



## **2024 MAYOR'S BUDGET MESSAGE**

Madam Chair and members of City Council, this message and the accompanying budget are submitted to you in accordance with Article 10, Section 10.2 of the Charter of the City of Huntington, WV.

This is my final budget message. We have invited those individuals who served in the two previous City Councils elected in 2012 and in 2016 to join us tonight. Each person can speak to the state of affairs in our city during their term in office. Sadly, three individuals with whom I served are no longer with us. We honor the service of Councilwoman Frances Jackson, Councilman Gary Bunn and Councilman Rick Simmons.

Each person who was elected to this current City Council in 2020, and each person elected in 2016 and 2012, served valiantly.

I have seen where our city has been. I see where our city is. I am left with very high expectations of where our city is headed in the coming years and decades.

I'm very proud of what we have accomplished and what we still have left to do.

I was recently asked to speak of my vision for the coming four to five years. I didn't pause when I indicated that if a leader's vision is set on a four- or five-year window, that leader and those whom the leader leads would find themselves tripping over themselves and miss the opportunity that the future presents. I indicated my vision is a 50-year vision. That way, the unexpected crises that will inevitably arise may cause a need for a brief course adjustment, but the 50-year vision will not be thwarted.

Our city and region have been paralyzed by a limited vision that caused short-term decisions to create long term blindness. It is interesting that our daily activity within the operations of our municipal government is defined by what has not been addressed during the past 60-plus years. We have been paralyzed and expected to address 21<sup>st</sup> Century problems with 1950 and 1960 solutions or strategies.

Over the years, you have heard me proclaim, "Make No Little Plans," "Set standards that the nation will seek to emulate," "Make a decision. If it fails we will fall forward, but make a decision," and "Don't ever say no, provide another solution."

Our city has become known as a "City of Solutions." The solutions did not come from the Mayor's desk. They came from the kitchen tables in our neighborhoods, from businesses and from employees who see an opportunity to address the needs in the marketplace that are not being addressed. They come from houses of worship that see a need that requires a



compassionate heart. Solutions have come from youth who see a community that can do better by assuring that everyone is invited to the table of participation and let their voices be heard.

Certainly, there have been challenges. Each of those challenges has provided us exponential opportunities. We have responded aggressively and intelligently to each of the challenges we faced. We have demonstrated that we are a city of doers and builders.

Our actions have leveraged an unsurpassed investment of over one half of a billion dollars from federal, state and private sources.

- We have renovated nearly every building owned and operated by the City of Huntington. We have built a new Mayor Joseph L. Williams Jr. Fire Station and a second fire station in Westmoreland is being designed with the construction expected to commence later this year. The remaining four fire stations have all been renovated with additional improvements scheduled for Centennial Station and Station 10.
- The top two floors of the Jean Dean Public Safety Building have been completely renovated. Our Compass wellness program is used as an example for police and fire departments across the country.
- A new city garage is nearing completion at the former National Guard Armory. Our Public Works Department is moving its Motor Pool Division, Street Department and Sanitation Department into the newly-renovated facility, creating a more efficient operation with all services emanating from one location.
- The Marshall Health Network Arena has undertaken a complete renovation inside and out. Its makeover also magnifies the makeover of our downtown area. The Arena is not just an entertainment venue. It has become a destination location alongside Pullman Square.
- Safety Town has undergone a makeover which enhances the experience for our children who visit and also emphasizes the importance of safe standards for our homes and neighborhoods.
- The Bob Bailey Senior Wellness Center fulfills a promise to provide a facility that is long overdue to the senior citizens of the West End, Westmoreland and Wayne County into our neighboring communities of Ceredo and Kenova.
- And City Hall has undergone a complete transformation utilizing philanthropic donations led by Drs. Joe and Omayma Touma in conjunction with City of Huntington General Fund allocations. The two phases have completely restored City Hall to its original design and has made the offices functional to 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards.

Every property involving every function of city government -- Police, Fire, Finance, Public Works, Planning and Development, Civic Arena, City Council and the Administration -- has been and is being renovated to current-day standards. The total cost invested exceeds \$30,578,000.



