



State of the County Address February 2023

Good evening, Council President Vincenti, members of the County Council, and everyone joining us tonight. I want to thank the members of the Council for confirming my cabinet members who are joining us here in the audience this evening. I also look forward to your review and confirmation of my most recent appointments, Mr. Greg Greene as Deputy Director of Information & Communications Technology, Greg is here with us, and Mr. Mike Brunicke, Deputy Director of Emergency Services, Mike is also here tonight.

It is my distinct honor to stand before this evening you as your County Executive. As you know, I grew up here, my family has been here for generations, and every day I look out my window in the County Executive office onto the fields where I played sports for Bel Air

High School quite a few years ago and I feel blessed and honored by the opportunity to lead our county.

We can all be proud and confident in Harford County. It's blessed with a diverse and talented population, a strong public safety team, great schools, a key location, and an abundance of natural resources that make this a wonderful place to call home. Harford has grown, but we still retain a respectable dose of the small-town charm of a tight-knit community where neighbors still care for each other. It's important that we persist in our efforts to both keep pace with a rapidly changing world and also protect what we cherish most about our way of life.

Proverbs tells us that "*the integrity of the upright guides them.*" Integrity is the guiding principle for my administration. Outside of my office door is a quote from Mark Twain which says: "*Always do right; this will gratify some people and astonish the rest.*" Doing the right thing doesn't always make everyone happy, but it is my job, and I will continue to follow the letter of our Constitution, Charter, laws, and codes.

With your help, Rob McCord and I have been able to assemble a great county leadership team to consistently deliver excellence and integrity in government. That team has been in place two months, and I am very pleased to report that we work very well together to analyze and effectively address our many challenges and opportunities.

To facilitate a collaborative leadership team, we expanded the County Executive's Conference room to allow adequate space for all my directors, deputy directors, and visitors to discuss openly and in person our challenges and ideas. Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. said, "Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than the one where they sprang up." We now have a space to foster such a collaborative effort.

While I have been putting a lot of time and effort into building a leadership team, my administration has also been working hard to build the extended network of personal relationships that will be key to our long-term success. In my first week as County Executive, I had the pleasure of visiting with most of our County employees and seeing them in action at our various facilities and I'm proud of our workforce and the work they do for our citizens. From our talented computer and technology staff to our water and sewer workers in the field, each of our dedicated employees contributes to the quality of life we have come to enjoy.

I've also made it a priority to open doors between my Administration and this County Council. We were happy to arrange your visits in January to our primary County facilities and my Cabinet members have been and will remain responsive to your questions. Moving forward, I will continue to be available to meet with you. We represent different branches of local government, but we share the same goals.

My Administration has also been reaching out to our federal, state, and local partners because I know we work best when we work together. In January, I welcomed Sen. Van Hollen to our County and in the coming months I'll be meeting with more of our federal delegation in Washington. Gov. Moore and I have had several discussions; I spoke with him just yesterday during a visit to APG; I'm working to build relationships with his new cabinet; and I have connected with my fellow county executives all around the state.

Closer to home, I have enjoyed my meetings with MG Edmonson, the Senior Commander of APG, State's Attorney Healey, Sheriff Gahler, our judges, UM UCH CEO Elizabeth Wise, Dr. Theresa Felder of Harford Community College, Public Schools Superintendent Bulson, members of the Board of Education, municipal leaders, and more. My message to everyone has been the same: Let's work together for the good of the citizens we all serve.

My number one job as County Executive is keeping Harford County safe. The safety of our public is paramount, and I intend to make sure our public safety teams have what they need to make Harford County as safe as reasonably possible. I'll be a strong and reliable partner with Sheriff Gahler, the three municipal police chiefs, the Maryland State Police, our Fire/EMS, and our Volunteer Fire Companies.

Within hours of taking my oath of office, I convened my entire cabinet at the Department of Emergency Services command center for a disaster response exercise. We literally worked until the sun went down on my first day in office to improve public safety.

One of the first executive actions I took as County Executive was to establish the *Emergency Services Advisory Board*. It was created to help me address immediate, serious challenges we face with providing the level of emergency response expected by our citizens. To be blunt, our 911 response times are not where they should be. The Advisory Board provides me with advice on necessary changes to address the shortages in EMS volunteers, increased demands for services, and rising costs that are the drivers of my concerns.

I have directed our Emergency Services leaders and the rest of my staff to make the resolution of these challenges a top priority. We are actively recruiting more 911 operators and have added two new Deputy Directors to the Department. I also ordered that the County-staffed EMS medic units that were previously assigned to a specific station to float to stations as needed to fill unanticipated shortages. It was one of those very units that had been moved to Joppa-Magnolia Fire Company that responded to Ice World for an incident on December 20th involving a young woman who went into cardiac arrest. I want to personally thank HC Senior Deputy Jeremy Mothershed and our paramedics Andrew Dixon and Justin Wolfe who responded and played key roles in saving her life. I also want to give credit to the

fast-acting staff of Ice World who successfully deployed an AED. This device was essential to saving her life and we are adding more AEDs to county parks & recreation facilities.

