



# STATE OF HARFORD COUNTY ADDRESS

BOB CASSILLY, COUNTY EXECUTIVE

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 2024



## **State of the County Address - January 2024**

Good evening and welcome to my second annual State of the County Address.

I'm Harford County Executive Bob Cassilly and I am pleased to address this County Council and the public once again. Before we begin, I would like to thank my Director of Administration, my Directors - and all our county employees who make our success possible. Thanks also to the special guests with us this evening.

It's been my honor to serve as your county executive for this first year of my term. As you will see, we've been working hard redirecting government to serve the people - and not the other way around. With the support of this council, we have assembled a highly competent and professional team of directors and deputy directors who are providing the citizens with superior service. Their integrity and selfless commitment are beyond question.

We're breaking down bureaucratic silos, and operating as one team to identify, understand, and address challenges and opportunities in every part of our County. We hold weekly directors' meetings where each director briefs all others on key initiatives and events so that every part of the governing team fully understands what we're doing, where we're going, and can effectively leverage their collective knowledge and experience.

We work as part of regional and statewide collaboratives. I meet regularly with leaders in our State Government and with my fellow county executives throughout Maryland to share issues and find solutions. My Department Directors are also leaders throughout the state in addressing mutual concerns.

Our quarterly video conference meetings with State Highway Administration and the three municipalities foster communication and collaboration in transportation. The result has been improved traffic flow and enhanced road safety and maintenance.

For example, at our request, SHA recently adjusted the timing of traffic signals along Route 24 from I95 to US 1 to help keep traffic moving on this heavily traveled corridor.

Making our citizens an active and informed part of our government has been one of my top priorities. To this end, I'm out in the community every day, listening

and answering questions, I've been doing a monthly call-in show on HarfordTV and sending out monthly newsletters on all aspects of government.

We resurrected meaningful Community Advisory Boards throughout the county to allow real discussion and input at the local level on important issues. My directors participate in these sessions to answer citizens' questions. Many of our volunteer chairpersons are with us tonight - thank you for your service.

Public safety is my top priority, and our police and EMS personnel will, once again, be a primary focus of our budget.

I am very proud of the fact that over the past 10 months, my administration responded effectively to a crisis in our volunteer ambulance service. As you already know, just about a month into my administration, our volunteers informed my administration that the volunteer ambulance service could not continue to function, and their duties needed to be taken over by the county. In short order, my administration recruited and hired full time EMS personnel, purchased equipment, and created workstations and bunkrooms for 14 ambulance crews that are now stationed throughout the county.

We also addressed serious challenges with our 911 system and overall emergency management.

Before we leave the subject of our volunteer ambulance service, I want to take a moment to thank all the EMS volunteers over the years who helped our residents when they needed it most. These selfless volunteers left home and family to answer calls that came in the middle of the night, on holidays, or whenever a call came. One of those volunteers for an amazing 45-plus years was Dottie Arnold.

Dottie served as the President of the Harford County Volunteer Fire & EMS Foundation since its creation in 2005. The foundation itself was intended as a bridge between the all-volunteer service and a fully paid county service. Dottie kept that bridge open and helped ensure uninterrupted service throughout the transition. Dottie is with us tonight. Dottie, on behalf of the citizens of Harford County, thank you and your colleagues for a job well done.

Our volunteer fire service remains a tremendous asset to our county, and we can't do enough to praise the accomplishments and dedication of these men and women on the front lines. We continue to work with the volunteers to support their needs. This year we completed improvements to fire stations in Abingdon, Fallston, Havre de Grace, Jarrettsville, Joppa, Level, Norrisville and Perryman, and we are moving forward with our plans to construct new stations in Riverside and Whiteford.

There is still work to be done, but I am confident that we have the right people in place in this administration and in the volunteer fire service to get the job done right. These efforts are greatly enhanced by the assistance of our Public Safety Work Group that meets monthly to identify and discuss public safety concerns.

With the brutal murder of Rachel Morin, public confidence plummeted in the safety of our beloved Ma & Pa trail. Shortly after her body was discovered along the trail, my administration began evaluating options to use cameras and artificial intelligence to enhance security along the trail. There were many logistical challenges, from power supply to placements, but, thanks to the hard work of my staff and key contractors, this February we expect to have in full operation a network of cameras along the trail's isolated sections.

These cameras will provide constant surveillance, which we hope will restore a degree of public confidence in the safety of our trail. In addition to public safety, we are working on many ways to improve the quality of life for all our citizens. One behind-the-scenes example is our Department of Public Works, which is producing award-winning tap water from our Abingdon and Perryman water treatment plants.

