future - accelerating the growth of pharmaceutical manufacturing and our research and development cluster in downtown Richmond.

The redevelopment of the old public safety building is moving forward as well. This year, we will begin the environmental remediation inside, and soon the building will come down and new construction will start.

These projects in our downtown core will impact the entire Richmond region.

The members of city council deserve credit for their support of these projects and of our overall economic development strategy.

Working together we are accomplishing great things, and I value and appreciate our continued partnership.

Our city is promoting long-term economic advancement and sustainability. Jobs, innovation, and opportunity all working together to uplift the people of Richmond.

These are concrete steps being taken and they deserve celebration, folks.

We're also seeking proposals for the redevelopment of the city's 60 - plus acre Diamond District. Our vision is a mixed-income, mixed-use urban village... anchored by a new baseball stadium for our Richmond Flying Squirrels!

And let's not forget the CoStar campus expansion. We're talking 2,000 new jobs, and almost half a billion dollars in investment.

We're sending a message to the rest of the country that Richmond, Virginia is an exciting and attractive place to live, work, and prosper.

You see, Richmond isn't just growing. We're growing intentionally, practically, and with purpose!

From large business to small business, we are moving Richmond forward.

That is why I am thrilled that we recently launched the Triple A Business Assistance Program using our ARPA funds.

This program, led by the city's Office of Minority Business Development, is designed to provide professional, targeted assistance to local, small businesses recovering from the consequences of the pandemic.

From barber shops, to antique stores, to tech startups, to your favorite local restaurant. It's critical that we support these pillars of our economy, and continue to make Richmond an attractive place to run and start a business.

A big theme of these projects is that they all lead to jobs.

In fiscal year 2021, we created over 1,000 new jobs in our great city, but we need to keep pushing. We need to make sure that our economy continues to recover and grow.

Your government is working, and despite a worldwide pandemic we continue to make strides.

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When I became your mayor one of my top priorities was get our city's financial house in order.

Today, your city remains highly rated by the credit rating agencies and under the leadership of Chief Administrative Officer Lincoln Saunders we've gained some amazing new team members who will take us to even greater heights. They include:

- Sabrina Joy-Hogg as new Deputy Chief Administrative Officer of Finance and Administration
- Jason May, as our new Budget Director
- And Sheila White as our new Finance Director

Let's give it up for these hardworking city leaders.

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I'd like to shift focus for a moment now to talk about public safety.

Gun violence has plagued this city for far too long. We've made progress, but we need to do more. A lot more.

No mother should have to bury her child because we haven't done enough.

Our families deserve better, that's the bottom line, and I know we can DO better.

Which is why we're focused on prevention.

Last year we established "We Matter RVA," - an afterschool program running in two Richmond middle schools: River City and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Tonight, I'm excited to share some positive feedback from parents. We've heard comments such as:

- "My child comes home happy and excited about everything she is doing and learning," AND,
- "The program is a success! I love how my son gets excited to attend the sessions."

This is the kind of support that creates lasting change for our kids and their families.

Which is why we must continue to utilize evidence-based solutions that tackle the root causes of crimes.

So, as I announced last week, our plan is to partner with Next Up to help allocate \$1 million in ARPA funds, focusing on youth initiatives.

Specifically, utilizing practices supported by the CDC to improve outcomes for our kids. Our main areas of focus will be:

- After-school programming
- Parenting support
- Mental health support for children
- Tutoring
- And mentorships

With assistance of our newly hired Community Safety Coordinator we will ensure our holistic Gun Violence Prevention and Intervention Framework is intentionally implemented within our community.

But, ladies and gentlemen, this is not all we are doing to address gun violence.

We are fixing infrastructure, investing in quality housing, supporting childcare opportunities, expanding access to parks and community centers, and addressing health inequities.

These are fixes that address root causes of crime.

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We must also support law enforcement and make certain they have all the resources necessary to combat violent crime in our city.

That is why we have provided bonuses using ARPA funds. And we will propose competitive salary increases in the upcoming budget.

The Richmond Police Department is currently working on new officer recruitment practices, seeking more and diverse applicants. And exploring how they can remove barriers, such as testing requirements, the inability to take your car home, and assistance with student loans – and I applaud them for that.

