

State of the City Address
Thursday, January 10, 2019
St. Marys, Georgia
John F. Morrissey, Mayor

As I considered this year's State of the City address, I reflected on the state of the nation and how that climate influences our small city. At times we seem overwhelmed by the emphasis national media and social media places on our differences. We are a nation divided in political opinion and philosophy making necessary and desirable compromise at our national capitol a rare occurrence.

The influence of a constant stream of information and misinformation appears to force us to "take sides" rather than come together to find workable solutions in government to the work that needs to be done. We are not as willing to listen to opposing views or to find common ground as we were just a few years ago. That reality makes the task of governing as much a challenge locally as it is nationally.

It is encouraging that more citizens are attending Council and Town Hall meetings representing some of the many voices city leadership must consider. Many citizens email, call, or stop us in the grocery store or after church to seek clarification or to express support or opposition to projects or issues. In all candor, the more reasoned and thoughtful voices resonate most clearly with us. City leadership has a responsibility to balance differing points of view. Often we also seek input from field experts or legal counsel before making a decision. More often than not, we find ourselves constrained by ever changing state and federal government regulations from a variety of agencies.

Some seek to portray the City as segmented by neighborhoods or length of time we have lived here or by geography or where we have worked or what we do for a living. To me these "borders" are artificial and simplistic, only building unnecessary walls that prevent honest exchange of ideas and factual data necessary for solid decision making. We are simply a city where people have different opinions about the role of city government.

Having differences, be they real or perceived, means compromise is often the only answer. Compromise requires utilizing a consensus building approach in order to create the momentum necessary to achieve meaningful results. Compromise means accepting that no single person, whether on Council, on a Committee, on staff or sitting at home watching on video has all the answers. That is a challenge not only for city leadership but for our citizens. Your point of view may not always prevail but is important you express it. In doing so, it is important to note that the most valued voices are those dedicated to building our city, not tearing it down.

Retiring council member Bob Nutter wrote a thoughtful letter to the editor last week commenting on the quest for unity. He urged citizens to search out the facts rather than relying on social media comments or rumors. He urged to listen carefully and reminded us that when commentary is fueled by bitterness or anger, nothing remains but ashes.

The necessity for collaboration, communication and unity in purpose sets the stage for the city government's focus in 2019. Our priorities are clear. First, we must complete the Hurricane Matthew and Irma recovery efforts and infrastructure and safety projects we initiated in 2018.

.The improved boat ramp at Wheeler is now in process and should be completed in 180 days.

.The plan to make the waterfront more pedestrian friendly for residents and visitors is underway with completion in 270 days.

.The nearly million dollar commitment in 2018 to upgrade our police and fire radio system to insure safety for citizens and our public safety employees is now in implementation stage and should be complete in 120 days.

. The Douglas Drive drainage project is underway and will be completed in 120 days.

. The Joint Development Authority's Wharf at St. Marys project is moving forward on schedule.

We anticipate growth and expansion at the Kings Bay Plaza as well as a plan to move forward with job creation in new light industry at the midtown industrial park. This expansion is possible because of the business friendly tax incentives the City is able to offer as well as our hands on assistance in helping businesses access additional State incentives.

Master Plan projects with immediate deadlines for 2019 will still be on schedule.

We acknowledge that some projects will not be completed for reasons beyond the city's control. The Ferry Service Boat Dock for the National Park Service does not yet have a near term completion date. That means that the city will need to continue allowing the Park Service and Lang's Ferry business to utilize the Gateway dock for passage to Cumberland Island underscoring the City's investment to maintain a key tourist attraction and financial bedrock for local downtown businesses.

Addressing storm water mitigation solutions will be a priority in 2019, but we must rely on citizen buy in and commitment to create establishment of a Stormwater Enterprise Fund if that endeavor is to succeed.

Another matter that requires serious citizen action will occur in March when Camden County voters are asked to approve renewal of SPLOST funding. Voters will have the opportunity to continue financing major infrastructure projects in the cities and county through a sales tax that generates revenue from visitors as well as residents. Of major concern to St. Marys residents will be the reality that continuation of SPLOST funding is an essential component in meeting out legal Water & Sewer payment obligation. Without SPLOST support of approximately \$1.7 million, the city options to meet our legally obligated bond payments will become a difficult financial challenge for the city and its taxpayers.

A major lesson learned in 2018 that we plan to continue in 2019 is the adherence to perseverance as a basic city policy. As frustrated as many citizens were about the delay in the repair of the Wheeler Street boat ramp, city leadership was more frustrated. Delays in permitting. Delays in FEMA funding. Delays in insurance payments. Our only choice was to persevere. Stay on it. We now recognize and accept that perseverance is a constant reality as we govern in collaboration with so many other entities. Hold our ground and persevere.

I opened my comments reflecting on the differing philosophies of how citizens expect us to govern. As much as those differences may challenge us, I am reminded of the common values we share regardless of where we live or how long we have lived here. Those values were what citizens from every neighborhood expressed during the recent Master Plan process and were included in the final Plan. The majority expressed a strong desire to be One St. Marys, not a divided St. Marys. Those values and vision have been officially adopted by the city and will and should be the basis for our actions as we move forward in 2019.

One St. Marys. One Vision. One Future.

We value:

- Our people
- Our small town ambiance
- Our peaceful and safe environment

We respect:

- Our rivers, marshes, wildlife and coastal environment
- Our diversity and individual differences
- Our rich history

We envision a St. Marys where:

- All lives are respected;
- All voices are heard;
- All families can thrive;
- All neighborhoods are vibrant and inviting;
- All individuals have adequate economic opportunities;
- All businesses have the opportunity to prosper.

It is by accepting those values and that vision that I ask the Council, the city staff, and appointees to Boards and Authorities to undertake challenges and opportunities in 2019. As we seek to attract new residents and new businesses, let us all talk about our city with pride and optimism for the future. While there are always things city government can do better, I remain convinced that focusing on the positive is the best path to create the climate in which we can all thrive.

As Mayor, I am the Chief Executive Officer of the city with responsibility to lead by example to insure civil discourse and mutual respect. In addition, I intend to continue a focus on achieving economic stability and vitality; smart and measured growth; and reasonable and achievable goals with an eye to the future while providing basic city services in the present. It is my goal to do everything in my power to make sure your city government is as flexible, nimble and responsive as necessary in 2019 to pave the way for future generations to be able to enjoy what we all love most about this city. I encourage all of you to join me in that endeavor.

And now I open the first Town Hall quarterly meeting for 2019.