

**Tuesday, August 11, 2015
“State of the Region”
Danville Pittsylvania County
Chamber of Commerce**

Good morning!

It is once more an honor to be with so many people who care deeply about our region – Danville and Pittsylvania County.

Your devotion, dedication and spirit are inspiring, and confirms the belief that, working together, we can accomplish great things...so thank you for being here today.

Thanks to the Chamber of Commerce for organizing and Danville Regional Medical Center for sponsoring this event.

Before I begin, let me recognize City Council members, County Supervisors and other elected and appointed government officials with us this morning.

I thank you for your efforts every day to strengthen our region and to make it a community of choice and a community of opportunity. Thank you for answering the call to public service. We are a better community because of your leadership.

I also want to thank our businesses, our service organizations and our partners in the region and the Commonwealth. They work relentlessly for progress and prosperity in our region.

Let me also take a moment to thank and honor the the hundreds of public servants who come to work every day in Danville and Pittsylvania County. There is almost no facet of life here in the region that is not touched and enhanced by our city and county employees. The people of Danville and Pittsylvania County may not notice what these employees do as they run through their busy days, but believe me, life as you know it would not be the same without our dedicated workforce.

In Danville, our workforce is led by City Manager Joe King. Before I go any farther, I want to salute Joe for his strong, able and visionary leadership. As you may know, Joe will retire on Nov. 30. We thank him for 13 years of service to our city, with the last five of them as city manager.

Joe's signature on Danville and this region will remain long after his retirement. For example, during his tenure as city manager, the city won a statewide Achievement Award from the Virginia Municipal League for our Safe and Sound Neighborhood Program and multiple awards for our River District Development Project.

We believe our blight eradication program is equally worthy of statewide recognition. Vacant and abandoned buildings serve as a drag on any new investment. If potential investors see a third of the buildings in disrepair or abandoned, then that image is the one they take back with them. To prevent that image from steering investors elsewhere, keeping neighborhoods well maintained is critical. Joe and his leadership team have put in place a multi-faceted strategy to create neighborhoods of choice.

Greater financial stability and increased government transparency also mark Joe's tenure as city manager. I am going to address these areas in more detail today, but first let me say, "Joe, job well done, my friend! Thank you!" I ask everyone here today to join me in giving Joe a round of applause.

Today, I also want to welcome Clarence Monday as county administrator. Long ago, City and County leaders made a deliberate decision to work collaboratively to build a better home for ourselves and for our children. Clarence shares that goal, and we look forward to working with you.

A year ago, I stood before you and reported that the state of the region is good and getting better. Today, I can report to you that, with your help, we have made much more progress.

The best evidence of that success came a few weeks ago. I want to share this information with you today because it has received little attention. Here is what happened:

Two months ago, we received a visit from three private, independent bond-rating services. We invited them to Danville because we thought it would be an opportunity for them to see firsthand the strides we have made in the River District, blight eradication and development of our industrial parks. We believe they were able to get a good sense of the changes that have taken place here.

A few weeks later, we learned the results of that visit:

One agency upgraded Danville's bond rating to a higher tier, giving the city a second tier rating in the eyes of two of the three agencies.

The third agency upgraded the city's outlook from stable to positive, and this leads us to believe in the next 12 to 18 months we will move up and be on the second tier of bond ratings in the eyes of all three agencies.

What you might find more interesting are the reasons the agencies cited for their decisions. Let me share a couple of comments with you:

Here is what one agency stated in its report:

- "We view the city's management as very strong, with 'strong' financial policies and practices." These practices are "well-embedded and likely sustainable."

A second agency concurred, stating in its report:

- "Conservative budgeting, strong budget control and adherence to well-articulated policies have led to a stable, strong financial position."

Rest assured, our financial house is in order, our financial health is improving and when we issue bonds, we will save money for taxpayers.

This is great news! Let us celebrate that here today!

More evidence of fiscal discipline is our continued ability to maintain the right mix of municipal services and facilities without increasing tax rates and fees. This reflects the City's seriousness about financial stewardship.