Expanding our county park system is a more visible example. I look forward with great excitement to cutting the ribbon on additional acreage we recently acquired on the beautiful Oakington Peninsula, between Havre de Grace and

Aberdeen. This gem now includes over 1,200 acres of county-owned land with more than 2 miles of waterfront. We are still in the planning stages but it is clear that this park complex has the potential for a system of waterfront trails and other uses that will make it a crown jewel in the mid-Atlantic region.

In addition, I am proud to announce that, in partnership with Harford Land Trust and Maryland Program Open Space, we are acquiring 129 acres of environmentally sensitive land that had been slated for 232 new homes in Joppatowne.

This year we also added more than 2,000 new acres to our agricultural preservation efforts. Having worked with various stakeholders, we will be presenting to you in the near future legislation to update our agricultural preservation process to allow greater flexibility in this program to support our goal of preserving viable farmland. We are also engaged in planning the construction of new recreation centers in Aberdeen and Joppatowne.

In Edgewood, we're building a community park at Nuttal Avenue. The park will have a walking trail, an open field for gatherings, and a playground with a military theme to honor the historic use of the site by the US Army during construction of APG's Edgewood Arsenal area.

Regarding overall land use, we will be undertaking a countywide zoning review this year. I am committed to ensuring this state-required process is transparent and keeps citizens informed.

As the first county executive who is also a veteran, I appointed our first-ever full-time veterans coordinator who is available 24/7 to help our vets. I also appointed an active veterans commission and together they have held very successful veterans' forums. They've reached out to our American Legions and VFWs and created new webpages including a calendar of veterans' events countywide. Our Crisis Intercept Mapping program to confront the epidemic of veteran suicides has become a model for the state.

We are determined to help every veteran we can. Bob Brown, our veterans coordinator, recently got a call from an Army combat veteran who had been trying for five years to access his VA benefits. He said he was calling Harford County Government as a last resort. Bob was able to straighten things out, and within a month of contacting us, this veteran had a well-deserved check in hand for \$45K.

Moving forward, I am pleased to announce that Harford County will host a VA Claims Clinic on Aug. 14 in Edgewood. This is a unique opportunity for our veterans to meet directly with VA representatives to file or follow up on claims.

Shortly after taking office, I tasked my directors with developing a plan to address the unique challenges and opportunities of our Route 40 communities. Aware that residents were weary of decades of endless talk, my direction was to identify specific action items for which my administration will stand accountable.

We used a rigorous, data-driven approach to analyze the region and, in consultation with the community, we developed 60 specific action items spread across each of our departments to address identified challenges and opportunities.

We meet monthly to chart progress on each of those action items and just last month we published our first newsletter to stakeholders to keep them informed of our activities. This effort is directed not only at Harford County government, but also strives to leverage the assistance of community groups and the local businesses.

This spring we will present this Council with proposed legislation to improve the quality of rental housing and to address other challenges in the Route 40 communities. On the economic front, my Administration is working hard to unleash the awesome power of the private sector.

Given our location on the I-95 corridor, our proximity to Aberdeen Proving Ground, an excellent work force, strong schools, and strong communities, we are well positioned to enhance our economic success.

In an effort to maximize the economic development potential of Aberdeen Proving Ground, Harford's private defense sector is receiving unprecedented support from my administration. Our economic development team includes the president of the National Association of Defense Communities and the former deputy to the APG senior military commander.

To facilitate collaboration, we opened a Harford County Economic Development office on Aberdeen Proving Ground. I recently sat down with a dozen leaders from our defense contractor community to discuss their unique opportunities and challenges and we will continue to work with them to expand the stable of well-paying defense jobs.

Last month I toured a \$30M facility at Aberdeen Proving Ground that will support emerging technologies with both defense and civilian applications. I was proud to see that, with assistance from my administration, Harford Community College is already working closely with APG to tailor academic majors to fill the jobs necessary to support this new APG capability and already has interns working in the facility.

This fall we sponsored a defense and technology job fair that hosted more than 225 candidates for 37 defense contractors. We also held a networking event for

small defense and tech companies to meet with larger “prime” defense contractors and identify opportunities for collaboration.

In November, Harford, in partnership with Carroll and Frederick counties, was awarded a total of \$275K, \$100K of which is for Harford County, to evaluate the region’s economic resilience and develop a plan to spark innovation in Harford County through technology development, entrepreneurship, and technology transfer.

At the conclusion of this initial effort, our tri-county partnership intends to pursue further federal grant opportunities.

