

Suffolk State of the City Presentation
April 28, 2005, Hilton Garden Inn and Suffolk Conference Center

Speech Given by

The Honorable Bobby L. Ralph
Mayor - City of Suffolk Virginia

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Suffolk City Council and the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce, I welcome all of you to the annual State of the City presentation.

Last year, we promised you that we would have it in the new Hilton Garden Inn and Suffolk Conference Center, and here we are. Isn't this a beautiful place? How many of you are seeing the conference center for the first time? May I see a show of hands?

You will notice right away that this is unlike any Hilton Garden Inn you have seen before.

If you plan on checking into the hotel any time soon, you'd better get your reservations in early because Keith Alexander the General Manager tells me it's really booking up.

A few weeks ago, the Virginia Economic Developers Association held its conference here and sold out the hotel. It was a big success.

You know this facility is a dream come true in many ways. A few minutes ago, you saw it come together, right before your eyes. This is a great example of what can happen when you make a plan and stay focused on it.

In 1998, City Council made a commitment to help bring a major hotel here as part of a downtown Revitalization Initiative. We stuck with it. Kept our focus and it happened, thanks to a lot of hard work by a lot of people like City Manager Steve Herbert, Myles Standish, Christine Ledford and Dick Stormont.

Now Suffolk is beginning to reap the benefits.

Walk outside and look around at the beautiful marina, the promenade and the park. All of that belongs to the people of Suffolk. This Saturday, we’ll have the grand opening of Constant’s Wharf Park and Marina. The festivities will include family fun activities, musical groups as well as a fireworks display as part of our celebration, and you all are invited.

People are calling this hotel and conference center, “The Jewel of the Nansemond.” And for good reason. It shines as an outstanding example of cooperation between business, government and private citizens who have a vision for something great.

I hope you don’t mind if I extend that jewel metaphor to our city, and call Suffolk, THE JEWEL OF HAMPTON ROADS.

This jewel has many facets, and that’s what I want to talk about today.

Just as the individual facets of a diamond all contribute to its beauty and value, we are showing off the many aspects of our city that make it the sparkling jewel of Hampton Roads.

There are five major facets – our five strategic priorities. Each year we polish them a little more, and each year they sparkle a little brighter. They are...

Economic Development and Tourism,
Downtown, Neighborhood and Village Revitalization,
Smart Growth,
Quality of Life,
and Education.

Right off the bat, I want to report on something that will have a huge economic impact on Suffolk for years to come. It’s called VIMSIM -- short for the Virginia Modeling and Simulation Initiative.

Governor Warner announced this initiative on April 12 at the opening of Lockheed Martin’s Center for Innovation in northern Suffolk.

Here’s how Governor Warner described the impact of VIMSIM:

“VIMSIM has the potential to dramatically transform and strengthen the economy of this region and the Commonwealth as a whole by attracting more high-tech, high wage jobs.” This is great news for Suffolk because we have all of these companies located right here in our Technology Corridor...

- the new Lockheed Martin Center for Innovation,
- the U.S. Joint Forces Command, and
- ODU’s Virginia Modeling Analysis and Simulation Center, along with companies like
- Science Applications International and General Dynamics Advanced Information Systems.

All of these high-tech organizations are part of the modeling and simulation industry.

Here’s what VIMSIM means for us in dollars and cents:

The modeling and simulation industry currently employs over 4,000 people and contributes over 412 million dollars a year to the region’s economy. VIMSIM will pour even more high-dollar jobs and research into our area.

Modeling and simulation is something we’ve been hearing a lot about lately.

It helps the military to test combat strategies on a virtual battlefield. It enables doctors to practice surgical procedures on virtual patients.

Also this technology has valuable applications in homeland security.

Along with Governor Warner, Congressman Randy Forbes rallied support on Capitol Hill for this industry, which is on the verge of breaking out of the defense industry and into our everyday lives.

Modeling and simulation has applications in finance, entertainment, medicine and areas we haven’t even dreamed of yet.

Suffolk is proud to be home for cutting edge industries so vital to our nation’s defense and in bettering the lives of generations to come.

Governor Warner gave us these very encouraging words when he announced VIMSIM.