We are also encouraged by signs of the City's strengthening economy. Revenue from local sales and meals taxes continue to grow. Our unemployment rate has fallen nearly a full percentage point from a year ago.

But as our fiscal house strengthens and our economy improves, all citizens need an opportunity to participate. The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until good is secured for all and woven into the fabric of our community. We must do better.

To do better, we must continue to adapt to changes and challenges that come our way. We must continue to step back from a situation or an established way of doing things and ask, “Is there a better way? Let’s reimagine this.”

This spirit of reinvention is at work in this region, and it is yielding big results. Let me take the next few minutes to provide a few examples:

It is the spirit of reinvention within our region that led the Danville Regional Foundation a few weeks ago to announce a \$10 million investment in Watershed Ventures. This real estate investment firm will focus on redeveloping underutilized, long empty and dilapidated structures in our River District.

It is the spirit of reinvention that led to the Gene Haas Center for Integrated Machining to be established on the campus of the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research. I was happy to join Gov. Terry McAuliffe and other state and local leaders three months ago in a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the center, which the governor that day called one that “truly helps us go leaps and bounds above anybody else.”

It is the spirit of reinvention that led to the Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness to be established at Averett University. This center allows students to learn from firsthand experiences in the community, bringing their liberal arts education to life both inside and outside the classroom.

These initiatives are game-changing investments for our region, and we are thankful for the partnerships that were formed, the frameworks built and the seeding provided to make them happen.

The spirit of reinvention also is guiding the City of Danville.

Earlier this year, we launched a redesign of our website – danvilleva.gov. The new design vividly showcases images of the city, accommodates screens of all sizes and provides citizens with access to many types of data in a way never before available. It takes government transparency to a new level. That is the spirit of reinvention at work.

In March, our Fire Department received international accreditation for excellence in fire service. To become accredited, we invited the most intense scrutiny available. The standards are high. Few departments achieve accreditation, so what this means is that we are among the best of the best. That is the spirit that drives Danville.

Our Police Department continues to be ahead of the curve in technical application and strategic thinking. We implemented use of Body-worn Cameras a full four years before the national call to equip all officers with such devices. The department now has 116 cameras and the associated infrastructure in place to cover all officers, supervision and civilian personnel that interact with the public.

Our Police Department also has moved to a scientific-based system of analyzing crime and traffic data to determine the most effective methods for deploying law enforcement and other resources. That is the spirit that drives Danville.

This year, we are in the fifth year of our award-winning River District Development Project. Our current efforts include the following:

- We are creating a pedestrian lane on the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Bridge to connect walking trails on the north and south side of the Dan River.
- We will put in place six gateway signs, 36 vehicular signs in and outside the River District, 20 directional signs, 12 pedestrian signs and 4 informational kiosks.
- The next streetscape phase soon will begin on Craghead Street, which is a major entry route into the River District.
- Repurposing of buildings continues for residential units and for locating, starting or growing businesses.

Today, private investment is taking place as we had hoped, and it is outpacing public investment by threefold. Nearly 40 different businesses are flourishing in the River District, and more are coming. There are multiple restaurant choices. Entertainment, health and fitness, and educational opportunities are available.

We believe the changes are transformative. On May 1, with the generous assistance of the Danville Regional Foundation, we publicly unveiled a new brand identity for the River District to capture the spirit of the changes taking place and to send a clear message within and outside the Danville community about what makes the district special.

The brand identity uses the credo “Reimagine That” for the way things work today in Danville. Our message is clear, “the status quo is a no go.”

This same spirit also is at work throughout Danville and the region as a whole. Today, I have provided only a few examples of this spirit at work.

We must continue to navigate life's twists and turns and adapt to changes and challenges that come our way. This spirit of reinvention – to reimagine – is based on our ability to continue to work together as partners, learn from others, build frameworks and plant seeds.

So I challenge you to continue work together as partners, learn from others, build frameworks and plant seeds. If we do, we will be prepared to adapt to any change and challenge – to reimagine a better home for our children and ourselves.

With help from each of you here today, we are making steady progress in building a better region. The state of the region is strong, and the future looks bright. It is my honor to serve alongside you.

Thank you and God bless!