I want to publicly acknowledge and thank our Director of Emergency Services Rick Ayers for his exceptional service over the past several months. During the recent surges in Covid, the Flu and RSV, Rick was able to work with the EMS units, hospitals, and care facilities to reduce wait times for that our ambulances faced in discharging patients into the hospitals. Thanks, Rick, for addressing this issue and for all the hard work you are doing in your Department.

I want to also thank Sheriff Gahler, his deputies, and our municipal police for all of the difficult and dangerous work they do in our County every day to keep us all safe. Harford County is fortunate to have avoided the political antics that have undermined effective law enforcement in so many other communities.

Education is an area of special interest for all of us. My family and I attended Harford County Public Schools, some of my extended family members are teachers, and my grandchildren attend our public schools. My goal is to ensure that every generation graduates with a high-quality education.

Toward that end, I am pleased to have sent to this Council the names of three highly qualified candidates for the School Board who know how to efficiently manage large budgets, and I look forward to their consideration and confirmation. Given that our public

schools receive half of the general tax revenue we collect from our citizens, it is vital that our Board of Ed include members who are both passionate about high quality education and also skilled in fiscal management. Frankly, I'm concerned about the budgets that have been approved by the current BOE. For example, over the past five years while student enrollment has been flat, county funding for HCPS has increased by 36%, and 24 of their central office administrators are now being paid more than \$170,000 annually. As county executive, I have no authority over the salaries of school administrators, but it is critical that we put people on the Board who can be good stewards of taxpayer funds and make sure teachers and students are our funding priority.

As students graduate, it's important that they have career choices that include both college and skilled trades. As a society, we won't last long without electricians, plumbers, auto repair and HVAC technicians. I hear all the time from businesses about their need for skilled workers for rewarding careers in all the trades. We need them in County government too.

To help grow our own workforce and to bring opportunities to high school and community college students, my administration will be launching an apprenticeship program within county government that we hope will become a model for the state. Working with Harford County public schools and the community college, we'll offer jobs to students in our

emergency operations center, fleet maintenance facility, water treatment plant, and other County offices to give students hands-on experience and a head start on potential careers.

Though not quite as exciting as public safety and education, transportation is the one area that impacts each of us every day. Harford faces a particular challenge in the fact that our road network is largely served by State Highways that we do not control. In fact, of the 234 traffic signals in our County, 93% are owned and managed by the State Highway Administration. As a State Senator, I worked hard to bring a multi-million-dollar dynamic traffic signal technology to the MD 24 corridor that extends from Bel Air to I-95 to minimize delays. But we still have much work to do. As we are all too well aware, time spent waiting in traffic is precious time lost with family and friends.

In January I met with our State Highway District Engineer, and we established quarterly meetings between my Administration and State Highway leadership to better coordinate capital projects. We are also creating a Traffic Division within our Department of Public Works to coordinate with the State Highway Administration to help better manage traffic flow within the County.

Just as our transportation challenges require careful attention, we have to also attend to our economic prosperity. That is why, with your help, we separated the county's Department of Economic Development from the Department of Housing and Community Development, to ensure that economic development receives the careful attention it deserves. We are in

the process of developing an Economic Development strategic plan which will focus on five key priorities:

- 1) First, we will enhance our relationships with the defense community, including both Aberdeen Proving Ground and the associated defense contractors, with the goal of generating well-paying jobs in Harford County. We have hired the former deputy to the senior commander at APG to lead that effort and he will be assisted by our most senior economic development staff member.
- 2) Second, we are standing up business navigators who will be responsible for guiding new and expanding businesses through the challenges of the County and State bureaucracies.
- 3) Third, we will be working through our Agricultural Advisory Board to expand opportunities for our farmers, including the development of a local meat processing facility.
- 4) Fourth, we are exploring opportunities to expand local tourism, especially in the areas of sports, agriculture, arts & entertainment.
- 5) And finally, we will expand efforts to attract quality manufacturers and other businesses that can offer well-paying jobs.

I have also created a Southern County Task Force that is currently made up of members of my cabinet whose charge is to fully analyze and comprehensively address the important

opportunities and challenges unique to the Rt. 40 corridor. The Task Force members are now engaged in gathering information. Once the Task Force is in operation, it will be expanded to merge with the Council President's Route 40 revitalization efforts and will include members of outside entities and the public. This effort will be completely transparent and open to your ideas and suggestions.

