



We Are Columbia

# PRESS RELEASE

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## NEWS RELEASE

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### **Mayor Benjamin delivers 2016 State of the City Address**

COLUMBIA, SC – Mayor Steve Benjamin delivered the 2016 State of the City address this evening at City Hall.

Below are the prepared remarks Mayor Benjamin delivered.

#### 2016 State of the City

Remarks as Prepared for delivery by Mayor Steve Benjamin

January 26, 2016 – Columbia, SC

Members of City Council and fellow elected officials. Mayor Coble, neighborhood leaders, Madame City Manager and talented staff, General Cloutier, Colonel Ellerson and the leaders of Fort Jackson training the greatest fighting force the world has ever seen for almost 100 years. We are thankful to rightfully hold the title of the most military friendly city in America.

Together we have weathered BRAC and the SPEA process and we hope that together we can continue to display why we believe we should spend the next 100 years together as well.  
(Hooah)

My God-given parents Samuel and Maggie Benjamin, my doting aunts, my incredible in-laws and my wonderful wife and babies.

I often tell DeAndrea that I wouldn't be half the man that I am without her and she agrees with me!

Thank you to my beautiful daughters for leaving dance practice early to come to daddy's speech.(again)

To our citizens. I've often been criticized at the haste or the speed at which I try to move to help Columbia reach her full potential.

Asked why he wasn't satisfied with the slow, incremental progress in Civil Rights proposed by some, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would often quote his mentor – the great pastor, activist, South

Carolina native and President of Morehouse College, Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays – who would caution his students on the fleeting nature of our time here on earth.

"Life," he'd say, "is just a minute—only sixty seconds in it.

Forced upon you—can't refuse it.

Didn't seek it—didn't choose it.

But it's up to you to use it.

You must suffer if you lose it.

Give account if you abuse it.

Just a tiny, little minute,

But eternity is in it!"

So, I come to you this evening recognizing that today marks five years, six months and 25 days since I was blessed with this opportunity to serve the people of our great city as your mayor.

For my daughter who loves math-- that's 2,035 days...48,840 hours....2,930,400 minutes together - *some minutes longer than others (smile)*

Longevity has its place - but how should we measure that time?

Well, as the expression goes, "In God we trust. Everyone else bring data."

So, here are the numbers:

9.5%...that was Metro Unemployment on July 1, 2010 when we started this journey together.  
4.9%...that's Metro Unemployment today down nearly half and lower than the national and state averages.

46,436 that's how many jobs we've helped create since taking office by seeding an environment ripe for private investment and expansion while demonstrating leadership by raising the minimum wage for all city employees to \$10.10 per hour.

That's nearly 23 jobs created every day since taking office and more than a quarter of those positions, 11,307, are open, available and taking applications right now.

710 openings for Registered Nurses.  
294 opening for Truck Drivers.  
178 openings for Occupational Therapists.  
172 openings for Computer Programmers.

And if we filled all those jobs right now we'd cut unemployment to under 2%.

108 rooms and an \$18 million investment at Aloft Hotel joining the growing number of hotels downtown

188,000 square foot and \$80 million at the new law school.  
\$25 million investment with the Horizon II/USC Center for Applied Innovation.  
Total Quality Logistics expanding to create 100 new jobs.  
\$100 million mixed use investment at the historic Kline Steel Property.  
\$13 million at Rosewood Crossing.  
\$45 million at Palmetto Compress - yes the Palmetto Compress.  
And countless others

Over \$1.3 billion in new downtown investment since 2014 alone and, with 41 retailers committed to the Commons at BullStreet, every historic property that we fiercely debated as a city expected to be preserved and adaptively reused.

Thanks to the Knight Foundation and the Central Carolina Community Foundation we'll be working with the world renowned Gehl Architects on a new grant to help us start connecting Bull Street through our historic district with all of our hospitality districts into an exciting connected pedestrian friendly experience the best is yet to come.

Americas pastime will return to Columbia's Spirit Communications Park with the Columbia Fireflies getting ready for the first pitch on April 14th in a first class multipurpose venue that will host community events and help build our economy for generations.

What is AS important is HOW our stadium was built with \$16,276,725 in local business contracts and \$5,705,093 in minority business contracts.

