



# STATE OF HARFORD COUNTY ADDRESS

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## State of the County Address - Rising Together - January 2025

Thank you: Council Members, directors, honored guests, and citizens here and watching online.

I am honored to be with you to report on Harford County's progress at the mid-point in my 4-year term.

Two years ago, I came into office with a mandate grounded in a set of principles and priorities. I outlined them at my inauguration, and they haven't changed:

- Integrity & accountability in government
- Public safety - top priority
- Responsible budgeting - good stewards of taxpayer's hard-earned dollars

- Economic development - growth that sustains and enriches our entire community
- Support for education - for our children's future and our own
- Quality of life - for all residents

But it's not enough to talk about these high ideals. We only reach our goals by taking action. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Well done is better than well said."

Tonight, I will report on what we have done and are doing on behalf of our citizens. As is usually the case in local government, the day-to-day work is rarely flashy, which makes me a good fit for the job ... But our results are impactful, changing - and even saving - lives.

**Public safety** has been a priority since day one.

As we all know, just months after my inauguration, I was notified by the Volunteer Fire and Ambulance Association that the County had to immediately take over emergency medical services. The resulting county-run ambulance service now includes 17 full-time, fully staffed and trained ambulance crews deployed countywide, 24/7. I'm delighted to report that, thanks to our efforts, EMS response times are down - and we are saving lives every day.

These are situations where minutes count.

Recently, one of our citizens, a 62-year-old woman was going into full cardiac arrest. Our dispatchers helped her fiancé do CPR but she had no pulse. Our ambulance team arrived within those crucial first minutes, and they were able to resuscitate her. And today, she's alive and well and able to enjoy her two new grandbabies. She is with us today, along with her family, and so are the first responders involved. I'd like to ask those first responders to please stand and be recognized.

We are on schedule to complete construction of the Abingdon Volunteer Fire Company Riverside station next fall, providing us with another location for our ambulance crews to serve the busy and too often dangerous I-95 corridor.

I want to take this time to give a special thanks to our volunteer fire & EMS providers. And I want to also thank all our first responders for their incredible service to our citizens.

I was on the scene for the response to the house explosion on Arthurs Woods Drive and witnessed firsthand the cooperation, coordination, dedication, and hard work of our volunteer firefighters, our department of emergency services, law enforcement from the federal and state governments, sheriff's deputies, our department of public works, BGE, and many other responders. I have seen the same

level of professionalism in their well-coordinated response to crimes, flooding, hurricane winds, and other crisis events this past year.

The county is providing additional support for the volunteer fire companies, including: assistance in recruitment & retention, increased allotments for tuition assistance, and providing medical supplies for our volunteer EMS providers. We cannot thank these volunteers enough for their service and sacrifice.

I am fully committed to enabling the long-term continued service of our volunteer companies well into the future, but we know there are challenges ahead.

The Harford Volunteer Fire & EMS Association recently voted unanimously to request that the county provide some level of professional fire fighters to supplement the great work of our volunteers. This reflects the fact that our VFCs face unprecedented demands for service and challenges maintaining an all-volunteer fire force. We are carefully evaluating their request. I want to be clear that we are being very well served by our volunteers, but we cannot ignore reality; it is imperative that we continue planning for the introduction of some level of paid fire service as resources permit.

The other half of public safety is our police, and we are exceptionally well served. We have honored our promise to keep Harford's sheriff's deputies our top funding priority. Over the first two years of this administration, we have increased

police compensation by 14%, and we will continue our investment in these outstanding men and women. We funded 10 new deputies and 4 new SROs - soon to be 7. We have also invested in state-of-the-art public safety radios that provide encrypted communications. I see the sheriff is with us tonight and I want to say, Jeff, I look forward to working together toward our common goals.

In the aftermath of the school shooting in Joppatowne and the presence of a known violent offender in Edgewood High School, we have recently increased support to schools to allow them to deploy enhanced weapons detection systems. I went to Joppatowne High on the day of the shooting and immediately offered full support. My administration worked with the school system to pilot a weapons detection system that is now in place at Joppatowne High. We also coordinated a visit by the schools, sheriff's office, and county officials to Cambridge High School to view the latest equipment in action, and we provided the schools with \$1.1million in rapid assistance to purchase security infrastructure.