Our neighborhoods have aged over the years and, as a result, properties decline in value and the safety of residents is placed in jeopardy when substandard and decrepit properties are left unaddressed. Since 2012, the city has demolished 511 structures. Our demolition program has been so successful, West Virginia State Auditor J.B. McCuskey reviewed our program, hired our demolition program manager and established a program of demolition patterned after our demolition program.

The condition of the roads in a community can leave a lasting impression. Since 2013, the city has budgeted \$20,388,054 for the paving of 80.4 miles of our roads. Not a year goes by during our paving season that we do not hear from someone calling to thank us for paving the road that as the person says has either not been paved for over 40 years or that the road had never been paved before. We are now budgeting more for one year of paving than was budgeted the eight years prior to this administration. We expect to impact more roads and improve the condition of the roads by applying an asphalt rejuvenating agent that will extend the life cycle of those roads before they need to be repaved again. The city owns 190 miles of roads. By becoming smarter, innovative and more efficient with our paving program, we will be able to make data-informed decisions on the roadways that need to be paved the most.

Our Police Department has responded remarkably to the challenges set before our city as a result of the level of addiction that has driven criminal behavior. Since 2016 at the height of our addiction crisis through 2023, we have seen a consistent reduction of crime. Violent and property crime has dropped 29.1%. In the same time period, burglaries reduced 72.7%, larcenies reduced 37.4%, and robberies reduced 65.5%. Last year, there were only 2 murders, the lowest since 2015. In fact, violent crime and property crime are lower today than they were reported in the 1980s.

The mental health challenges combined with substance use disorder add additional stresses in the community and within law enforcement. The common problem of addiction linked with homelessness necessitates innovative strategies. The Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) is a part of the newly-developed Coordinated Care Unit of the Huntington Police Department. The Coordinated Care Unit focuses solely on mental health needs within the community. The CIT pairs mental health providers with law enforcement officers to respond to mental health/co-occurring substance use disorder crises.

HPD with our Crisis Intervention Team approaches the mental health needs in the community with compassion while holding individuals accountable for their actions. The Coordinated Care Unit and Crisis Intervention Team have received national recognition by the National League of Cities for its 2022 Capstone Challenge and the U.S. Conference of Mayors 2023 Police Reform and Equitable Justice Grant for the small population category.



Our Compass program continues to receive acclaim from across the country. Most importantly, there are tangible results in assisting our firefighters and police officers in managing their physical and mental health to make them more effective in their chosen profession. Seventy-three percent of our sworn police and fire personnel use Compass regularly. Police and fire personnel are 20% more satisfied with their ability to manage relationships and deal with mental and physical health issues. Firefighters who use Compass have a 14.5 second faster response time. Because of this faster response time, 22 lives were saved within the City of Huntington during the past two years due to the early administration of CPR to a victim.

Our Compass program, Crisis Intervention Team and the Quick Response Team that works in partnership through Cabell County EMS are innovative programs that began with federal and state grants, philanthropic assistance and general fund appropriations. There is a level of stability to ensure the long-term success of these programs because we have received the first installment of 14 payments of opioid settlement funds that will be made to the City of Huntington. Our most recent \$2.7 million payment was received in January, and City Council authorized the money to be placed in a segregated account that will be used to assist our efforts in ensuring the difficulties that we experienced in the past 10-plus years will never happen again.

Our public safety pensions for decades were the subject of ridicule and concern. Many suggested the fragility and underfunding of the police and fire pensions was leading the city to bankruptcy. For years, the standard operating procedure was for the city to be 3 to 4 months in arrears on its payments. The practice was to ensure that the city was “caught up” in time to qualify for the matching funds from the state. The city’s pension funding trend was derisively but accurately criticized as being an interest-free loan from the pension board. That was resolved on June 6, 2019, when we were considered current for past debt and current for the fiscal year. Our public safety pensions that were identified as an example of how not to manage a pension system have been in recent years used as an example of successful pension management by the Municipal Police Officer and Firefighters Retirement System Board.

The beginning balance in the 2013 firefighters’ pension system was \$13.5 million and in June 2023 was \$38.8 million – an increase of \$25.3 million comprising a total return of 187.2%. The beginning balance in the 2013 police pension system was \$22.4 million and on June 30, 2023 was \$46.6 million – an increase of \$24.2 million comprising a total return of 108.3%. All contributions continue to be current in each plan.