“We can make this the beginning of the biggest economic development force, not only for Hampton Roads, but for all of Virginia.”

When the newspapers get excited about something, they take it and run. Well they got excited about what’s going on in Suffolk, and gave us some very complimentary coverage. You’re looking at some of the headlines that appeared over the past several months.

From northern Suffolk to the south, nearly everywhere you look there are noticeable changes. Great changes. And each change contributes to the sparkle of the Jewel of Hampton Roads that we call Suffolk.

Economic Development is an important facet in our jewel. Last year we saw nine major local expansions and we welcomed 22 new businesses across the city. Combined, these companies have announced more than 78 million dollars in new capital investment and have created over 680 new jobs.

Among the new businesses are Ferguson Enterprises, the nation’s largest wholesale distributor of plumbing supplies. They’re building a new regional sales office and distribution facility in Northgate Commerce Park.

Ciba Specialty Chemicals recently opened their new North American headquarters for their water and paper treatment division.

Bank of America, Farmers Bank, SuffolkFirst Bank and Newport News Credit Union added new offices last year.

Over the last seven years, new investment has totaled 650 million dollars. That’s well over half a billion dollars. And during those seven years, we’ve seen more than five thousand new jobs created.

We welcome all of our corporate newcomers and we look forward to many great years together. At the same time, we want to express our thanks and appreciation to our long-time friends who have thought enough of Suffolk to stay with us for many years. There’s Unilever Lipton Tea, celebrating their 50th anniversary in Suffolk. Wow! Thank you, Lipton for making us your cup of tea for half a century.

Of course, you can’t talk about Suffolk without talking about Mr. Peanut. We have Mr. Obici to thank for him and for Planters Peanuts. They have given so much to this city over the past 100 years, and they continue to remind us of our deep roots in agriculture and food processing. Can anybody tell me why Mr. Peanut wears a MONOCLE instead of GLASSES? Give up? He can’t wear glasses because peanuts don’t have ears!

Our friends at Sara Lee coffee and tea have also invested in Suffolk’s future through the years, and we are confident that we will continue our strong relationship with them for many years to come.

Now, before I go any further, I’m going to announce not one, but FOUR businesses who are making major commitments in Suffolk. I’ve been sworn to secrecy until this moment, so here goes...

First, we'd like to officially announce the planned expansion of the Target Import Distribution Center facility right off Route 58 by an additional 300,000 square feet. Many of you will remember that we held our 2003 State of the City program in Target’s 1.5 million square foot distribution center. Well, they’re making it even bigger.

Our next announcement is a direct result of the increased demand for facilities to support our military and defense contractors in northern Suffolk. Lakeview Development Group is planning to convert the former F-A-G Bearings Warehouse to office space and plans to lease it to the U.S. Joint Forces Command. This represents 9 million dollars in new capital investment.

We are also proud to announce that the prestigious law firm of Pender & Coward, PC is moving to historic downtown Suffolk. The Pender & Coward Building will be located at the corner of West Washington and Saratoga Streets with over 400,000 dollars in new capital investment.

And finally, Devon USA, who is a leading developer of warehouse distribution and light manufacturing facilities, plans to construct two new warehouse buildings totaling more than 760,000 square feet near the intersection of Benton Road and Carolina Road, with an estimated 20 million dollars in new capital investment.

That totals over \$44 million dollars in new investments in our city – announced today.

Many of the folks representing those four companies are with us. So would you all please stand? Now, would everyone here please join me in a round of applause to thank them for investing in Suffolk.

Now, would each of you see me after today’s program? I want to give you something that I would want to have myself. A golf shirt embroidered with the words, “Suffolk, Virginia.”

If you have ever felt that you are part of something BIG, this is it.

When so many new businesses flock to our city in one year, you have hit a tee shot to the green.

And when the Governor tells you that your city will lead the way in homeland security, you know that you’ve hit a double eagle.

The exciting growth we are experiencing impacts everyone in Hampton Roads, because, as Suffolk raises the bar, our neighbors aspire to greatness as well.

And speaking of regional impact, our tourism efforts are shining a bright light on Suffolk for all to see.

