



State of the County Address 2026

Thank you all for being here on this cold night.

As you saw in the video,

there's a sign outside my door –

it says, "Always do right."

It was a gift from my father:

a WWII Veteran and Merchant Marine

who at 18 yrs old served our nation

from the engine room of a Liberty Ship

being pursued by Nazi subs across the North Atlantic

As your County Executive,

doing right has been my guiding light.

Always do right

for the county I was born in and love

And always do right

for the great people who live & work here

That's who I'm working for

– not powerful insiders

The people who want safe communities,

good schools, good jobs, &
quality of life that includes open spaces,
roads that are not crowded or dangerous,
farms and parkland.

I'm especially committed to helping those
who pitch in to help their neighbors,
who volunteer their time, talent & treasure
to make Harford a special place.

Fiscal Responsibility

My first day in office was exciting and fun
until I met with my budget team
who gave me a cold dose of reality –
I had inherited a \$90M structural deficit.
Our options were a tax increase or
spending cuts
that were certain to upset government agencies
& others dependent on that big spending.

Because I firmly believe
that government must live within our taxpayers' means
I chose fiscal responsibility and efficiencies
over tax increases.

Fast forward to today,
our AAA bond rating has been retained;
we've won awards for budget transparency
& our Treasurer has been recognized
for statewide leadership in fiscal stewardship.

Still, fiscal responsibility has created a lot of noise
from special interests

that wanted more government spending
piled on top of our hard-working families.

My Treasurer and the Spending Affordability Committee
were even derided in this very council chamber

But we stood firm,

did the right thing for our citizens,
& the county is in a far better fiscal position today.

The state of Harford County is strong!

Over-Development

Our Harford community is strong and highly desirable
thanks to the many who have worked so hard
to improve our quality of life.

The women and men

who created and supported
our agricultural preservation program,
protected our families,
built our parks and trails,
taught and coached our children,
built our schools,
volunteered as firefighters and EMS,
channeled residential growth to a defined areas,
protected our open spaces, & many more.

Their immense efforts are our legacy to carry forward
& I feel a great sense of responsibility to uphold that legacy.

Growth has to happen,
but it must benefit all of us,
not just a select few.

To that end,

our comprehensive rezoning plan
we submitted to this council
did not include any upzoning for residential parcels.

We've purchased over 200 acres of open space
for passive and active recreation

We preserved an additional 4,536 acres of farmland
from development

We stopped the plans supported by your predecessors
on this council,
to build mega-warehouses
in Abingdon Woods and Perryman,
& apartments in Fallston, Benson, Forest Hill & Hickory.

Instead of unbridled development, Harford's economic future is in our small businesses, our expanding high-tech manufacturing sector, a brilliant folks at APG, and the rapidly expanding medical services sector.

For decades Harford has heard from special interests
that the only road to our financial security
was through big development
- mega-warehouses, high-density apartments,
& rapid expansion of the development corridor.

My administration rejects that approach,
our future does not lie in compromising our quality of life
but in improving it.

Our business community is flourishing because
we are delivering the strong families & the good schools
necessary to generate a well-educated & reliable workforce

And we provide the essentials employers need
to sustain and retain a quality work force:

strong public safety,
effective and efficient government,
moderate taxes,
beautiful parks, open spaces,
recreation and cultural opportunities,
diverse communities of faith,
good roads, &
government that ensures all of us **play by the same rules.**

With our support,

our schools are #1 in the state
in Youth Apprenticeships

We're hosting well attended job fairs

to promote the trades

We have strengthened our partnership with

Our #1 employer, APG
& APG is providing new opportunities for growth.

On and off post.

Major defense contractors have now opened offices in Harford,
including, among others:

DRS Leonardo, Deloitte,
Fairwinds Technology
and Semper Valens

Hello Harford, our new tourism marketing organization,

has hit the ground running,
helping tourism-related businesses
work together to generate success.

**With our thriving economic base, my administration is able to focus on what
matters to everyday citizens & families**

Public safety is our top priority because, if you're not safe in your home & your community, nothing else matters.

