



State of the County Address – January 12, 2021

Leading in Rough Waters

Mr. Council President, Members of the County Council, my fellow citizens, this is County Executive Barry Glassman coming to you in a virtual format with my 2021 State of the County Address.

It is hard to believe that this time last year, reports were beginning to surface from China about a new Coronavirus deemed COVID-19. As we all know, it was not long until March brought the pandemic to Maryland. Since then I've had an old Swedish proverb taped to my computer screen – it says, “in calm waters every ship has a good captain... rough waters are the true tests of leadership.”

I am fortunate to lead a dedicated county workforce. Through 61 statewide Executive Orders, we never closed for a single day and Harford County frontline workers kept delivering essential services to our citizens and businesses.

As the early shutdowns occurred, I was just finishing up this year's budget. I am proud that, despite some reductions in capital spending and long range projects, we still fully funded education; completed the second phase of salary improvements for our law enforcement and correctional officers; funded increases for my county employees, and kept the County moving forward.

Over the last six years I have navigated the County to a position of fiscal strength. Quite frankly, that is allowing us to sail these stormy seas brought on by the pandemic. We have returned our fund balance to 25 million dollars. So far, cuts haven't been necessary, nor has the County had to dip into its reserves. Our income tax revenue has held up. In fact, we closed last fiscal year with about 2% growth and this fiscal year 2021 is on track to make budget. Our property tax revenue, which has been growing at 2% over the past few years, is also on target. Our transfer and recordation tax revenues are very strong, reflecting our diverse economic base and a hot housing market confirming that Harford County is a desirable place to live. As we stand today, the state of Harford County is strong!

Looking ahead, we will have to keep a close eye on State cuts and cost shifts as the legislative session gears up in a couple of weeks.

It also remains to be seen what type of future funding or additional rounds will come from Congress, but I am confident that local governments, such as ours, are among the best ways to get that money into the communities we serve.

In fact the Cares Act has been a great assistance to our community for COVID related expenses and economic development. In mid-May the County received approximately \$45 million from the federal government thru the State. Now, at first the State didn't want to release this funding directly to most of the counties. But with dogged determination, I and my colleagues across Maryland insisted local governments were the best at meeting local needs. I am pleased to report, and thankful to my staff, that we were able to put all of that 45 million back into our local community for our personal protective supplies, small business and restaurant grants, plus grants to the Board of Education and other allied partners.

As for upcoming budget. I wish we had greater certainty. The truth is our fiscal outlook has never been this difficult to gauge. Our economy is still subject to supply and demand forces, but we also face unpredictable currents. They include the spread of the virus; the speed of a vaccine; the timing and size of federal aid, and the decisions made in large part by the State that determine which business may open and to what extent, and which businesses are closed and for how long. In the past it was possible to sense a prevailing wind in the economy that would last a year or two. Now it is difficult to see trends from

quarter to quarter. Changes come week to week, and sometimes even day to day. What I can say is we have built a solid ship with a resilient local economy, and my conservative budgeting has restored strong reserves without tax increases as we made record-level investments in education, public safety and local businesses. I do not plan on changing course, turning back or lowering our sails.

Despite some headwinds, I will continue advancing our goals and can announce we will be moving forward in my next budget with funding for a body camera program for law enforcement and plans for the new Aberdeen Community Center, which we held back on this year due to the crisis.

Beyond the pandemic, 2020 was a year of continued accomplishments and milestones.

- ❖ My administration was honored with 2 awards for innovation from the National Association of Counties. In partnership with the Sheriff, we were recognized for our anti-drug pledge program for children in elementary school. And our Wheelchair Costume Workshop was honored for giving kids of all abilities the chance to dress up for Halloween.
- ❖ We continue to enhance emergency services, as the County's EMS paramedics handled close to 3000 calls, and we continue to increase investments in our volunteer Fire/EMS system... I also gave our front line fire/EMS companies 2 million dollars in CARES Act funding and waived their pension points for the year. I am excited that our NEXT GEN

program will help pay off student loans for Fire & EMS volunteers, with 39 applicants so far.

- ❖ We achieved a milestone in preservation, by partnering with the State and Harford Land Trust to purchase Belle Vue Farm in Havre de Grace. The 347 acre farm will give us close to 1300 hundred acres of preserved parkland along the Chesapeake Bay shoreline. The County's agricultural Preservation program was updated in April and we preserved 1509 acres of valuable farmland. I am proud to say close to 25% of Harford County land is under local, state and federal preservation easements. Our next step will be to begin studying our tree canopy to quantify the county's forested lands. I am pleased Bay Conservancy as a partner in the endeavor.
- ❖ We won a major victory on the legal front when the Supreme Court ended a 30-year case involving a proposed rubblefill in historic Gravel Hill next to the Saint James AME Church. The court upheld the reversal of a 45 million dollar judgement - one I would note that many said I should have settled or paid. Thanks to the many counties around Maryland that supported us in protecting the environment, local zoning authority and those citizens alive and passed who stood up for environmental justice for their community.
- ❖ We expanded our digital platforms, which have proven crucial during this year and helped us remain operational. For example, through our

ePermit Center, citizens and builders of residential homes can now take their projects from application to inspection to U&O - all online.

Regarding the internet, we recently made progress in addressing the lack of service in some regions of the county, with a public/private partnership to expand the infrastructure for broadband.

- ❖ Carrying out one of my efficiency goals, the county saved an estimated 1.1 million dollars in healthcare costs, thanks to plan changes that offer better benefits without raising costs for county employees. More recently, HR Director Jim Richardson led the way to another 1.3 million in savings with enhanced benefits and lower premiums for our retirees - and he's about to become one of them. After 22 years in county government JR stayed with us an extra month just to see this program through. JR we hope you'll enjoy a well-earned retirement. I am proud that Deputy Director Tiffany Stephens will move into the Director position and Nicole Barnwell will also be moving up, becoming the first African American to serve as Deputy Director of Harford's Human Resources.

Through this unsettled year, I have tried my best to balance protecting us all and keeping our local economy open to the extent the State would permit. I am so proud of our citizens and so grateful to our health professionals, first responders, county employees and our everyday families who have balanced a pandemic, teleworking and virtual learning, and embraced Harford's tradition of giving back to our neighbors in need.

I pray for the families who have lost loved ones and send blessings for healing.

In each of my preceding State of the County speeches I enjoyed sharing my study of President Lincoln and his historic leadership. This year I thought I'd share an inspiration that begins on one of his darkest days. Lincoln and the First Lady worshipped their 11 year old son Willie. In 1862, as typhoid fever made its way around Washington D.C. it had stricken Willie and he died in the White House Guest Room in what is still known as the Lincoln bed. The President and First Lady were never the same. In fact Mary never entered the guest room again. Lincoln's pastor spoke of that pandemic which had taken their dear Willie as this pandemic has taken 130 Harford Countians and 300,000 Americans as I speak. Lincoln bowed his head as the pastor said "Heaven but tries our virtues by affliction... and often the cloud which wraps our present hour serves but to brighten all of future days"

I too can see brighter days ahead with calmer waters. Keep the faith,
Be Safe, and take care of one another.

Thanks and God Bless.