



Mayor Steve Williams  
City of Huntington

## **2021 MAYOR'S BUDGET MESSAGE**

Madam Chair and members of City Council, in accordance with the provisions of Article 10, Section 10.2 of the Charter of the City of Huntington, West Virginia, I hereby present to you the proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2022.

What a difference a year makes, or so they say. One year ago, not a person in this room would have believed that our nation was about to experience a pandemic that would kill more than 450,000 Americans and would have shut down businesses as individuals sought refuge by learning how to work from home. A year ago the terms “social distancing” and “working remotely” were not in our daily lexicon.

What a difference a year makes. All that is special in our lives -- family visits, worship services, neighborhood gatherings, dinner at a favorite restaurant, attending sporting events, a casual handshake or a hug -- became fearful and dreadful actions that could lead to death.

We have experienced a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, a once-in-a-lifetime economic crisis, and a once-in-a-lifetime social upheaval. Amid all of the despair, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity before us and we have one chance to get it right.

Fortunately, we have laid a foundation in recent years that providentially has positioned ourselves to approach the opportunities presented by this pandemic and social upheaval in an aggressive, opportunistic manner that would have never been imagined possible in years or decades past.

This is the first City Council in more than 50 years that is **not** operating from a perspective of scarcity. Roads are being paved. Dilapidated buildings are being removed. Police and fire pensions are being funded properly. Employees are receiving regularly-scheduled raises.

The problems before us are problems that have arisen over the years because the city did not have the resources to address the issues head on. These problems of deteriorating roads, declining neighborhoods, closed factories, flooded streets, and substance use disorder did not suddenly arise during the past 8 years. While the problems did not develop on our watch, they are being addressed on our watch.

The state of our city is healthy but not wealthy.

Our three priorities will be driven by a culture of opportunity and innovation. They are:

- 1) Continued fiscal stability
- 2) Economic transformation
- 3) Overcoming the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic

These three priorities will touch every aspect of our budget. All of our departments are inextricably linked. We have established an organizational ecosystem that provides service in the

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most effective and efficient means possible, but also creates a culture of expectation and accomplishment.

### **First Responders – Police and Fire**

Our Police and Fire departments will continue to be budgeted at record levels. Budgeted staffing levels will remain the same. We will continue our aggressive efforts on recruiting to assure we have a qualified, diverse work force. We will not sacrifice quality for numbers. Our standards cannot be compromised. Our residents have experienced world-class service and that will remain the standard.

We continue to budget for additional police patrol vehicles. And again, we will purchase an additional apparatus for the Fire Department in keeping with our fleet maintenance program that was recently established.

We have sought to renovate and update each of the fire stations in the city. We will begin construction on the 20<sup>th</sup> Street fire station this year. In turn, we are budgeting for the acquisition of land for a replacement of the Westmoreland fire station.

A mental health liaison position will be created in the Police Department to coordinate mental health services for the public on police calls for service. They will provide services as well as develop an overall program with private and public providers. Best practices across the country will be researched to develop the best possible policy and service for our citizens.

The Compass wellness program for first responders that was funded for the past few years by the Bloomberg Foundation is being utilized as a prototype by other cities across the country and around the world for their first responders. We have established measureable metrics that would enable our program to be utilized for other front-line occupations in numerous lines of service. We will be absorbing the Compass program into our general fund budget after December 31.

I am so proud of the effort of the rank and file within the Police Department. The FOP is actively reaching out to every part of the community to assure that the residents whom they serve see them as approachable, compassionate, professional, and as fellow human beings. They are diligent in actively separating themselves from the difficulties they have seen develop elsewhere. Last year, after the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis when individuals arranged a peaceful rally and march to protest the injustices experienced by blacks and other minorities, the Huntington Police Department organized themselves to provide protection along the route of the protest march. The Huntington Police Department provided protection to those who were protesting the police.

Only in Huntington.



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### **Capital expenditures – Public Works**

Our Public Works operation has continued to address capital improvement challenges that had been long ignored. We will continue to fund street paving, street construction, sidewalk repairs and construction at record levels.

We have budgeted for the Hal Greer Boulevard highway redesign and expect the work to begin this year. The partnership that we have established with the West Virginia Department of Transportation has enabled us to also replace the 5<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and 8<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge with functionally safe but also tasteful and pleasing designs. We expect those bridge projects to begin this year as well.