### **Public safety will face challenges.**

Due to unfortunate changes in our state laws, we face unprecedented challenges to student safety. Sadly, newly enacted state laws hide from our schools, police, & parents the serious offenses of juvenile offenders. The result, far too many unsupervised violent youth are put back into our communities and schools. The risk

to our students is compounded by laws that prohibit effective school discipline. My administration is working with our delegation to advocate for changes to these laws that are necessary to protect our children.

**Traffic/Roads:** With our focus on public safety, we are ever mindful of the risk our citizens face every day as they and their loved ones drive on the public roads. When I came into office, I established quarterly, impactful meetings with our State Highway officials. Working with our state partners we have made substantial progress in addressing critical roadway challenges:

- With construction wrapping up on the extensive I-95 improvements, the state has begun a three-year project for a new interchange at Routes 24 & 195. This will be a major improvement to a primary entrance to our county.
- The final engineering design for Woodley Road, the long sought-after bypass that will reroute warehouse truck traffic away from the center of Perryman, is now complete and we are working with APG for final approvals.
- The intersection of Route 23 and Grafton Shop Road has claimed far too many lives. When the state said that they could not afford the project, we kept it on the active projects list by offering to pay the state's share. SHA accepted that offer and our Public Works team was able to get a 90% contribution of federal funds.

- We are moving forward with new sidewalks to replace the mud path citizens have trodden along Edgewood Road at Route 40.
- And traffic light timing along has greatly improved on Route 24 and other arteries countywide.

**Education:** Harford is about families. We have always had a strong commitment to improving our children's lives and that is no more evident than in our commitment to quality education. Let me be clear, Harford County has and will continue to fund our schools at or above state requirements.

My administration will continue to work closely with the Board of Education and Superintendent to ensure our children have a first-rate education.

To further that goal:

- The county purchased land for a new elementary school to relieve overcrowding in the general population and for students with the most severe special needs. By locating this combined school inside the development envelope, we have qualified the project for state funding, which will save Harford County taxpayers about \$50M.
- We continue to provide funding toward the \$87M Homestead Wakefield replacement building.

- We have provided funding for higher teacher salaries and starting teachers are on track to earn the required \$60K per year.

To help launch our students into good jobs, we established the first HCG apprenticeship program, and two graduates have been hired full-time. Overall, we are proud that HCPS has 250 students working at 168 local companies approved through the Maryland Apprenticeship and Training Council, making Harford a statewide leader in apprenticeships for our children and grandchildren to start their careers.

**Government efficiency** - Maximizing the impact of our taxpayers' dollars is absolutely essential. To that end, we reconfigured our government to focus on achieving maximum levels of efficiency and productivity - think of it as our version of DOGE before there was a DOGE.

Our government efficiency task force has explored cost savings and efficiencies throughout nearly every part of county operations. Our achievements include:

- A thorough evaluation of our vehicle usage and maintenance to minimize costs of purchasing and maintaining vehicles.
- A survey of all county-owned buildings that allows us to better prioritize maintenance and repair.

- A new ambulance billing provider, resulting in substantial increases in revenue and efficiency.
- \$14M in procurement savings through careful negotiations and best practices.
- Our talented Law Department has saved us \$1M in outside legal fees and in 2024 their attention to debt collection yielded enough revenue to fund an amazing 85% of the department's entire budget.
- Hi-tech investments in our transit bus service and increased ridership have allowed us to capture more federal funding, saving the county \$1M.
- Parks & Rec looks for savings large and small - including our new low mow areas where we reduce mowing frequency in certain areas which saves money and helps the environment.

Even as we continue efforts to spend less, our future prosperity depends on a thriving business community.

**Unfortunately, our state government** has been pursuing policies that are clearly at odds with a strong economy and, as a result, the state economy is lagging well behind the rest of the nation, with the state projecting revenue growth of less than 1% next year.

We must be honest about budget challenges these policies bring us both statewide and here at home.