I hear often from you and from members of the public about the need to preserve our beautiful open spaces and farms. Please be assured that we are working hard to protect and preserve our natural heritage for future generations:

1. With your approval, we are moving forward with efforts to add another 12 farms, totaling more than 2,000 acres, to the County's agricultural preservation program.
2. I have approved another 1,000 acres of farmland that we hope will be included in the Maryland state preservation program.
3. We are working with Harford Land Trust to support their efforts to preserve key properties throughout the County, including our most recent joint effort that culminated in the County's purchase of 30 acres of environmentally sensitive woodlands in Perryman for permanent protection.
4. Later this year we will begin construction of the final segment of the Ma & Pa Trail which, when completed, will provide an 8-mile walking and biking trail between Fallston and Forest Hill by way of Bel Air.

5. We have initiated development of a master plan for 1,430 acres of beautiful waterfront property the County owns along the Chesapeake Bay between Havre de Grace and Aberdeen.
6. And we are working with the State to initiate the completion of a 5-mile-long hiking and biking trail that we hope will run along the banks of the Susquehanna River from the Conowingo Dam to Lapidum landing.

A special word about our veterans: as a War Veteran, I understand and appreciate the importance of our veteran community and the many benefits they offer to the County. For those who have given so much for their nation, we must do better. Just a few weeks ago, I, along with some of you, were honored to participate in the dedication of the MD 155 bridge over I-95 in honor of Specialist Ron Spudis, a Harford County native and Silver Star recipient who gave his life protecting his fellow soldiers in the Republic of Vietnam. Harford County will continue to work with our Veteran community to elevate their status in my administration and in our community.

So much for the fun stuff. My primary effort right now is preparing the County's annual budget. That effort is, unfortunately, marked with the considerable uncertainty in the financial outlook of our Nation and State and our County's own structural deficit.

Our local economy remains strong for now, but many economists and business leaders are predicting a recession in 2023. And whether or not we have a recession, inflation is

already here and is having a significant impact on our bottom line. Rising costs mean we cannot simply hold the line on spending as everything we do now costs more. Transporting children to school, providing employee health benefits, heating and cooling our buildings, buying and fueling up ambulances, and recruiting and retaining quality employees - from accountants to law enforcement officers - it all cost considerably more this year.

Property values are up, which means a larger assessable real property tax base. However, rising interest rates are taking a toll on real estate transactions and we are seeing a significant drop in our recordation and transfer tax revenue.

We also don't know what additional expense mandates we will be seeing from Annapolis which has for the past several years pushed significant costs onto county governments, most notably for implementing the Kirwan Commission's so- called "Blueprint for Maryland's Future," and a number of law enforcement related expenses like body cameras, police oversight boards, police evaluations, and more. Governor Moore has made some promising statements about not pushing additional costs onto the counties, but we cannot say for sure whether his Administration will be able to follow thru and keep further unfunded mandates in check.

We are also challenged by the fact that, over the past two years, Harford County enacted very aggressive budgets that resulted in spending well beyond our means. At a time when our accounts were flush with federal COVID relief money and strong revenues, we

spent almost \$60 million of our own savings for ongoing expenses, creating a structural deficit.

Over the past two years the County also strayed from its long-standing practice of keeping the annual borrowing authorization to about \$50 million. For the current year, that number ballooned to more than \$130 million. This escalation is unsustainable and will crowd out future budgets, leaving less money to pay for teachers, deputies, and essential services.

Folks, we cannot continue to leverage our children's future. My budget will reflect an uncomfortable return to responsible financial management. We will try to work with everyone to minimize the strains, but structural deficits and excessive long-term debt are unacceptable and that is why I'm setting aside the lion's share of the next few months to dive into the budget on a line-by-line basis.

We also need to consider options to increase revenue to the county without raising taxes. We need to consider:

- Should we increase the tipping fees, that is the cost trash haulers pay us to take their garbage? Our costs of processing trash have increased greatly over the years but the fees we charge haulers for that service have not kept pace. As a result, we have been subsidizing our trash processing with significant payments from the general fund.
- Should we increase the 911 fee from \$0.75 to \$1.50 to offset the cost of adding the additional 911 operators I spoke about earlier?

These are among the questions we must face in preparing a responsible county budget.

In conclusion: I spent three years of my life in Iraq helping the people there establish provincial governments from the ground up, so I have a unique perspective on our own opportunities and challenges. We are blessed with so much in our Nation and our County that we too often take for granted. While we have our challenges, our blessings are so far greater. So let us thank God for our many blessings and pray that he will grant us the wisdom and guidance to meet our challenges as we work together to make this County better than ever. Thank you. May God bless Harford County.