

2007 State of the City Address  
Roanoke Mayor Nelson Harris  
Roanoke Special Events Center  
August 16, 2007

Excerpts:

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*By placing most of the 12,000 plus acres in Carvin's Cove in a conservation easement, we not only protect our water supply at the reservoir but also keep the Cove in its natural state. This would be a significant beginning to our efforts to protect and develop this natural reserve, which is the second largest municipal park in the entire United States.*

*I believe these efforts also enhance our economic development efforts and contribute to the expanded mission of the Regional Partnership in recognizing the value of the outdoors and recreation as attractors for young professionals.*

Full text:

Good morning members of City Council, distinguished guests, and fellow citizens. It's always an honor as your Mayor to come before our community to share the state of our remarkable city. At this time, I want to acknowledge my City Council colleagues present today. Please join me now in thanking them for their tireless service.

I am pleased to be able to give this address in the city's new Special Event Center, which officially opened on March 31 as part of our 125th Anniversary kickoff celebration. We are very proud of this state-of-the-art facility and I encourage our local businesses to consider using it for future events and conferences. While today's speech will address many ideas for our future, on each table we have placed special brochures that list highlights of city government accomplishments for Fiscal Year 2006-07. I invite you to take these with you and read about the many ways your city is working to help make our community a better place to live.

The Year 2007 has been a very special year because we are celebrating our 125th Anniversary as a city. This celebration is significant for many reasons, but most of all because it gives us an opportunity to tell Roanoke's story. It is an adventure that tells of the People, Pride, and Promise that make our city great. Although I have authored several books about Roanoke's past, this story is not confined to any one author or time period. Instead it includes many chapters-written by many people.

Our greatest chapters in Roanoke are not yet written. Today I want to share with you a preview of how some of those chapters might read. While there is much I could

highlight, there are three areas of focus for my remarks this morning, namely recreation and environment; culture and arts; and finally and most critical, our schools.

We begin this part of the story by talking about what is on the horizon for the PEOPLE in our community. This year, City Council adopted a Master Plan Update for Parks and Recreation to provide improved open space opportunities. The plan's development included conducting a citizen survey, focus groups, community forums, research, and public meetings, in an effort to gather ideas for future programs and facilities. As a result of this effort, the city has committed \$30 million over the next five years to improve upon and expand our parks and recreation amenities. This represents the single largest capital commitment to parks and recreation programs in the history of our city.

I am proud to be a part of a Council that will leave as a lasting legacy to our citizens this effort to improve the quality of life of Roanoke, which will touch and impact the lives of all citizens regardless of age, income level, or neighborhood. A city that values open and green space gives its citizens fresher air, the opportunity to compete in sports, to stay fit, and to enjoy the natural beauty that makes Roanoke a "star city."

As a part of this significant effort, I am asking today that City Council consider the following proposals as we move forward: First, that Council prepare to adopt a conservation easement at Carvins Cove consistent with the management plan currently under development. I and other city officials met with Governor Tim Kaine during his Tuesday visit to Roanoke, to advance conservation easements at Carvins Cove. Over the past year, local, state and federal representatives have been assisting the city's Department of Parks and Recreation in the development of a land use management plan for Carvins Cove. Completion of this plan and the Natural Heritage Inventory is expected within the next 60 days. By placing most of the 12,000 plus acres in Carvin's Cove in a conservation easement, we not only protect our water supply at the reservoir but also keep the Cove in its natural state. This would be a significant beginning to our efforts to protect and develop this natural reserve, which is the second largest municipal park in the entire United States.

Second, I would recommend that the Council consider prioritizing the refurbishment and upgrading of Washington Park as the city's parks capital plan is implemented. There has been much discussion about the lack of equity of park facilities in our city, and making Washington Park one of our signature parks would begin to address this legitimate concern.

Finally, I'm pleased to announce a citywide "clean and green" initiative. Under the leadership of Councilwoman Gwen Mason, city staff will be working with businesses, neighborhood groups, schools and other organizations to rev up our efforts to beautify Roanoke. This will include the clean side-trash pickup, flower planting, and efforts to maximize Roanoke's attractiveness; and the green side-increasing recycling and encouraging environmentally friendly living. We'd like the manmade parts of Roanoke to be worthy of that which the Creator gave us.

These three recommendations, if adopted and implemented, will complement our already successful efforts in parks and recreation, which include bringing an amphitheater to our city, completing our city's greenway system, redeveloping the Reserve Avenue site, and the Roanoke River Flood Reduction Project of which one third is now completed.

As Mayor, I am proud to have Council colleagues and city administrators who are working to deliver on the promise of a healthy outdoor environment for generations of Roanokers to come. Last year, Roanoke joined Local Governments for Sustainability (also known as ICLEI) and is participating in its "Cities for Climate Protection Campaign" as a step forward in achieving this goal.

This year we began an alliance with the Town of Blacksburg to lead local governments in Southwest Virginia in addressing environmental issues. Realizing behaviors have an impact not only on our own citizens but on neighboring communities, Roanoke and Blacksburg are working with Virginia Tech's Green Engineering Program and the Shenandoah Valley Air Quality Initiative (SHENAIR), part of the Center for Energy and Environmental Sustainability at James Madison University, to learn emissions assessment methods.

Our city also has implemented a number of environmental initiatives, including: Plans for the design and construction of the city's first Green Building for the Williamson Road Fire Station; The Purchase of Bio-diesel Fuel for City Vehicles; A Citywide Residential and Commercial Recycling Program; An Urban Forestry Plan, and Changes for City Vehicles. We are making great strides, both now and for the future, to improve our parks, expand recreation, and improve our environment as a city government.