That means supporting the men and women
who protect us every day.

For our Harford County Sheriff's Deputies,
we have for the past 3 years
funded competitive salaries and benefits
at the levels recommended in the sheriff's salary study

We provided them with 1st rate police equipment,
including upgrades to the newest radio technology,
and new police vehicles.

We now have 17 active ambo units,
with the latest technology,
stationed countywide,
answering 30,000 calls annually
and - this is important -
when minutes count,
their response time is usually under 8 minutes.

I recall an incident shortly after I took office
when an elderly woman lost consciousness
and struck her head.

She waited for over 20 minutes for a unit to respond.

Those delays for critical responses are now a rarity.

Our investments in new equipment for our ambulances
are saving lives every day:

The new whole blood program and Rapid Intubation System (RSI)
are the latest innovations.

RSI was tested soon after it was fielded
on Christmas Eve,

when a Career Medic used RSI for a young man in his 20s
who was in unstable condition

after his vehicle was hit by a semi-truck.

Thanks to our skilled paramedics,
the patient was successfully intubated
before he was flown to Shock Trauma.

I would like to recognize our EMS Division

Chief Caitlyn Ledford who is here with us tonight
and EMS Captain Natalie Stotler,
who saved that young man the day before Christmas. Thank you.

To ensure rapid response times county wide,

we completed a new Fire and Ambo station in Belcamp
& a new station in Whiteford is moving forward.

Our amazing and highly dedicated VFC's
received record funding last year.

With our support, our VFC are experimenting with
alternative structures to ensure rapid response,
like paid driver programs
& living quarters for volunteers.

And the County is taking on more of the administrative burdens
and expenses from the volunteers.

You may recall in June 2024,
the fire at Steppingstone Museum,
and at nearly the same time
there was a shooting at Harford Mall.

Folks, I was on the scene &
every volunteer fire co. in the county was involved
in one way or another.

I saw how they worked together and I could not have been prouder.

In recognition of the physical toll & long-term risks
associated with the selfless service
of our volunteer fire fighters,
particularly the heightened risk of occupational cancer, Harford County is proud
to announce a new health initiative:

The Volunteer Firefighter Cancer Screening Program.

**Now Let's talk traffic – You're driving to work, taking your kids to school or to
soccer practice, no one wants to sit in traffic.**

My administration has achieved
unprecedented coordination with St Highway Administration
to solve problems on the state roads
that are our main arteries,

To aid efficiencies, we've focused on synchronizing traffic lights
along main corridors, like 24, 924, 1, and 22

And to address critical traffic hazards

we are working on or have completed projects with SHA:
on 23 @ Grafton Shop, Route 40 @ Ohio & Ostego,
& Route 1 @ Reckord.

And we have a number of other initiatives

still under discussion with SHA

On our county roads:

we have paved and repaired 45 miles of roadway.

We have a project underway on Spesutia

and completed an innovative and cost-saving roundabout
on Bel Air South Parkway.

I have a major announcement tonight about Woodley Road:

After years of effort, we are finally ready to move forward
with construction of the road connection

to divert truck traffic from residential areas

on the Perryman Peninsula.

We will be putting this project out to bid in February

& anticipate shovels in the ground this summer.

We have also made substantial improvements

to our county bus transit -

88% of those operations are funded by federal & state grants,

cost-saving routing software has increased ridership

to 414K passenger trips, while reducing total miles by 200K

For Education

We fully funded the superintendent's FY 26 Budget.

We also agreed with the BOE last year

to a 3-year budget plan

& I am prepared to send you a budget

that will fully fund our agreed upon 6 1/2% increase for FY27.

Our teachers have gotten raises every year.

And Harf Co Schools are on track

to achieve the \$60K starting teacher salaries,

as mandated by the Blueprint.

We purchased a new school site in Fountain Green,

on the former Eva Mar property.

& construction is planned for a new elementary school &

school for those with special needs.