\$5 million is being budgeted for capital outlay and improvements. This includes, as I mentioned previously, purchasing land for a new Westmoreland fire station, moving forward with plans for a new fire station at 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 20<sup>th</sup> Street, and improvements to the old armory building on the West End. The old armory building will be upgraded to centralize Public Works operations, including the city garage; provide storage and a site for HPD's Forensics Unit to conduct its investigations; and provide classrooms and training sites for various city departments.

Our paving, street construction, sidewalk restoration and other capital expenditures have become more proactive than reactive. We are on the verge of a scheduled road paving program. My goal is to establish a set paving program of our 200 miles of streets wherein we will schedule and know over the ensuing 8 to 10 years what streets will be paved and in what year. An established paving schedule will include paving, maintenance, and restoration. We know that restoration programs lengthen the usable life of a paved street. Expending our resources on building curbs and channeling storm water will not only lengthen the life of a street but will also improve the quality of life of our neighborhoods. By implementing such evidence-based engineering practices, we will be able to upgrade our frequently traveled city streets more often, and the other streets with lighter traffic will be restored to lengthen their lifespan. Gone are the days when streets will go 40 years or more without being paved.

This will be a massive departure from how capital improvement decisions have been made. We will employ evidence-based solutions using sound engineering practices.

### **Continued Fiscal Stability/COVID-19/Innovation**

Our present fiscal condition is strong because of the dedicated coordination between each department and the Finance Department. Every expenditure, every revenue, every decision is scrutinized by the Finance staff and each department. We have been able to maintain our operations by carefully managing our cash flow, our accounts receivable, and our accounts payable. We don't incur an expense if we can't pay it on time. In turn, we are enormously aggressive on collecting that which is owed the city.

We have established ourselves as the most fiscally sound municipality in West Virginia. Our employee benefits and public safety pensions are properly funded. Our reserves are sound. Just because we now have reserves at a level that has never been seen in Huntington does not give us

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the wherewithal to fund every project on a whim. We will make fiscally sound judgements by utilizing the determining factor as to whether the expenditure is sustainable for ongoing delivery or upkeep and maintenance. If we can't afford to fund it during the ensuing years or cannot afford to maintain it, then we simply cannot afford it, even if the current cash available is substantial.

I believe we need to take a serious look at making permanent the elimination of the Business and Occupation Tax for retail and restaurants. I also believe we need to review our regressive fee structure that pays for our various services.

Suffering through the uncertainty of a pandemic is not the time to permanently change our tax and revenue structure. It IS the time, however, to begin review of our business tax structure and accompanying fee apparatus. Although our balance sheet continues to be stronger than it has been in recent history, we must be sober in how we approach our tax policy during these unpredictable times.

### **Economic Transformation/COVID-19/Innovation**

As we advanced in the America's Best Communities competition, we held onto the mantra, "Make No Little Plans." We won the competition mostly because of the extent of how the various institutions in our community embraced the broad, bold vision of our economic revitalization and transformation plan. Those who had experience in our community and neighborhoods in getting things done, creating opportunity out of a deeply-held faith and vision of opportunity, who actually have tried and failed only to pick themselves up and continue pursuing the vision that nobody else could see – those individuals embraced the bold, ambitious plan that no other city the size of Huntington would have the audacity to pursue.

Our experiences during this pandemic have revealed that people living in the most populous areas of our nation are looking to relocate to smaller communities where social distancing is the cultural norm. The Huntington Innovation Plan (HIP) is being implemented to develop employment and economic opportunity in the Highlawn, Fairfield, and West End neighborhoods as our broadband capacity is being enhanced through the Thunder Cloud high-speed broadband project funded by grants last year.

Huntington's municipal government is turning into an enterprise that is not just measured by the safety and cleanliness of its neighborhoods or the quality of its streets. It is also measured by the quality of life in its neighborhoods and opportunities for prosperity that match the dreams and effort toward each person's ambitions.

We embarked to set standards that the rest of the nation would seek to emulate. We have managed to succeed at that lofty ambition beyond our own expectations.

With that accomplishment reached, we have a much more important and difficult ambition to achieve – to set standards that our neighborhoods will seek to emulate. The fact is our city is seen outside our borders as a magnificent example of how a community can come together.

