



Mayor Michael E. Bennett
State of the City Message
April 25, 2011

The City Charter requires me to provide a State of the City Address on an annual basis. While each Mayor has chosen his or her own manner in which to do this, I prefer to tie this address into the annual budget adoption process. After all, it is the budget that sets the priorities for the City over the next 12 to 18 months.

To say the least, FY 11 (the one that is coming to an end) has been one of great challenge. Most elected officials get into public life seeking what they can do for the citizens of their town, city, county or state. They don't enjoy, as we have had to do, having to determine what we were no longer able to do for our citizens and employees. But cuts in revenue over the past two fiscal years have forced us to do just that. In spite of the tough economic times, we have made some notable accomplishments over the past twelve months.

One of our most visible additions has been our new branding initiative. This year we launched the "Aberdeen, Home of Opportunity" logo and the results of Campaign One should begin showing up in the next several weeks. New banners, billboards and signs will grace the city, much of which has been paid for by our local business partners.

We have also made less visible internal changes. Last June we adopted a new Charter which provides for a clearer chain of command and provides for greater accountability. This achievement on top of the adoption of the Code of Conduct, and on top of the new pending changes in our Ethics chapter, should result in a better, more efficient and more open government for our citizens.

We continue to be the high tech employment center of northeast Maryland. And we welcome the type of projects that will help us become that. It has been a pleasure to work with COPT on the Northgate project as it has been to work with Merritt on their project. We look forward to working with other builders and developers as they too look to Aberdeen to be their home of opportunity.

That being said, we have had to discourage some projects. While all on this Council wanted to see a continuing care facility for senior citizens built near Ripken Stadium, we were not willing to accept mandatory tax forgiveness for that project. In order to protect our other tax paying senior citizens, we had to oppose a bill in Annapolis mandating this tax forgiveness. That bill was withdrawn and the developer has abandoned the continuing care facility project.

We continue to process annexations that will ultimately increase the commercial and residential development capacity of our city. But we will do this correctly. Any annexation must be a positive addition for the remainder of Aberdeen residents, and annexations must pull their weight. Believe me, each annexation will also have a firm but fair annexation agreement attached to it.

We have invested back in our City. Currently a \$20 plus million ENR addition is being built at our wastewater treatment plant. While this costs our utility payers money, it is a solid investment in helping clean up the Chesapeake Bay. Other infrastructure projects have been slowed by lack of money, especially our road system preservation projects. But as you will see, in our FY 12 budget, I propose to not wait for full Highway User Revenue State funding to be restored and to have the City directly tackle the \$4.2 million of system preservation work that must be done. Obviously, I don't intend to do all of that in one year, but we are going to make a great start this fiscal year with the slight increase in HUR funding accomplished through the Maryland Municipal League and funding through the general fund.

Our finances continue to be strong. Not as strong as I would like, and our reserves are not as abundant as I would like, but we are in good shape generally. The past two fiscal years have been difficult, and the budget process has been painful. But, in a spirit of cooperation and teamwork, this Council, the staff and I have brought this fiscal ship through some rough waters.

For FY 10 and 11 we had three basic budget goals. First, not to reduce City services, second, invest back in the City where possible and third, protect our valuable employees from lay-offs and furloughs. We were able to achieve all three. For FY 12 we plan to slightly change emphasis. First, we want to take care of the employees who went twice without any sort of salary increase and provide them a nominal cost of living increase. Second, as stated before, we want to take on the deteriorating state of our roadways and begin aggressively paving and repaving those streets in need. Not to do so will cost our citizens far more in the long run. I am also proposing a reduction in our property tax rate from 68.75 cents per \$100.00 of assessed value to 68 cents.

Those who know me, and know my background understand my deep commitment to public safety. I am pleased to announce that the Aberdeen Police Department is well into a major reorganization that has made them more efficient and opened up opportunities for advancement within the Department. All of this has happened at no additional cost to our citizens. I am very happy with the progress that the APD leadership has made and look forward to its very bright future.

We certainly cannot forget the men and women of our Department of Public Works without whom we would all be in trouble! They keep our roads plowed and patched, our water clean and our wastewater treated. Without them this City would have a difficult time. My hat is off to the men and women of the DPW and I know I speak for all of the Council and our citizens when I say, "thank you".

My hat goes off to the Aberdeen Planning Commission. They have undertaken the difficult task of updating the City's Comprehensive Plan. The document is now ready for Council review and Council adoption. You know I can't stop with the Planning Commission. Aberdeen is very fortunate to have a very committed group of citizen volunteers in Aberdeen Fire Department members, Auxiliary Police who help the Police Department and members of a number of committees that help to make this City a community and a place to be a part of. The Council and I thank each of you for the commitment you have shown to this City and the citizens that we all serve.

Last but certainly not least, let me say that I feel blessed to work with such a wonderful Council. I am proud as to how well we work together and even though we many times agree to disagree, we conduct our professional relationships in the most civil and cordial way. I believe that this simple fact has helped make us as successful as we have been in these difficult economic times.

On a personal note, I am humbled and honored to begin my term as President of the Maryland Municipal League. I finish my year as President Elect representing our President Gary Comegys while he has battled bone marrow cancer. President Comegys decided not to run for Council in Salisbury and I will finish out his term and start my term at the end of June. This past year has allowed me to travel the State on behalf of MML and discuss and lobby for municipal issues. And, as much as I have loved that travel, I always enjoy when I get home since I truly believe that of the 157 municipalities in Maryland, Aberdeen is the best and truly the "Home of Opportunity"!