As previously indicated, the Mayor Joseph L. Williams Jr. Fire Station has been completed and is presently in full service. Planning for a second station in Westmoreland is in the works with renovations to the remaining four stations totaling north of \$400,000 have been made with





additional improvements being budgeted. We have funded five new apparatuses with two sets of turnout gear, and a third set is included in the upcoming budget. To date, notwithstanding the projected budget allocation for a third set of turnout gear, the apparatus expense and turnout gear expense represent a \$3.5 million investment.

The Fire Department has placed a heightened emphasis on recruitment efforts. Working with the Fire Civil Service Commission to revamp testing procedures during the past two years, it has brought positive results in the Department. With the next recruitment class, HFD will be fully staffed for the first time since before 2019, notwithstanding normal attrition due to retirements or other unforeseen issues. That being said, we no longer have a recruitment crisis in the City of Huntington Fire Department.

Our services in policing, fire protection, public works infrastructure management, planning, development and financial propriety requires competent, motivated, dedicated personnel. Frankly, those criteria are a minimum standard, and our city employees deserve to have compensation and benefits that are competitive. Our employees have demonstrated a level of innovation and determination that has drawn national attention to our innovative strategies addressing the hardest of challenges facing our cities and communities. Our three bargaining units and administrative employees had not received a raise in six years, and the bargaining units operated without an agreement for more four years. I am proud that we have successfully negotiated 16 separate bargaining agreements since 2013 and have stabilized our pensions and our health care benefits and set assurances that no person is employed to work for the City of Huntington with a compensation less than \$15 per hour. All told over these years, our employees who had labored with no pay increases, and in some cases with temporary pay reductions, have received 48% in compensation increases since 2013.

Separate from the General Fund budget, we have been very active through the efforts of our Sanitary Board and Stormwater Utility. Sewer and stormwater operations are out of sight and out of mind until sewer lines back up or streets and basements start to flood.

The West Virginia State Supreme Court mandated in the late 1990s that the Sanitary Board had the responsibility to address street flooding by providing street sweeping service throughout the city. It was not implemented until 2015. Since 2015, 8,995 curb miles have been swept resulting in the removal of 26,880,000 pounds (13,344 tons) of debris.

The Sanitary Board also contracted to have the interceptor line cleaned. This line carries sewage the length of the city from Guyandotte to the treatment plant in Westmoreland. The interceptor line was built in the late 1950s and had never been cleaned out until two years ago. We are nearing completion of the interceptor line being cleaned and 4,626,600 pounds (2,313 tons) of debris and sludge have been removed.



In addition, the largest local public infrastructure project in the history of the state of West Virginia totaling in excess of \$268.8 million is being undertaken by the Huntington Sanitary Board and its companion Huntington Stormwater Utility. The projects encompass:

### **Huntington Stormwater Utility**

- Hydrology studies of the Fourpole Creek watershed
- Hydrology study and stormwater conveyance design for Arlington Boulevard
- Stabilization of the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Pump Station
- FEMA accreditation for the downtown levy/floodwall system
- Feasibility study of Huntington's two floodwall and levy systems

### **Huntington Sanitary Board**

- Sanitary treatment plant renovations
- Treatment plant and pump station upgrades
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue combined line separation
- CSO backflow preventer
- Route 10 line extension

The quarter of a billion dollar investment in our sanitary and storm sewer systems ensures that the city is equipped to encourage business development over the coming decades. So much is being done now because so little has been addressed during the past 60-plus years. Fortunately, our U.S. senators and governor have been full participating partners in providing us the necessary federal and state assistance to ensure basic infrastructure is operable so our city can grow.

As we have aggressively addressed our needs, we also have to come to understand that we need to nurture our youth to enable them to see that public service can provide stability in their young lives. Last year, we created a program called "On the Go Youth Empowerment." We brought in 11 individuals to serve as interns and apprentices during the past year. Two of these individuals, Tyler Robinette and Lauren Wheeler-Hollis, decided to take full-time jobs with the city when their internships ended. Hawke Maynard was another intern in the program and he worked in the Finance Division. One of his main duties was transferring old data into the New World program used by the Finance Department. His hard work and dedication helped to vastly shrink a backlog of data waiting to be transferred into the system. This is a continuing program that we hope to bring in more youth to expose them to the employment opportunities that are available with the City of Huntington.