Unfortunately, when we look in the mirror, we manage to see the struggling community that has

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yet to learn the measure of its aspirations. We need to recognize the greatness that is among us, in every neighbor and in every neighborhood.

We have a lovely, engaged, compassionate community. When people visit or find reason to move here, they find that this city burrows a niche in their heart that makes them want to stay.

We have an opportunity because of the pandemic. People are actively looking to relocate to a community where they can continue to be productive in their given occupation but no longer have to live in a crowded metropolitan area.

But let's be honest. Our neighborhoods, homes, and common spaces have been allowed to crumble over the decades. Some of our neighbors see their declining neighborhoods as a mirror of their own declining fortunes. There are those, however, (and I believe they are a significant growing number) who see the evidence of declining neighborhoods as an opportunity to breathe life into that which has struggled to exist.

We will not be able to attract those elsewhere to live by our side if we don't begin to spruce up our neighborhoods, homes, streets and our common spaces and reflect that rejuvenation in how we see ourselves.

Our neighborhoods need to be given permission and the means to reinvent themselves. Housing has been a problem that has been long ignored. We will be unveiling a robust housing program that will target neighborhoods by encouraging home ownership, new construction or rehabilitation on properties purchased by our Land Reuse Agency and rehabilitation of declining owner-occupied homes.

In 2020, we took advantage of the pandemic and received a grant to fund a graduate fellow from Harvard to evaluate our housing stock and to make recommendations. Over 90% of the homes in Huntington were constructed more than 50 years ago. Owner-occupied homes comprise just over 50% of our housing with rental property comprising 49%.

57% of our rental housing is considered to be declining, unsafe or vacant. Of our owner-occupied housing, 38% is considered to be in some level of disrepair. For these reasons, we have hired 3 new housing inspectors to beef up our inspection and code enforcement efforts. We will also provide additional resources to our City Attorney's Office.

In 2020, we demolished 104 structures and have demolished more than 400 structures in the past 8 years. We expect by June 30 of this year to have demolished an additional 113 structures. The problem is a growing city cannot grow by tearing down. A growing city grows by building up and rehabilitating those structures that are in disrepair.

Project SHINE is a pilot project targeted for the Highlawn neighborhood for owner-occupied homes that need rehabilitation. 140 owner-occupied homes are being targeted with an expectation to rehabilitate 70 homes this summer. The purpose is to help stabilize housing in the

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Highlawn neighborhood. By targeting one neighborhood at a time, the results will be more noticeable than if the 70 homes were spread throughout the city.

The Fairfield neighborhood is the home of a partnership that the Fairfield Community Development Corporation has established with Huntington Banks. It targets first-time home buyers interested in buying or building a home in the Fairfield neighborhood. This project began during late 2020.

Our efforts to encourage businesses to open and/or relocate in our community always involves a detailed assessment of incentives that could and should be offered to entice companies to invest in our city. For decades, I have heard conversation after conversation of the business retention and business attraction incentives and packages that should be pursued. Many of these incentives have established wonderful opportunities for our community. We need to establish a series of incentives to entice PEOPLE and FAMILIES to move into Huntington. Again, pay attention to the statistic that was previously stated – over 90% of all housing in Huntington was constructed more than 50 years ago.

We recently eliminated Business and Occupation taxes for the construction and rehabilitation of homes for the first \$200,000 of the project. I believe we should go a step further. We should also assess the wisdom of eliminating building permit fees for all new residential housing that is constructed or rehabilitated in our city. There will still be a requirement for building permits to assure that work is being constructed in accordance to code. However, building permit fees would be eliminated for residential housing newly built or rehabbed.

### **Opportunity/COVID-19/Innovation**

As I have said a few different times in this message, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare areas where we are suffering. My life's experience has revealed to me that when suffering is present, opportunity is present. When people are in pain, there is opportunity for healing. When hopelessness persists, there is opportunity to identify hope in the darkness. The pandemic has given us an opportunity to gather our resources in a new way or in a way that has been utilized previously and set aside.

I am certain that the reason we are positioned to find ourselves standing strong at the other side of this pandemic is that we have stood together.

Prior to the pandemic, one issue that seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the room was the opioid epidemic. The level of addiction in our community became a national discussion because we stepped forward and aggressively acknowledged the problem, named the problem, and owned it. As our overdoses at one time were the highest in the nation, our community eventually became the home of the highest reductions of overdoses in the nation.