Tourism promotion works hand in hand with our other priorities to draw attention to our city. One way we measure the effectiveness of our efforts is by revenues from lodging, meals, admissions and sales tax. Since Fiscal 2000-2001, annual lodging tax revenues have increased 29 percent and meal tax receipts are up by 50 percent.

Last year, the folks in our Tourism Division personally greeted 8,800 guests at the Prentis House Visitor Center.

Also, Lynette’s team is providing regional leadership for a group of destination marketers in six cities and four counties across Southeastern Virginia.

Suffolk is now hosting walking tours and narrated bus tours of the Great Dismal Swamp and history tours of our city as well.

To celebrate our long history as an agricultural community, Suffolk has a real, honest to goodness Farmers Market operating downtown near the Seaboard Railway Station on Main Street. It’s open on Wednesdays and Saturdays from May through September and it’s attracting lots of folks from outside our area.

You’ve probably heard of that TV show, “Extreme Home Makeovers.” Well, you could say that Suffolk is doing its own version.

Here are just a few examples of “Extreme Makeovers” happening in our city:

Many of you have fond memories of the Nansemond Drug Store. Today it’s Pisces Restaurant serving great seafood downtown.

The Professional Building was Suffolk’s first high rise office building. Here it is with a brand new facelift, looking better than ever.

Here’s the historic Prentis House, said to be the oldest building in Suffolk. It was pretty dilapidated and almost got torn down. Then it was rescued and now it’s the home for Suffolk’s Visitor Center.

And remember Byrum’s Hardware Store? It has been turned into the Washington Street Center housing our Economic Development Office and the new home of the Suffolk Division of the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce.

And dozens more restorations and improvements are transforming the look of Suffolk. Many of our historic buildings are coming back to life because people have a vision, the timing is right, and the City and state provide attractive incentives for redevelopment.

Just look at what’s happening in Downtown Suffolk. If you’ve been away for any length of time, you wouldn’t recognize it now. A remarkable rebirth is taking place along Main Street.

In 2004, fourteen new businesses opened in the downtown core. And within the next six months, we expect to see at least ten more.

All of these new restaurants attract lots of people downtown. There’s even a fitness center to help you work off those extra pounds.

We’re very proud of the progress on the Center for Cultural Arts, which is giving a new life to Suffolk High School, and has been a city landmark since 1922. We broke ground last October, and work is well underway to create an arts center that will become the focal point for cultural activities for generations to come. A special thank-you goes to Mr. Peter Pruden and Betsy Brothers for their leadership in making the center a reality. And we welcome the newly appointed Executive Director, Michael Bollinger. So many people in our community have generously supported this project, and we look forward to the grand opening next spring.

Elsewhere in the town, we are moving forward with streetscape improvements along the East Washington Street Corridor. This is phase one of developing the historically significant Fairgrounds community, a planned subdivision of 152 homes, apartments and condominiums adjacent to the downtown core.

Significant revitalization is taking place in our villages. We adopted area plans for Huntersville and Driver Village. This is part of our 2018 Comprehensive Plan to preserve open spaces as well as the historic rural villages throughout Suffolk. The plan calls for revitalizing existing developed areas to help reduce suburban sprawl and its associated traffic and infrastructure problems.

We put a great deal of thought and planning into how our city grows. We have adopted a Comprehensive Plan for smart growth over the years, and it is working very well. As a result, we have avoided many of the growing pains experienced by some of our neighbors.

For example, we have found that clustered developments of housing, stores and offices is smart planning because we use less land and ease the cost of providing police and fire protection, schools, roads and other services. Successful cluster plans are in effect in Driver Village and the newly planned Bennett’s Creek Square on Shoulders Hill Road.

Just north of downtown near Obici Hospital is Hill Point, a 1,500 home, mixed use development with multi-family, single family, office sites and school sites. It’s one example of an entire community built on the principle of smart growth.

Smart growth initiatives preserve our precious agricultural land so it can continue to benefit our community.

Smart growth also happens through incentives for affordable housing. Every time we rehabilitate a downtown building or a home in one of our villages we are enhancing the character and charm of our city while providing new spaces for people to live and do business.