In response to the federal CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, the Baltimore economic region, of which Harford County is a part, was designated by the U.S. Department of Commerce as one of 31 national Tech Hubs. Each of the Tech Hubs will compete for between \$40M - \$70M in funding.

To help small businesses in need of financing, we are in the final stages of resurrecting the County’s loan program, which will allow small businesses in the county to access loans for purchases of land or buildings, technology upgrades, new equipment and more. We are confident that these loans will allow our local business to grow jobs and expand our local tax base.

Our Economic Development team has been busy supporting our local businesses with direct outreach to over 250 businesses this year alone. During one of those meetings, we learned that a high-tech firm was unable to expand jobs and physical space due to cash flow issues. My team was able to make them aware of state grants, which they have since applied for. If approved, this will result in 56 new high paying jobs and more than \$1M in capital expenditures.

This fall we celebrated the addition of 61 new farms to our Legacy Farms program which honors farms in business for more than 100 years. Our farmers are now served by a full-time agricultural advisor who travels to each farm and works to solve their problems.

An energized agricultural advisory board is actively addressing the challenges our farmers face in remaining competitive. The board is planning for the development of a local meat processing plant, agri-tourism signage, and better engagement with the school system and other partners.

We are also expanding opportunities for well-paying jobs that correspond to the talents of our local workforce.

Thanks to the Council's support, we have reversed the previous administration's plans to allow valuable commercial properties along I-95 to be filled

with mega distribution centers that offer few opportunities for well-paying jobs, and we are working hard to recruit high tech manufacturing jobs to those locations.

Workforce development has taken on new energy as we partner with our high schools, colleges, and businesses to pursue lucrative career opportunities for our graduates. Our schools are better aligning their curriculum with workforce demands.

I want to thank HCC President Dr. Teresa Felder, the board of education, Superintendent Bulson, APG Senior Commander MG Edmonson, and UCMC (hospital) Director Elizabeth Wise for partnering with us in this endeavor. Thanks to those of you who were able to be with us tonight. And we look forward to supporting HCC's development of a new workforce development center and similar efforts by HCPS.

Because everyone deserves a fair chance for economic success, we are actively supporting our small and minority businesses. Last spring, we met with a group of our minority business owners to determine the reasons they rarely submit bids on county contracts. We also reviewed the results of a study on minority business opportunities with county government. In response, we have separated a number of very large contracts into smaller contracts to allow for increased competition by

our small and minority owned businesses. Those solicitations for bids will be issued in the coming months.

I want to say a few words about the upcoming budget.

I have promised to be a careful steward of taxpayers' money. For example, my administration has already saved over \$10M on necessary purchases through best practices and negotiation.

As our taxpayers live within their means, so must their government live within those means. In a sincere effort to align budget priorities, my administration has been working over the past six months with the school board and others to analyze needs and funding. However, I fully expect that we will again face very difficult budget decisions.

Education funding is a priority, and already represents a full 48.3% of our County budget. All counties are facing tremendous challenges in meeting the increased spending obligations imposed by the state-mandated Blueprint education reforms. I am confident that we can work together to meet these challenges and that those efforts will benefit from the strong working relationship we have forged with our Board of Education.

The choice before us is very simple: hold the line on spending or increase taxes. My request to the members of this Council is for intellectual honesty in the budget process.

I will not support a tax increase and I will, therefore, not support overall spending increases that exceed the rate of revenue growth, which we estimate will be around the 5% level. And I hope you will do the same.

Moving forward with the FY 2025 budget process, we must continue our steadfast support for public safety by providing our sheriff's deputies and correctional officers with competitive salaries. We must also fund teacher salaries and all the new state-mandated requirements in our public schools. However, in doing so, we cannot continue to reduce spending on the rest of the county employees and operations.

Making it all work is going to require cooperation. I have already initiated discussions with council members and outside agencies laying out the immense challenges we face. My hope is that we can continue a constructive dialogue to balance our citizens' needs with available funding.

I know that Harford County is up to this challenge - or any challenge. We just celebrated our 250th anniversary. To have made it through two and a half centuries, we must be doing something right.

I've lived here all my life, and I think it's this: Just like a family, we may disagree from time to time, but we come together when it counts. Our personal connections are our superpower. We look out for one another and give a hand up when needed. We cherish our children and grandchildren. We sacrifice for them, and we work to make their future brighter than our own. That's why I believe in Harford County, and I know that even after 250 years, our best days lie ahead.

Thank you. God bless you, and God bless Harford County.