Chief Smith, in collaboration with our Human Services Division, is also actively recruiting three additional violence interrupters who will be hired from the Richmond community to help mitigate conflict.

Last year, the brave men and women of the RPD seized 947 firearms citywide – 547 of which were stolen. That's almost a thousand illegal guns that are NO longer in the hands of criminals. Thank you, men and women, of the Richmond Police Department.

New initiatives like Operation Red Ball, a task force of Richmond detectives and officers working to preempt violence in the city, play a critical role in making necessary arrests and recovering firearms. We owe them our gratitude.

To build on these efforts, I am proud to announce that we are dedicating \$500,000 in ARPA funds to establish a Gun Buy Back Program.

This will create incentives for folks to turn in operational firearms reducing the likelihood of them being used in violent crime.

Councilwoman Lambert and Councilwoman Lynch have done an incredible job collaborating with Chief Smith on this important effort. And they deserve our thanks!

We are going after guns and we're locking up violent offenders.

It's simple, in order to prosper, our city needs to be safe – safe at home, safe at work, and safe at school. And that means we must be tough on violent crime and tough on the root causes of crime.

We must also acknowledge that the relationship between our police and our community is a two-way street. We need both to be aligned in the mission of community safety. That is why it is critical we develop a Civilian Review Board that works for our city.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the council-appointed members of the CRB Task Force for their contributions to this process thus far.

After careful examination of their Report, our administration sought additional expertise to guide this critical process.

We hired Dr. Will Pelfrey, a nationally recognized professor with an expertise in policing, to help design a Civilian Review Board that fits the needs of Richmond. His work assisting communities in this way across the country is impressive and I look forward to sharing his recommendations with city council in the coming weeks.

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Unfortunately, public safety matters are not the only life and death issue we face today.

Let's face it – no one thought that we'd still be living in the Covid-19 pandemic in 2022.

The trajectory of COVID remains an unknown and we have no choice but to continue to persevere.

The people of this great city are strong. We are doers. And because of that, I remain optimistic and hopeful.

Thankfully, some things are in our control. Like the ability to choose to wear a mask and get the vaccine.

In the City of Richmond to date, approximately 68 percent of people 18 years or older have received at least one dose of the vaccine and we've provided over 55,000 booster shots.

We have some of the finest healthcare workers in the world whose efforts to get Richmonders vaccinated and boosted have been unwavering.

These folks are heroes – they've saved countless lives -- and we continue to owe them our greatest respect.

Dr. Danny Avula – who has been appointed by Governor Youngkin as the new Commissioner of DSS -- deserves our utmost thanks for his leadership during the first two years of the pandemic. And I just want to say thank you, Danny.

Doctors across the country have pleaded with Americans to wear masks to prevent the spread of Omicron.

They have done so with science backing them the entire way.

There is no other way to put it -- Governor Youngkin's Executive Order going against the medical community was not only wrong, but dangerous.

Thankfully, we have RPS Superintendent Jason Kamras who had the courage to keep our kids safe. Thank you, Jason.

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I recently read a report by UNICEF that estimates this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings as a result of COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures world-wide.

That statistic shocked me to my core... and reminded me who we are fighting for.

Richmond has to remain open. Schools have to remain open, and businesses have to remain open.

And we stay open by following the science—vaccinations and masks.

We must put science above politics.

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We can't change the past, no matter how much we'd like too.

But, we can control how it impacts our future.

On June 14<sup>th</sup> of last year, the City's Equity Agenda was passed unanimously by City Council.

I said it before, and I'll say it again. This administration is about the fix. We are making bold decisions that improve the quality of life for all of our residents – no matter your zip code, no matter your place of worship, or who you love.

We can take concrete steps towards a better and more equitable future – and that's what we are doing!

We are moving forward with a number of the priority areas within the Equity Agenda, many of which have been discussed this evening. Some additional highlights include:

- Establishing the first ever comprehensive Health Equity Trust Fund partnering with the Richmond City Health District.
- Addressing substance abuse by introducing a resolution on February 14<sup>th</sup> that declares opioid overdoses a public health crisis, and commits Richmond to participate in a regional Metropolitan Spike Alert program. This Alert will notify registered members of the public when spikes in overdoses are detected and provide information on resources for treatment and recovery.