And I’m sure you heard this news. Just last week, the City Council voted to take over the maintenance of our roads from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Up until last Wednesday, we were the only city in Virginia that didn’t maintain its own roads. This action will pave the way, so to speak, to improved transportation infrastructure in every part of our city and better serve our businesses and all of our residents. Being able to plan and improve our own roads is essential to smart growth.

Now, let’s take a look at something we call quality of life. There’s a doctor I know who rides his bike to work. Another doctor runs marathons. A Suffolk minister takes rides in the country on his motorcycle. So does our Director of Tourism.

Quality of life means that people of all ages have the choice of services they need to enjoy the way they live, work and play. That includes health and public safety services as well.

Quality of life also means that you can have business meetings on five different golf courses in five days if you want to. (I’d like to try that some time!)

Incidentally, if you haven’t played our beautifully restored Sleepy Hole Course, you’re missing a real treat. Just recently *Golf Digest* ranked it Number Eight in the nation on its list of best new affordable public courses.

When you can safely walk downtown and through your neighborhood ... when your kids can walk to school or ride for miles on scenic bike trails... that’s quality of life.

Our museums, cultural activities, parks and scenic waterways are amenities that add value to life in Suffolk.

Council funded construction of an additional North Suffolk Library because it offers children and adults quality of life.

We announced the new Suffolk Sports Complex Master Plan – an outstanding regional park that everyone in Suffolk will be proud of.

Boat ramps at Lone Star and Bennett’s Creek parks, and joint recreation facilities with Suffolk Public Schools are all facets of Suffolk’s quality of life.

In a nutshell, quality of life is what keeps our people here and attracts new people to our city every day.

Quality of life also means quality of education – and that’s a big priority for Suffolk, especially in this time of record growth. We recognize that we must continually strive to raise the bar in public education.

To equip tomorrow’s technically savvy workforce demands our firm commitment today.

We have more cooperation than ever before. The private sector has stepped up to the plate in support of our schools. I am mighty proud of the response of our corporate leaders to my invitation to join the Mayor’s CEO Advisory Group. It connects the needs of employers to the schools training their future employees. It provides valuable input into planning today’s curriculum for tomorrow’s workforce.

In July the new Paul D. Camp Community College Regional Workforce Development Center will open in the heart of downtown Suffolk. This new training center will offer educational services for both employers and individuals looking to enhance job skills.

It’s a partnership with the college, the city, the Virginia Employment Commission, Suffolk Public Schools and Opportunity, Inc.

Over the past three years, Suffolk has invested \$_____ building and improving our schools and in hiring and compensating quality teachers.

Last fall, we opened the new state of the art King’s Fork High School. And the world class Creekside Elementary School is scheduled to open in September of 2006.

We’ve renovated and improved John F. Kennedy, John Yeates and Forest Glen Middle Schools.

We are working hard to make every child a star. Last year, well over half of the graduating class planned to continue their education at a college or technical school. Congratulations to you all.

We are proud of what our students have accomplished.

When you consider how far we have come in just one year, and the new directions we’re heading, I think you’ll agree that we are part of something very exciting.

We will continue to polish this diamond, and as we focus on our priorities and work our plan, we will see this great city sparkle and shine even brighter.

In fact, it’s already happening.

We see old houses become new homes. We see a downtown reborn. An aging riverfront transformed into a beautiful gathering place.

We see government and private industry focusing national attention on Suffolk as the newest hub for high technology.

We see our city achieving a good balance through planning, discipline and dedication. Balance in our growth, in our finances and in our land use.

Our city still has the lowest tax burden for businesses and residences in Hampton Roads. And that will continue to be part of our philosophy.

With economic development and the corresponding growth and diversity in our tax base, we will have the resources we need...

- To invest in education
- To improve our neighborhoods
- To increase the level of all our services like fire and police protection.

Suffolk’s accomplishments within our city limits add value to the entire region. Like facets of a diamond, all of our successes contribute to the brilliance and excellence of Hampton Roads.

So, my friends, I am encouraged by what I see today, and I hope that you are too. We will continue to fine-tune our strategies to move our city toward greatness. We are privileged to serve our citizens and to be part of the dynamic Hampton Roads community.

We can say without any hesitation that Suffolk is the jewel of Hampton Roads...

And we can say with enthusiasm...It’s a good time to be in Suffolk!

Thank you all for being with us today.