With our partners at CCEB Venue Partners Contract Construction, Construction Dynamics, Enviro Ag Science and Barton Malow training dozens of workers through a new workforce development initiative---most of them either homeless or residents of public housing on the job for the first time in years building this multi-purpose venue.

Thanks to this council for settle high goals and our staff most notably Gregory Tucker and CCEB Venue Partners for proving that it's not just what you do, but how you do it.

Showing us all that not only is there dignity in work but that we all need to participate in and benefit from this great renaissance.

Is that how do you define 2,035 days in the life of a city?

Maybe it's through our commitment to Public Safety:  
\$12,275,984 in new funding.  
13% in pay raises to our first responders  
54 new officers hired this year, more than 40% of them minorities  
and 300 new Koban body cameras on their way to be deployed.

It's a commitment to 21<sup>st</sup> century policing AND justice for all recognized and applauded just five days Chief Holbrook in the White House by none other than the President of the United States.

Over four million pounds of recycling collected in just four months since introducing the new recycling roll carts.  
That's a nearly 50% increase over the prior eight month average and the numbers are still going up.  
We've cut sewer overflows by 68%.

We've cut over \$3.4 million in transfers from the water and sewer fund and invested over \$420 million in maintenance and improvements to our water and sewer infrastructure.

Let me say that again in case you missed it:

We cut over \$3.4 million in transfers from the water and sewer fund and invested over \$420 million in maintenance and improvements to our water and sewer infrastructure.

And maybe it's the things we never imagined:

3,500 students living in new downtown developments  
2 upgrades to our credit score from Moody's and Standard & Poor's .  
1 symbol of division and hate pulled down and put away for now and for all time.

2,035 days and we are on the right path

New development creating new jobs and new revenues allowing us to make new investments in infrastructure, public safety, parks and recreation and new initiatives that improve quality of life which, in turn attracts new residents and new talent building new industry that sparks new development - an ecosystem and engine of growth that could drive downtown to 40,000 residents---- millenials, families and empty nesters by 2030.

It's so ambitious that it's almost unimaginable.

Then...on day 1,921...the truly unimaginable happened.

Over 11 Trillion gallons of water fell from the sky

16 Inches of rain recorded on Forest Drive on the first day alone and 8 feet of water devastated the shops at Rosewood Crossing.

45 dams failed and 541 Roads closed.

6,415 911 calls and 2,697 agency dispatches the first day alone, hundreds of families evacuated here in Columbia with \$12 billion in damage and 96,829 requests for FEMA disaster aid across our state.

19 of our beloved South Carolinians died in this Thousand-Year Flood and we all went back to zero.

In a letter to his wife after a particularly bloody battle during the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote, that "great tragedy, unimaginable tragedy, can change a person, can change a people, can twist and turn you at your very core and you can't turn back.

The flood did that to us. It changed us in a way that nothing has because it was a disaster unlike anything to befall this city for 150 years since Sherman himself burned this city to the ground.

I was out there, every day, in the neighborhoods simply washed away by rushing waters.

I saw their faces, listened as they told me how their neighbors had to kick in their bedroom windows so they could climb to safety, how it all happened so fast. I watched as they pointed out

the line on the wall where the water crested. I helped them as they took precious family photos from a soaked album and laid them in the front yard to dry.

I talked to a nearly 70 year-old man who had lost every single worldly possession, strong, stout and tough as a pine knot and I held him as he broke down and cried like a newborn child.

A disaster like that can bring out the worst in a people. We've seen it before.

But here in Columbia, SC something amazing happened.

These people...this city that had every reason to seek out the darkness and hide there falling deeper and deeper into misery, instead found the strength to pull their feet back under themselves and not only stand but march forward.

I saw police officers and firefighters Chief Jenkins, Regular army & national guard and utilities workers work ungodly hours in unthinkable conditions putting themselves in harms way over and over and over again.

I saw rescue workers and hospital workers turn shift after shift until they had to be pulled off the line because they wouldn't rest unless someone made them.

I saw men and women, families who'd lost everything they owned, reach out and give of themselves freely to neighbors who somehow had it even worse they did.

I saw restaurants delivering trays of free food to shelters, shop owners donating their wares, students helping clear molding drywall and deacons delivering bottled water.

I saw community groups and Girl Scouts, Baptists, AMEs and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Bloomberg Philanthropy, the fashion industry and I saw volunteers from as far away as the great nation of Israel.