- We are also ensuring equitable transit and mobility for all Richmonders. We will construct red bus lanes along the Pulse route this spring. And, as long as I'm your mayor, riding the bus in Richmond will be free.
- Lastly, we are in the final stretch of the development of RVAgreen 2050, our climate action plan, which we look forward to sharing with you this fall.

Like I said before, your government is working. Our policies remain focused and driven. We are tackling the issues everyday Richmonders are facing and we are bringing the fix.

And it's not all big picture stuff either. When I was first elected, the phone would ring off the hook with people asking for potholes and sidewalks to be fixed.

And today, I can tell you that the phone rings a lot less. And that's a good thing. That's how we know what we're doing is working!

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We also know that when we wrap our arms around our families, they succeed. This is really what it's all about at the end of the day. We want families to thrive in our city. We're putting in the work today, so that when our children grow up, they inherit a city filled with opportunity.

Every child deserves the opportunity to succeed in life. Which is why right now, our focus is on removing barriers.

In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated in his final book, "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?" that "Those at the lowest economic level, the poor white and Negro, the aged and chronically ill, are traditionally unorganized and therefore have little ability to force

the necessary growth in their income. They stagnate or become even poorer in relation to the larger society.” He opined then that guaranteed income could be a remedy for poverty.

Fast forward some 50 plus years later, and we’ve created the Richmond Resilience Initiative, a pilot program that will continue through 2022, in which participants receive guaranteed income.

When folks make just enough money to no longer qualify for federal aid, but still don’t earn a living wage – they fall off a cliff. So, we’re providing participants \$500 a month to spend however they see fit.

Our families need to come first. Plain and simple.

We’ve fully funded our schools and built three new schools in Black and Brown neighborhoods. But we’re not stopping there.

This administration proposed, and City Council approved, a plan to dedicate \$81 million of Richmond’s ARPA funds to support our children and families.

We’re starting with four community centers, which will serve 100,000 Richmond residents in high poverty areas, all within walking distance of the centers.

In addition to these centers, we will soon announce a grant opportunity to expand access to high-quality childcare. Quality and accessible care at this age is needed if we want to nurture our youngest Richmonders. When critical development is happening, kids need to be interacted with and engaged with. Challenged and encouraged.

And lastly, we’re laying the groundwork for Universal Pre-K. We’re putting in the research now, to learn exactly what we need to do to

address the systemic barriers preventing access for ALL of Richmond's children.

Some kids start out with a built-in advantage, and that's just not fair. Every kid deserves to start school with the tools they need to be successful.

These investments reflect our on-going commitment to multi-generational wealth building, not only ensuring our youngest residents thrive, but that their parents and caregivers do too.

This all comes back to governing with a purpose. We are removing the systemic chains, link by link until all Richmonders have the opportunity to succeed.

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As a Black man, it's not lost on me that I speak to you tonight, standing in Shockoe Bottom.

Richmond has historically been known as the Capital of the Confederacy. But we're changing that.

Richmond is now emerging into a new era, filled with compassion and hope.

We're becoming more known for our inclusivity, our innovation, our dynamism, and our diversity.

My fellow Richmonders, watching the removal of the Robert E. Lee monument was one of the most important moments in our city's history.

Today, Richmond stands unshackled by its past. A Black man serves as your mayor. A Black woman serves as city council president. An Indian American man directs our Health Department. And a Jewish man leads our schools.

We are in the midst of a racial reckoning in this country, and when the history books look back and tell the story of today, it gives me great comfort that Richmond will be on the right side of history.

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Ladies and gentlemen, tonight you've heard the sum of all our hopes. Despite all the fear and uncertainty in the world, we remain blessed to live in one of the best cities in America.

And I promise you, that your city government will remain focused on the fix. And we will make bold moves to improve the quality of life for all Richmonders.

Thank all of you for joining me tonight. Both here and at home.

And may God Bless the great City of Richmond. [END]