## **BUDGET PREVIEW**

As Gov. Moore said in his recent speech urging state and county leaders to cut spending and grow the economy: it's not politics, it's math. He agrees with our Harford County strategy, we cannot tax our way out of fiscal challenges - efficiencies and economic development are key.

While I welcome the Governor's stated commitment to increased fiscal restraint and economic growth, our administration recognized this a full two years ago. We were early to the game in understanding that state and county revenue projections were not sufficient to sustain projected budget increases, and we took the responsible step of pumping the brakes on spending. In doing so, we faced allegations that this administration did not know how to project revenues, allegations that proved completely unfounded. We faced harsh criticism for our early recognition that, what Governor Moore has called the sugar high of federal stimulus spending, had led to unsustainable spending trends. Rather than yield to political pressure, we have taken the tough measures to reduce the structural deficit we inherited and ensure that the rate of growth in county spending matches the rate of growth in tax returns - thereby avoiding any increases in tax rates. In doing so, we

have earned awards for excellence in financial reporting and maintained our AAA bond rating.

I want to thank this council for your support in updating 20-year-old fee structures and realigning county fee structures so that those who choose to use government services pay their fair share for those services rather than shifting the burden onto all taxpayers. For example, we increased fees charged to developers for inspections and we shifted to developers a greater share of the increased costs of new schools. Obviously, the developers and their vocal advocates, masquerading as fiscal hawks, are opposed to these measures, but taxpayers agree, this is basic fairness.

Moving forward, I look forward to this council's assistance in upholding the county charter as a roadmap to fiscal soundness and responsible government. Recent attempts by some to change or ignore the charter for political gain put these principles at risk. We must not stray from the wisdom of our charter, which has served Harford County well for generations.

## **Economic Development**

The world is changing rapidly, and Harford County is well positioned to leverage new opportunities. For generations, Harford was viewed as a bedroom

community for Baltimore and our economic success was measured in land cleared to build houses.

Well folks, it's a new day. Modern, high-tech manufacturing is here and it's lean and mean. It demands a smaller, better educated, highly-skilled labor force whose brilliance and loyalty are primary determinants of business success. In return, that new labor force demands an exceptional quality of life. They want short commutes from strong communities to safe and dynamic workplaces. That requires public safety, quality schools, entertainment, recreation, all in a beautiful setting. In short, hi-tech manufacturing wants Harford County.

Our new Economic Development team is on it, bolstered by new hires who have real-world business experience.

Our plans have been aggressive, and I thank this council for your partnership. Instead of being a dumping ground for mega warehouses that chew up real estate and offer little in the way of living-wage jobs, we are growing well paying, modern manufacturing jobs and expanding opportunities for local businesses.

We have 3 new high-tech manufacturers now, and 2 more are planned. Our future lies in attracting more companies like ...

Parsons, Deloitte, Fairwinds, and Leonardo DRS, which have now taken up residence in Harford. Service Engineering, which is also supplying the county with

American-made public safety drones, is expanding under a contract to build drones for the U.S. Army. Each of these companies offers well-paying jobs to local graduates, encouraging them to build their careers and raise families in Harford County.

More local manufacturers are expanding: Locally-owned Independent Can invested over \$4M to modernize their production line. Chesapeake Spice just completed an expansion that doubles their manufacturing space. We see continued success with other Harford-based hi-tech manufacturers like: Better Engineering, Smiths Detection, RPM Tech, Booz Allen, and AES2.

And we will not forget our startups and small businesses that are the backbone of our communities.

Our Economic Development team visited directly with 763 businesses this year alone. Together, the business community has brought 850 new jobs and made \$547M in capital investments in Harford County over the past two years.

To build our highly skilled workforce, our Economic Development department, in partnership with our Economic Development Advisory Board, the Chamber, and our local schools, has facilitated business showcases bringing high school and Community College students together with local businesses.

Growing business in Harford does not mean we ignore the importance of our region in our overall economic success.

We are working with the other counties in the Baltimore region as part of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council and Greater Baltimore Tech Hub to attract even more hi-tech manufacturing. That has already paid off through a federal grant to establish a bio-tech research lab at our Converge Center in Aberdeen

Even with so many great improvements in our economic development outcomes, highly vocal critics remain. That is to be expected as we have made a major shift in Harford's approach to business development. Our efforts are not driven by paybacks, political contributions, or cronyism. We will continue to do what's right for Harford, which means everyone plays by the same rules.