For our high school students,

our collaboration with our schools and business communities

has made Harford number 1 in the state

for job apprenticeships

that allow high schoolers to work part time to learn a trade
that will provide a good wage upon graduation.

We completed the new Homestead Wakefield Elementary school
& a major stormwater management project
at Fallston middle & high school
– offering students a living classroom
while also protecting the environment

And our IT Department has connected all 57 school locations
to Harford County's modern (VoIP) phone system

**With safer communities and a strong investment in education, we are also focused
on making everyday life better for our citizens –**

Citizens of all ages need places to play
& enjoy fresh air and open space

We have invested in parks & ball fields
– upgrading Annie's Playground in Fallston,
we are moving forward with construction of
5 new ballfields in Fallston
& renovations to Hickory fields,

We purchased 129 acres in Joppa for ballfields and parkland,
and we upgraded the Cunion Fields in Edgewood.

Planning is underway for the Oakington Peninsula Park System
– it will be a crown jewel of the mid-Atlantic region
with 1400 acres of waterfront property.

We're investing the proceeds of marijuana sales tax
to support youth mentorships in cooperation with HCPS
& youth summer camps.

We are enriching the lives of our Seniors
with innovative health, nutrition and exercise programs

that earned our Office on Aging national and state awards.

Using the latest bus routing software,

Harford Transit identified available bus capacity

& filled it by offering group outings

for over 600 senior housing residents

to dine at local restaurants, go shopping, etc.

I hear everyone had a great time.

We supported outside organizations

doing good work in the community

by distributing \$1.3M to 27 nonprofits

identified by our Dept of Housing & Community Services

We hosted a record turnout at our Veterans resource fair.

We supported our Farmers

with the County's first full time dedicated ag advisor

& provided farm businesses with ag grants

to promote creative approaches to sustain farming.

Think about your favorite restaurant, small shop, or hair stylist

Small businesses are the backbone of our economy.

This year we provided a record \$1M

in low-interest, small business loans

& we facilitated more than \$4M in fed, state & private grants

to empower their success.

Our Water & Sewer Division is providing

award-winning drinking water for the THIRD year in a row.

And we are the first county in the state

to have our own lab certified to test for PFAS.

Our law department is enforcing civil citations

for repeated quality of life violations

& taking developers to task

for violating environmental regulations.

And we can't forget our animal friends –

My administration will be adding funds
to the Humane Society
to support their care for the extraordinary number
of abused animals seized by law enforcement.

We are not content to make just some of Harford County great - we want every ZIP code to enjoy a high quality of life. After decades of politicians talking about improving the Route 40 corridor, we took action.:

Our Southern County Task Force

has leveraged \$4M in federal and state funding,
citizens' indispensable sweat equity,
and strong business support
to improve safety, aesthetics, and opportunity
in Edgewood, Joppatowne and Belcamp.

And we earned national and state awards

for this innovative task force,
including NACo, MACo

We have with us tonight one of our great partners,
the 755 Alliance

The work our county does is made possible by our dedicated County employees

I see you in the field doing this great work every day.

We have an exceptional quality workforce

built on hiring & retaining the best applicants.

To better serve our county employees,
we recently opened a county employees' health center.

And our workforce structure, salary and benefits study

is in progress to better align job skills
and ensure that our pay is competitive.

As you saw from the video,
we have an award-winning administration/

Just some of their amazing achievements include:

- \$38M in procurement savings during my administration
- 304 claims resolved by our Law Department in 2025
& law is currently handling 124 claims for our sheriff's office - all of this despite
the strains and stresses
of operating on a very limited budget.
- Planning & Zoning completed comprehensive zoning
with no recommended expansion
of the development envelope.
- Last year alone, our Citizens Affairs section
responded to nearly 4,000 inquiries,
usually within 24 hours,
including weekends and holidays,
to ensure outstanding customer service.

Looking ahead, What's next?

Planning and Zoning Department will be working with the community on a Master

Plan for next 10 years

it will be transparent, user-friendly process,
focused on growing our economy
while preserving our quality of life.

