

*State of the City Address  
Mayor John F. Morrissey  
January 5, 2017  
Town Hall Meeting  
City of St. Marys, Georgia*

2016 began as a year with the Council facing challenges on several matters having long range implications for the city and included a time in which our staff was challenged to respond pro-actively to the winds of Mother Nature. The Council was not afraid to make difficult decisions and the staff proved well trained and responsive to their challenges. The capstone of a busy year came Christmas Eve when President Obama signed legislation to authorize the Navy and the FAA to make necessary arrangements to close the St. Marys airport. There were various opinions on this issue but from the city's perspective the most important fact was that we finally brought closure to a situation that has hung like a black cloud over our city for a decade and a half. By convincing appropriate agencies at the highest level of government to take responsibility to resolve an issue only they had the authority and financial ability to achieve, we set the stage for creation of a viable resolution. Now the city has 278 valuable acres of prime light industry property to market and bring more diversity to our economic base. It was a very positive conclusion to a year that saw us move forward on several fronts.

In my December Tribune and Georgian column I highlighted additional 2016 accomplishments, but in this, my third State of the City address, I want to focus on today, tomorrow and the future of St Marys.

I want to begin with what most residents feel are the two most important elements of any city's health...financial stability and the continued provision of vital city services and public safety. I am confident this City Council will continue to be fiscally conservative in expenditure of tax dollars. It is simply the way we do business. We will continue a policy of limiting our debt and will remain committed to pay down the water and sewer debt with SPLOST funds recognizing that redirection of SPLOST funding will challenge us operationally.

Provision of daily services to citizens has long been a priority for the city and that focus will continue in 2017. Whether police, fire, streets, sidewalks, ordinance compliance or other basic services, we will continue to find ways to motivate all employees to be innovative and creative in delivering quality services with limited resources.

But let's take a look at the bigger picture...at what citizens and businesses tell us they want St. Marys to look like in the near and long term. The Master Plan Steering Committee, which has been citizen driven since the beginning, will be issuing its final report in March after 18 months of extensive study, interviews, public input and specialized consultant analysis. That Plan is intended to give us a framework from which the Council and staff can better design goals and objectives to meet the long term expectations of those who live and work here. It will provide some very specific recommendations but also lay out some long term ideals from which the Council can measure any project before it is undertaken to gauge whether such an endeavor will move us a step closer to our ultimate vision. It will permit us to better evaluate and prioritize when and where we spend limited tax dollars.

Early reports from the Steering Committee have confirmed that no matter what neighborhood someone lives in, there are visions for a better St. Marys most citizens share. They want to maintain the small town feeling that has kept life long residents here and lured new residents. They want a more vibrant economy with increased job opportunities while protecting our environment and casual lifestyle.

They want clean, attractive streets, buildings and inviting entrances to all neighborhoods. They want a city they can be proud of and brag about to their friends and relatives who live elsewhere. As Mayor, I share that vision and I know the Council does as well. We recognize that the city has a role to play in setting goals to reach that vision, but that we are only a part of it.

The city can and will provide all the incentives available to us to encourage new businesses to locate here. We can and will make zoning ordinance changes and create ordinances that motivate property owners to spruce up their investments. We can and will do our part by maintaining city property and grounds. We can and will

promote and encourage growth, development and tourism. But we cannot do it all. Citizens, property owners, businesses all need to take responsibility in making St. Marys a more attractive, vibrant and inviting city. The City needs to do its part and we will. Tonight I am asking others in our great city to commit to do the same.

I have spent time this past year in Washington and Atlanta because I know that building those relationships and making those leaders aware of St. Marys is important to our future growth and our viability as a city. But I have also spent a lot more time this past year locally talking with neighborhood residents we do not usually hear from. I have learned a lot and I am asking each of our Council members to personally conduct more of that kind of outreach this year. Yes, we need to listen to citizens who approach us with ideas and concerns, but let's make that extra effort to reach out to people we do not know and those who do not attend meetings or email us. I am asking each of us to put pet projects or personal agendas aside and consider what is best for all citizens not just a few. I am also asking the City Manager and his staff to reach out and do more listening to all citizens. We cannot only listen to the most vocal among us.

Every neighborhood in St. Marys is unique in its own way but they are all a part of "One St. Marys". We need to step up our collective efforts to recognize that the city of St. Marys is not one neighborhood but many that stretch from I-95 to the Waterfront and north and south of Spur 40 to the city limits. It is this combination of all neighborhoods, citizens and businesses that make St. Marys a community. It is our responsibility as Mayor, Council and staff to focus on all citizens and all neighborhoods and I am urging us to broaden our radar and recognize both the differences and similarities in each neighborhood as we forge a plan to achieve a One St. Marys,

We began to create much needed momentum in 2016 and we must continue that momentum in 2017. When we and other Camden cities gave our commitment to combine our economic development efforts into a single re-organized Joint Development Authority that would become the county's single economic development vehicle, we knew it would take time to create the professional entity necessary to get the job done. We now see that investment coming to fruition and we will continue our strong working relationship with JDA so that St.

Marys can benefit from the many opportunities on the horizon. We cannot back off the momentum currently underway but rather redouble our collaborative efforts.

We have made strides in creating stronger state and federal relationships. That momentum needs to continue because the competition for attention and potential funding never fades.

We facilitated bringing new businesses to the community and that momentum has to move forward at an even faster pace.

We made great strides in developing more productive collaboration with other Camden cities and the county government and we need to increase those efforts to share resources, ideas and innovative ways to better utilize all tax dollars that St. Marys residents put into government services.

Yes, our focus and priority is St. Marys but in this ever increasingly global economy, we cannot afford to be isolated. We cannot afford to be left out or fall behind whether it is in technology, access to funds, or innovative methodology.

Momentum cannot continue without focus, commitment and hard work. I pledge that I will do everything in my power to continue that momentum and tonight I ask City Council members, the City Manager and all Board, Authority and Committee appointees to do the same. If we are to take advantage of our current momentum and the opportunities that lie ahead, then 2017 cannot be business as usual. We all need to be in the frame of mind to be more creative, innovative, and flexible. Let's keep the momentum rolling in 2017. Just as we made tough decisions in 2016, we plan to do it better, faster and smarter in 2017. I repeat that we cannot do this alone. Let us all commit to working together to get one step closer to the vision of St. Marys we all desire.