I saw a world-class city become a city of heroes and I want to take this moment to say thank you. So please stand - every first responder, every city employee and every volunteer - every man woman and child who gave something of themselves, no matter how small, so that we as a city might rise above those troubled waters.

Please stand so we can say thank you.

Your thousand simple acts of kindness turned away a Thousand-Year Flood and it is because of you that I can stand here tonight and without hesitation or qualification declare that the state of our city is strong!

You see, in that moment, we truly saw what it means to be One Columbia - a fabric of families and individuals from the across the wide spectrum of separate circumstance, beholden only to each other, woven free and indivisible into the greater whole of community.

That which has always been our vision - not only to become the most talented, educated and entrepreneurial city in America, but to do it together.

And do it together we must. I urge council to join me and our citizens as we turn disaster into opportunity and innovation.

The disaster of three months and 23 days ago brought devastation to our city. But it also brought opportunity: the opportunity to rebuild not only our homes and our public infrastructure but to re-imagine our city as a whole.

And we must seize that opportunity with urgency.

"Life is just a minute—only sixty seconds in it.  
Forced upon you—can't refuse it.  
Didn't seek it—didn't choose it.  
But it's up to you to use it.  
You must suffer if you lose it.  
Give account if you abuse it.  
Just a tiny, little minute,  
But eternity is in it!"

We must repair the damage to our roads, bridges, water and sewer infrastructure to not only restore them to what they were, but make them stronger, smarter and more resilient.

But imagine if we took that opportunity to make our roads more walkable and bicycle friendly, if we beautified our city gateways, installing underground conduit on our march toward becoming a gigabit city. If we made long overdue investments to too often overlooked corridors like Two Notch, Farrow Road and Beltline matching the commitment that we are delivering on North Main St.

It's time for these corridors to reflect the strength and vibrancy of the neighborhoods that surround them.

Its time for a seamless city.

We can do it.

We must continue in the strong spirit of regionalism bringing together all of our regional partners to reclaim the Gills Creek Watershed and restore a natural buffer that prevents future catastrophic flooding.

But imagine if we applied that same ingenuity and innovation to those neighborhoods affected by the storms and to all neighborhoods, compensating homeowners and demolishing abandoned and hopelessly dilapidated buildings and clearing overgrown lots and replacing them with inviting, neighborhood pocket parks where our children can play and families can grow strong.

Imagine transforming these structures into the cornerstones of community building the public realm.

Imagine rebuilding our great canal while also leveraging new riverfront investments, new developments that build our economy and promote tourism while preserving our watersheds.

I'm committed to moving forward with an expansion of our regional Convention Center to accommodate this growth in tourism so that more national and international conferences will bring their dollars to Columbia and doing in a way that is responsible and sustainable.

And, while we're at it, let's launch a a tourism initiative to connect Columbia to Charleston by launching a flotilla of small watercraft on a fact finding mission from our Riverbanks to the Holy City. This effort will be designed to encourage nature based tourism and will enhance the familiarity with our waterfront and raise funds for the Congaree Riverkeeper.

Imagine transforming disaster into innovation.

We can do it.

We must partner with the private sector and creative non profits to meet the housing needs of our citizens. The countless men, women and children left with no shelter and nowhere to turn when October's rushing waters destroyed their homes.

Imagine working with our development corporations, private developers and nonprofits to develop real, affordable workforce housing.

Bringing the same focus and the same incentives we used to spur our student housing boom so that families in Columbia don't have to work two, maybe three jobs just afford the rent.

We're tearing down Gonzales Gardens, now let's give these working families a healthy and happy place to live and raise families

Imagine if we leverage local creativity with federal dollars with support from local, state and national nonprofits to put quality roofs over our families' heads,

Imagine transforming disaster into innovation.

We can do it.

And imagine if we did the same for the hundreds of homeless veterans across our city with the quality, sustainable, low cost housing.

We need to make Housing First work and partnering with the VA and groups like the United Way, MACH and Fast Forward to provide the medical, mental health and job training resources they need to make sure once they get off the street they never go back.

Let us commit ourselves to making veteran homelessness in Columbia a thing of the past in 2016.

Last year we invested over \$1.3 million through our GAP, MAP and PEAR programs to help homeowners and landlords alike make significant repairs and substantial improvements to their homes while investing over \$1.2 million and leveraging over \$3.8 million in private dollars to help families in Columbia realize the dream of home ownership.