We will continue to push back on state mandates
for solar farms on prime ag land
and state mandates for increased housing density.

In partnership with HCC,

we are pursuing a Workforce development center,
to be located on the public transit line.

To ensure the Public Safety

We will continue to stand behind our VFCs,
provide record funding,
capitalize equipment purchases,
and reduce their administrative burdens.

We will begin construction of a new building
to house our Special ops division
which will allow us to improve operations,
& terminate expensive leases.

Parks & Rec will complete the Ma & Pa Trail this summer
for a beautiful 8-mile trail
that will connect four park systems:
from Annie's Playground in Fallston to Heavenly Waters Park
through the Town of Bel Air to Blakes Venture, and
on to Friends Park in Forest Hill.

We will continue working with the State
on the extension of the Susquehanna River train trail.

And we will move forward with recreation centers
in Aberdeen and Joppa.

We will invest in more activities and facilities
for our growing senior population
so they can remain a vital and active part of our community.

And we will continue to expand broadband
in the north part of our county.

For our schools,

we will continue our commitment to our teachers,
expand the apprenticeship program,
construct a new school for Harford Academy
and a new elementary school
& fund a new roof at Halls Crossroads in Aberdeen.

Economic Development

To strengthen our small business community,

we will continue our extensive business support initiatives
& expand our small business loans
and facade improvement grants.

And we will continue moving forward

with the development of a meat processing facility

Our law department must continue to be a leader

in protecting county personnel, property and investments. The department must be adequately resourced

to ensure every county department and the sheriff's office
have competent legal advisors
to execute agreements & resolve or litigate cases
with exceptional competence.

Before closing,

I would like to say a word about the next budget:

Our FY27 Budget will once again be fiscally responsible

And continue to focus on key priorities
of public safety and education.

Think of the budget as a pie chart,

About half of our tax dollars will go to education
& another 1/4 will go to public safety
- because these are our top priorities

The final one-quarter of all tax dollars

will support everything that county government does: including highway maintenance,
parks and recreation,
senior centers and programs,
planning and zoning,
managing building permits,
protecting the tax payers & employees,
supplying water and sewage services,
& so much more.

As in every year,

some of the entities we fund in the 3/4 of our budget
that is outside of county government
will demand outsized spending increases.

These increases can only be funded through higher taxes,
which I will not support.

In the past, this Council has attempted to satisfy those demands
for greater spending by the outside entities
by making last minute cuts
to the 1/4 of the budget that is our county government.

Those surprise cuts have had real consequences.

We had to delay for a full year

scheduled improvements to Citizens Care Center
that would have provided an additional 20 beds for seniors.

We had to delay construction of a new State's Attorney's office
that is essential to overall improvements

to courthouse security.

We had to delay essential improvements

to C. Milton Wright High School's roof.

And our law department has struggled

to defend taxpayers' interests

due to unprecedented cuts to their budget.

My Administration is fully prepared to work with this Council

to identify real efficiencies

and to legislate for the benefit of the taxpayers. Unfortunately, that collaboration

is made more difficult

by the recent announcement

from the Council President's Office

that the weekly coordination meetings between our offices

we have held for the past 3 years

have been terminated.

I urge you to restore those meetings

for the sake of the citizens we all serve.

In conclusion: 2026 is a big year - We will celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation's independence

We are blessed to live in the greatest nation on earth.

Our founding fathers had a vision

of government by the people

and it's the people that make America great,

not special interests or a powerful few.

In Harford County, I've stood up to these powers few,

and trust me, it would have been a lot easier

just to "go along and get along."

I could play the peacemaker

by giving into demands for more spending,

But I'd be doing it with taxpayer dollars

& sacrificing our citizens' quality of life.

I won't do either - so the noise will likely continue.

But we will not be bullied.

I will take the heat from power brokers

& remain focused on our core values:

fiscal responsibility, public safety, quality education,

economic strength, protecting our seniors and children

& realizing opportunities

for our citizens to live the American dream.

Thank you and good night.