The pandemic has caused overdoses to rise enormously across the nation. Our area included. The overdoses here have risen but not to the rates they were 6 and 7 years ago when we aggressively stepped forward.

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the opioid epidemic are not separate issues. They are inextricably tied together. I believe we need to organize ourselves to identify the markers in the COVID-19 pandemic that are causing the rate of overdoses to rise. I have had several conversations with local public health, medical, governmental, and community leaders in Huntington, throughout the state, and in Washington, DC.

It occurred to me that we need to fix this broken system here. I'm not sure what to do. I do know that we have to link Public Health with Drug Control Policy. I am collaborating with various individuals as to how we can best address these two issues and set our city as an example once again as a city of solutions as it relates to these two massive public health challenges.

I have been encouraged by the energy and zeal demonstrated by this newly-elected City Council. In the very short time that this group has been in office (43 days to be precise), there has been no shortage of inquiry and suggestions filled with innovative ideas.

Last year, we budgeted the position of Director of Innovation in the Mayor's Office. Scott Lemley has taken the reigns of that position. It was intended to create within each city department a means through which innovative solutions can be established. In short, every person in every department was given permission to seek innovative solutions.

As I indicated, there has been no limit on the level of innovative ideas being offered up by our Council members. It appears to me that we need to give Council permission to seek innovative solutions. Therefore, we are creating in the Mayor's Office budget an Innovative Projects appropriation of \$250,000 to provide City Council a process wherein an idea can be evaluated, measured and discussed and ultimately receive seed funding to determine whether it is worthy of pursuing. Councilman Bailey's long-awaited vision for a new senior citizens center is an example of a project worth pursuing

One of the most exciting innovations that we have had the joy of experiencing is the transformation of the Mountain Health Arena. For years, it was seen as the big orange elephant that was a drain on the city's resources.

I remember the battle back in the 1970s to have a civic center built. The idea then was if Charleston had one, Huntington must have one, too.

The Civic Center struggled for years. Yes, there are those of us who are old enough to remember Frank Sinatra, Billy Joel, Steve Martin, Kenny Rogers, John Denver and so many others performing there. But it never made money. Today, prior to the pandemic the Mountain Health Arena was meeting and exceeding its projections.

Cindy Collins and her team have taken advantage of the pandemic and continued with our improvements. The new naming rights agreement with Mountain Health Network is a stabilizing factor and a wonderful partnership with a world-class medical conglomerate.

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Look at this facility now. It is totally transformed from new seating, new bathrooms, a new conference center, and an entirely new color scheme with an eclectic design that causes people to pause and reflect on what the design says or means.

As you look at the worksite outside on the Plaza, it is a hot mess right now. But come April, you will see something splendid that will make you say, "Who would have ever thought that we could have something like that here in Huntington?"

Well, when you think about that or ponder on the history of this facility, know that in the past 10 years its seating, conference facilities, interior HVAC system, and the exterior have all received a makeover. If that can happen under everyone's noses, just imagine what can be done right before your eyes in your city. Often times, we look but don't see.

Some will say, "Who would have ever dreamed that Huntington could have become this example to the world?" There will be a choice few who will say, "We did."

### **Once in a lifetime opportunity**

The Chinese are credited with saying, "May you live in interesting times."

I believe we all can agree that we are living in interesting times. I would have never imagined that we would have ever found ourselves facing some of the issues that face us today.

The scriptures in Ecclesiastes say, "For everything there is a season...."

Forgive me for being somewhat personal here. For many of you, these are my first days with you of which I hope will become many.

We are living in interesting times. Have you ever considered the miracle of how you came to be here at this very precise moment in time? I believe with every ounce of my being that every moment in my life, intersecting with this moment in your life, has given us a providential opportunity to leave our mark on this time. You see, I believe we were born for a time like this. What I have observed of the dynamics and character of this group lead me to believe that something special is brewing.

We are here at this location at this time on purpose. It is no accident. We have but one chance. We have but one opportunity. We have but one swing.

We must get it right.

I recently read a snippet from Shakespeare's *The Twelfth Night* – "Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them."

Our community, our state, and our nation depend on how we respond. Greatness is looking to be thrust somewhere. Let it be thrust to our city.

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