With all this activity, the residents of our city came forward with a plan that became known as the Huntington Innovation Plan (HIP) that won the America's Best Community competition. It's interesting to see our institutions such as Marshall University and Marshall Health Network are leading our city to heights to lift up our neighborhoods to create "innovative" opportunities that lifts the entire region.

We now see developments that were viewed skeptically as to whether anything that ambitious could ever be accomplished. Old factories and abandoned industrial property were torn down and turned into fresh real estate ushering in the digital age. Stadiums that have been discussed and promised for 50 years have been built. A university and college network mastered its research capability to increase the capacity of workers.

Yes, we are redesigning our city and by doing so we are redesigning our expectations. We are building a digital superhighway with high speed broadband in our neighborhoods. Entrances into and through Huntington, whether it be by Hal Greer Boulevard or 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, are and will be adjusted to address the changing pedestrian needs and marketplace necessities. Take a long look at Hal Greer Boulevard through 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue as well as 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in the 20<sup>th</sup> to 26<sup>th</sup> Street corridors. No less than five years and certainly no more than seven years, these three corridors will hardly be recognized. Our community has had little to no construction and redevelopment the past six decades. The half billion dollars of investment to date in our community ensures that our city's landscape is going to change. Huntington is becoming a massive construction site. Prepare to be inconvenienced. We are doing all we can to ensure that gentrification does not enter our neighborhoods. But we all need to work with our city planners as plans for the coming decade are being finalized.

The Huntington Innovation Plan (HIP) focused our energies on transforming our city by strategically focusing on three neighborhoods (Highlawn, Fairfield and the West End) so their decline can be reversed to spark development. The importance of Highlawn and Fairfield reversing their downward trajectory was necessary due to their adjacent location to Marshall University, Cabell Huntington Hospital and St. Mary's Medical Center and their corridors leading into the city. The West End also was seeking to take full advantage of its location right off Interstate 64 and 20-plus million vehicles a year that pass by the West End. All three neighborhoods are positioned in such a way that their success reaches every other neighborhood in the city. Our high-speed broadband partnership with Thundercloud lifts every neighborhood into the digital superhighway, thus connecting every household and business to the worldwide marketplace.

We learned a significant lesson during the pandemic that affirmed the importance of our downtown. Businesses were having to adjust their structure for survival and our residents sought to alter their daily habits to protect their families and their lifestyles. Eight years into our administration, we had naturally implemented policies to promote growth in our retail and



business core. But when the pandemic hit, we recognized that we had to aggressively do whatever was necessary to protect our precious delicate jewel. We crafted tax policy to ease the burden on retail businesses. We provided ongoing support to our businesses to reduce the expense of acquiring equipment to prevent the spread of COVID. We assisted our restaurants by creating outdoor dining spaces. We were doing what every city in the nation was doing simply to try to create some sense of normalcy.

We had a leg up on most other cities around the nation. The difficult decisions that we faced head-on the previous eight years prior to 2020 actually enabled us to reach our stride during the pandemic. It is no wonder now that we are experiencing such a significant level of growth and burgeoning opportunity.

Our downtown is positioned to escalate the renaissance that our city is experiencing. Strategic policies, investments and partnerships have positioned us for growth that will resemble Huntington's first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Examples of the investments, policies and partnerships have occurred in such quantities and at such a steady beat, it is easy to forget all that has been done:

- Prior to the pandemic, we created a year-round beautification program that brightens our streets with flowers and banner programs that honor our veterans and Black heroes.
- Investment in holiday decorations made the downtown a tourist destination at Christmas time because of all the twinkling lights.
- Groups like the Auxiliary of Cabell Huntington Hospital and grants from philanthropic organizations began placing public art throughout the downtown and in our neighborhoods.
- Financial contributions by the city totaling \$1.5 million to the Keith-Albee is being used to leverage state and private investments of more than \$20 million to ensure this crown jewel of Huntington can continue to provide arts and cultural opportunities.
- Elimination of the B&O tax for all restaurants and retail-based businesses has invited additional investment in our downtown and has sparked an increase of total business tax collections for the city.
- The Huntington Municipal Development Authority became the principal owner of Pullman Square to make certain that the anchor of our eclectic downtown that started a wave of resurgence 20 years ago remains strong and stable for decades to come.
- Streamlining outdoor dining regulations and supporting outdoor musical series during the summer has prompted summer and multi-seasonal activity downtown.
- Designing a new streetscape will serve as a connection between 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue all the way to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue making 8<sup>th</sup> Street thru 10<sup>th</sup> Street parallel connectors for additional investment and development.
- The \$50 million investment recently announced for the historic Prichard Hotel building invites investment on the outer edges of downtown. The Prichard investment will prove