### **Quality of life**

As a lifelong resident, I agree with our citizens who want to protect our wonderful quality of life. It's what makes Harford County a very special place. Toward that end:

- My administration, working with this council, has protected more than 2,500 acres of farmland from development through ag preservation programs.
- We stopped allowing the construction of high-density apartments well outside our urban centers.

- We shut down major development projects that violated environmental laws, clogging our streams and the bay.
- We hosted a very successful Farm Fair and Italian Festival.
- We worked with the community to resurrect the Darlington Apple Festival.
- Construction is well underway to complete the final section of the Ma & Pa Trail in March of 2026, creating an amazing 8-mile trail connecting Fallston, Bel Air and Forest Hill.
- For you pickleball fans, we opened 12 additional pickle ball courts this year.
- The Oakington peninsula, on the waterfront between Havre de Grace and Aberdeen, now includes a total of 1,400 acres of preserved open space and the draft master plan for public use of those properties is nearing completion.
- We added an additional 132 acres of parkland (Salvo property) in the Joppatowne/Edgewood communities that is planned for additional ball fields and a recreation center.
- We supported the arts with grants to organizations like the Susquehanna Symphony, Ladew Gardens, the Decoy Museum, and concert series in Edgewood and Joppatowne.

- Later this year, we'll be celebrating historic anniversaries: Bush Declaration 250, Army 250, and 50 years since the Vietnam War.

We continue to support our veterans, and we are making a difference in their lives. Our veterans' affairs coordinator, Bob Brown, tells the story of a Viet Nam vet who was facing homelessness, struggling to afford healthcare, and having suicidal thoughts. That all turned around when he attended our veterans resource fair, and he got connected to the right people for help. This hero tells Bob that our resource fair saved his life.

**I want to talk for a moment about our Southern County Task Force** - We are in fact one county but for far too long we allowed our communities in Joppatowne, Edgewood, and Belcamp to languish. Those communities got plenty of talk but too little action. Two years ago, we formed the Southern County Task Force. It's an action-based initiative that uses data to identify challenges and opportunities and holds our leaders accountable for turning the tide. After 18 months of activity, they have produced real improvements to daily life. For example:

- Street sweepers are now operating on a regular schedule in Edgewood and Joppatowne.
- DPW paved 18 miles of county roads and repaired sidewalks and curbing.

- Community participation in parks & rec programs has expanded by 13% and participation in rec council programs has expanded by 38%.
- We upgraded 40 streetlights to new energy efficient LED bulbs.
- Water & Sewer upgraded service to over 2,700 area customers.
- We upgraded infrastructure at Mariner Point & Flying Point parks and expanded events in those parks to enhance the local quality of life and attract visitors.
- Working with this council we adopted a new livability code to upgrade the rental housing stock.
- Recognizing that government can't do it alone, we provide local, state & federal resources to empower community leaders to partner with us and expand volunteer service, like the 10 community cleanups they organized this year, resulting in 37 dumpster loads of debris collected in the area. The 755 Alliance is one of our great partners in these efforts.

We continue to value and leverage our strong partnerships with community groups like: Harford Land Trust, 3P, Friends of Harford and our Community Advisory Boards. Thank you for all you do.

In some ways, Harford County has had a tough year, with two disturbing tragedies - one on the Ma & Pa Trail and another at Joppatowne HS. Two neighborhoods faced house explosions; others suffered historic flooding. I am out in our communities regularly and I see residents who rise to meet these challenges and support each other in good times and bad. I'm also deeply grateful to all county employees who work hard every day, and when the unexpected happens, they rise at any hour of the day or night to help their fellow citizens. This is why I have such confidence in our future.

Whether you live in Bel Air or Belcamp, Jarrettsville or Joppatowne, we are all neighbors. Everyone matters, no one is expendable, and we are up to the challenge of making our county the best it can be. I see it every day - we are rising together and the state of Harford County is strong.

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