I believe these efforts also enhance our economic development efforts and contribute to the expanded mission of the Regional Partnership in recognizing the value of the outdoors and recreation as attractors for young professionals. To reiterate, I will be submitting for Council's consideration the following proposals: Adopt a conservation easement on Carvins Cove when the master plan is adopted, preserving the natural beauty of America's second-largest municipal park; Make as a top priority the upgrading of Washington Park to both serve our citizens and address the issue of inequity; and Engage our citizens and businesses in a "Clean and Green" program to beautify our city and embrace our unique natural setting, while improving environmental efforts.

The next part of the story has to do with the PRIDE Roanokers have in their community and its rich cultural offerings. It is quite wonderful for a city our size to have such a vibrant arts community and to provide so many opportunities to experience the arts. A variety of offerings are available to residents including ballet, orchestra, opera, and theater. Construction of the new Art Museum promises increased emphasis on visual art and architecture.

During this anniversary year, I asked our city to develop an event that would be ongoing on an annual basis as a celebration of Roanoke's spirit and uniqueness. This has culminated in the first annual Roanoke Arts Festival, which will be this October and will

include performers such as Judy Collins, The Ramsey Lewis Trio, and The Audubon Quartet, as well as extraordinary performances by our local and regional arts organizations. The City of Roanoke also supports the arts through its Arts Commission, which oversees the city's Public Art Program. In addition, Roanoke has hired a Public Art Coordinator to work with the Arts Commission to ensure the preservation and proper placement of the city's public art, as well as assist with purchases of new art objects.

In a press conference last week, I announced plans for four new pieces of public art, one of which will be commissioned in honor of the city's 125th Anniversary, and placed here at the Roanoke Civic Center. We have previously commissioned a sculpture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be placed on the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Bridge (formerly First Street Bridge), which will be completed in September. I realize that with state budget cutbacks over the past several years and the lack of any regional funding formula, many of our arts and cultural organizations and museums have financially struggled. Yet, they are each critical to the quality of life of the valley, provide vital educational opportunities for our young people, and create a dynamic urban component here in the capital of Western Virginia.

I have always believed that a city without art lacks soul. With this as context, I am proposing that the City Council solidify its commitment to our arts community by annually earmarking revenue generated by one cent of the current Real Estate Tax Rate for arts and culture. By adopting this "formula" we provide an annual revenue stream that will increase and model for other localities what could serve as a regional funding mechanism.

Our story's momentum builds with the PROMISE of the city's future. That promise is dependent on effective educational opportunities for our young people—foremost, a strong, healthy public school system. This must be our number one priority. The essence of our community is its school system. It is our connection to the future. Thus, our public schools must move to the next level. Unless we accomplish this goal, everything else loses its value.

As Mayor, I am proud that the City Council has strongly supported our schools. For Fiscal Year 2007-08, the city's CIP budget provided \$39 million to support school capital projects. These included ongoing construction of the new Patrick Henry High School, the development of the new William Fleming High School and additions to four elementary schools. Shared services are another collaborative way in which the city is working with Roanoke Public Schools. For example, by purchasing its fuels from the city's Fleet Management Division, Roanoke Public Schools is saving 20 cents per gallon. For Fiscal Year 2008, a savings of approximately \$64,000 in fuel costs are realized. The city and school administration have also agreed to look at consolidating their health insurance programs as another way to share services and save money.

This year, the city partnered with Roanoke Public Schools and Virginia Tech to launch a new initiative, "The Promise of Roanoke." The initiative is based on the belief that a bright future for our community starts with quality education for our children. This

citizen-led initiative will take a broad look across the city to identify what should be done to prepare the children in our community to succeed as students in the public education system, and in life. Their report will be shared with the community in the fall.

The Promise of Roanoke can work, but it will require the commitment of our community, our businesses, and our city—a solid partnership. The program's success demands community involvement, volunteers to take charge and lead the way to make the program a success. While these are tremendous efforts of which I am most appreciative and proud to be a part, we must do more.

Again, the enhanced performance of Roanoke Public Schools must be our number one priority. To that end, I am proposing for Council and the School Board's consideration the following: That City Council increase its local funding for the schools; specifically that beginning in Fiscal Year 2008-09, the local revenue provided be increased by \$500,000 per year over the next five years, for a total of \$2.5 million of new monies. For those familiar with the decades-old funding formula, this would make the formula rise to the level of almost 38 percent. That the School Board develop a program, with financial incentives, that would pair seasoned teachers with low-performing schools. We must put our best teachers in our most challenged classrooms.

It is time, perhaps past time, to conduct a comprehensive, citywide review of our decades-old attendance zones. My purpose for calling for this thorough review is two-fold. First, I believe we must rebuild and strengthen neighborhoods by returning to neighborhood schools. Schools anchor our neighborhoods. By having neighborhood schools girded by appropriate attendance zones, we can strengthen neighborhood pride and sense of community. Second, revising attendance zones also gives us an opportunity to reduce transportation costs, allowing funds to be more appropriately allocated toward instruction. I realize this initiative will require significant work, political will, and broad community conversation, but I stand ready to support such a needed and overdue effort.

The "People. Pride. and Promise." Theme of our city's anniversary weaves an intriguing storyline—one that will hopefully be remembered for years to come. What remains is to put actions to these words, and create a legacy for Roanoke as an extraordinary place. It's important to emphasize that Roanoke's story is an ongoing work. I urge you to help write these new chapters. Thank you for your continued support. Remember, Roanoke's story is not about one person. It's about a community that works together to create an outstanding quality of life for today, and to continually build for the future. With everyone's help, I am confident the story of Roanoke will always be a bestseller.