to be a linchpin toward investment for redevelopment of other significant aging properties in the downtown corridor.

- The strategic importance of Marshall University's Brad D. Smith Center for Business and Innovation cannot be overstated. The 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue Innovation District establishes the partnership that has been 40 years in the making. Utilizing the research capacity of Marshall University to encourage investment in 21<sup>st</sup> Century innovation creates a synergy that will not only lift the downtown but will be a catalyst for transformation of the region, state and nation.

All of these efforts, great and small, have created the most dynamic and eclectic downtown in a 100-mile radius. While our downtown is being transformed and the neighborhoods are being provided a fresh breath of new opportunity. The reality is while Huntington still has significant challenges to overcome any reasonable observation will acknowledge that Huntington's Renaissance is actively projecting Huntington as the most dynamic small city in the Ohio River Valley. Huntington is quietly changing the landscape and opportunity as the western gateway to Appalachia.

I often say sometimes it is better to be lucky than good. The reality is we are really good! If we are lucky, we are lucky to have such brilliant, innovative and motivated people living in and around our city. It is not luck that has propelled Huntington into the national discussion of how to create innovative solutions to the hardest challenges facing our cities, towns and villages. Timing is everything, and Huntington's time for unimaginable opportunity has arrived.

Huntington was once known 100 years ago as the "We Will City." Huntington is now changing in large measure because of the changes at Marshall University and Marshall Health Network. Huntington has become the "We Are City." "We Are," not just because of our pride in "We Are....Marshall," "We Are" because we have become a city of innovators, a city of builders and a city that sets standards the nation is now following.

The budget that we have constructed is very similar to what we have been doing the past four to six years. There are no surprises here. Our Police, Fire, and Public Works departments are all funded again at record-high amounts. There are no surprises here.

We find a way to build our downtown into a masterpiece on a small canvass. We budget to ensure that our roads are paved, our streets are cleaned and our neighborhoods are safe. In turn, as we focus on the fundamentals of city management, we are also seeking to advance our culture throughout our neighborhoods. Arts are a continued priority to make our neighborhoods livable. Acknowledgement of our Appalachian heritage and our historical legacy has been provided to us by giants who have changed the world. We will seek to invest in our artistic and cultural pursuits. There are those who will say every last penny should go into



infrastructure and public safety. Certainly, those are priorities that we will never ignore. But we do know how to multi-task. Investments in our artistic and cultural interests enhance our quality of life and make our homes and neighborhoods worthy of celebration.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we have a solemn opportunity to lift up the Black history of our residents and their impact on our city and world. We must own Black History Month. Carter G. Woodson is our most prominent former resident and citizen. Celebrating Black History Month celebrates his influence and reminds each of us that we have the capacity to change the world from this community along the banks of the Ohio River.

This budget is a continuation of the priorities that we have pursued during the past 12 years. We set aggressive goals and expectations. Likewise, we prepare a budget with conservative revenue projections and limited appropriations. The principal underlying expectation from day one has been that we would seek to set standards that the rest of the nation would emulate. We had to lift our expectations to create the future that the global marketplace demands. We are experiencing the fruits of those expectations. In short, this budget ensures that we finish what we started.

There are no new initiatives. We have a full plate and our energies must be directed to see that we complete our tasks. Many of our projects are on the verge of completion and others need continued prodding to ensure they stay on pace.

In 2014, I closed my budget message calling on the words of the 1960s Civil Rights song, “A Change Is Gonna Come,” written by Sam Cooke. It has been a long time coming. Change has arrived and more change is coming. “We Are” a city of builders and innovators. “We Are” change agents. “We Are” creating a city that will change the face of our nation and the world because we choose to be “We Are.”