That's a total community investment of more than \$6.4 million! Imagine if we doubled down on that commitment helping families bridge the gap between what they need and what FEMA will pay for.

We can do it for our residents and we can do it for our small businesses.

In fact, we are doing it because tonight, I'm proud to announce that this week we're launching the Small Business Disaster Relief Fund providing critical assistance to small businesses struggling to recover from the October Flood not covered by FEMA or private insurance.

We can do it and we MUST!

Imagine a new commitment to building a Smart City with high-speed gigabit fiber and focused neighborhood Wi-Fi that not only gives our students access to a 21st Century education, closing the homework gap, but creates an environment for a new explosion in small business investment and high-tech, knowledge economy industry.

Imagine the real impact we can make on people's lives. Imagine what's possible. Imagine the future that's right there waiting for us.

I say we can't afford to wait. Life is just a minute and it's up to us to use it.

A child born today will not only never dial a rotary phone, but will likely never use a pay phone or a phone book, never have a home phone number and probably never even know what a dial tone sounds like.

What is today cutting-edge technology like facial recognition, genetic screening and self-driving cars for them will be commonplace, taken for granted if not already obsolete.

Tomorrow is a world of wonder waiting for us. But it isn't promised to anyone.

That's why I'm committed today.

I'm committed to ambitious new goals for GED training, job training and workforce development. Filling those 11,307 jobs and many more.

I'm committed to bold new programs that engage a new generation preparing them as best we can for that unknown future with summer jobs and expanded apprenticeship opportunities.

Not only have we made strategic investments like our expanded health & sports program and a new, state of the art pool in Greenview Park which will open this year, but working with the Columbia Urban League, we helped provide 500 summer jobs to our kids - a 100 percent increase - and I'm committed to doing even more strategic community based health initiatives with partners like Palmetto Health.

I'm committed to working with One Columbia and the leaders of our creative community to develop a detailed and comprehensive Arts and Culture Master Plan that recognizes the Arts' role both in education and economic development.

I'm committed to continuing to expand our work with My Brother's Keeper including a new citywide literacy initiative "Mayor Benjamin's Barbershop Books" that, thanks to a new partnership with the Richland Library, Cocky's Reading Express, Alvin Irby and Barbershop Books and a generous donation from CIGNA, will put 10,000 books in 100 barbershops across Columbia over the next two years.

We going to make sure our children, especially our boys, have access to age appropriate and culturally relevant reading material in a familiar and comfortable environment.

We're going to put reading and education back in to everyone's lives and we're starting right now.

I'm committed to bringing new technology to our public transportation, continuing to pursue light and commuter rail, public/private partnerships for new parking that pulls us all out of our cars and alternative energy driven by new advances in solar technology.

I'm committed to continuing on our exciting march to make Columbia a Solar City.

I'm committed to encouraging our neighbors to help with flooding mitigation and we can start with a new program by delivering 1,000 rain barrels to families across our city.

And I'm committed to implementing the recommendations we received earlier this month from an august panel of citizens and compassionate community leaders---we must become a NO- KILL City.

I'm committed to continuing the fiscal discipline that has brought five years of budget surplus.

And I'm committed to eliminating the water/sewer transfer responsibly without raising taxes, without limiting services and without cutting funds to public safety because the progress we've made in police, fire and 911 emergency with stall, stagnate and fall back without continued investment.

We need more cops on the street, not less and we need them to better trained than ever - that is my commitment to you.

I believe we can do it - you and I and all of us together because I see a city, a great city, bound by love, forged by tragedy and focused on a future of opportunity.

So let us move forward as one people, one Columbia, with clarity and urgency as united in fair weather as we are in a flood.

One of our citizens summed it up perfectly --devastated by the storm she said that

"I believe that God shapes us with the disasters and the trials and tribulations"

He has molded us and It's up to us my fellow Columbians

And we have only just a minute—only sixty seconds in it.

Forced upon us—can't refuse it.

Didn't seek it—didn't choose it.

But it's up to us to use it.

We must suffer if we lose it.

Give account if we abuse it.

Just a tiny, little minute,

But eternity is in it!"

Thank you. God bless you. And may God bless the great City of Columbia.