



*State of the City Address  
Mayor John F. Morrissey  
January 14, 2016  
Town Hall Meeting  
City Chambers*

Welcome to the first Town Hall meeting of 2016 and to my second State of the City address. In my December column in the Tribune & Georgian, I highlighted accomplishments of 2015 so I am not going to repeat them, but rather focus on 2016 and what we can expect in this calendar year. But first I want to thank and acknowledge those whose talents and dedication contributed to last year's success and who will be working hand in hand with me this year to move the city forward.

The City Council faced some difficult decisions in 2015 and clearly responded with thoughtful, conscientious deliberation and decisiveness. Without the cohesiveness and collaboration of this team of committed men and women, we would simply not have made the strides we did. Likewise, our staff not only worked diligently to fulfill their assigned tasks, but have been eagerly undertaking the important role of planning for the future rather than just dealing with day to day business. The third group of key players who keep the city rolling is our talented volunteers, those citizens who work in many different capacities to insure we deliver the best services possible. Whether providing leadership by serving on Boards, Authorities, Commissions and Committees or by assisting staff in executing programs and projects, these volunteers play an ever increasing role in helping shape the positive future of St. Marys.

To each of you, my sincere thanks for what you have done for the city and what I know you will continue to do as we seize the opportunities and minimize the challenges of 2016.

Many of you have heard me say that 2015 was about setting the stage for the city to become more competitive, more pro-active and more focused in 2016. We gave attention to financial stability, to putting systems and processes in place, adding redevelopment powers to our portfolio, collaborating with the Joint Development Authority for the benefit of St. Marys, and increasing our presence and leverage in Atlanta and Washington D.C. I am confident we will see payoff from these building blocks this year.

As a part of the process, we re-doubled our efforts to look 3-5 years out. We mapped out the city's equipment life span, knowing that our multiple equipment and vehicle needs are a part of doing business and that short and long term capital needs must be addressed with more forethought than ever before. We acknowledge that a Stormwater Fund must be established to address the reality of certain flood zones in the city and we need to find a way to finance that Fund. After years of struggling with the demands being placed on the city regarding the future of the Airport, we managed to put the issue in the hands of decision makers in Washington who are in the position to resolve the matter and that resolution should be forthcoming. We established a long overdue Master Plan process to again look at the future for all aspects of our city, marking our current strengths and designing a framework for what we want the city to look like in 5-10-15 years.

And when I say "we", let me be very clear that the Master Planning process will involve the majority of our citizens and businesses. All those who want to be involved can be. Every neighborhood will get attention. All ideas will be considered. It is an 18 month process and we will leave no stone unturned to make sure the input and ideas are extensive. We eagerly anticipate translating all the hard work into results over the next few years.

Our city operational finances are sound as we enter 2016, however, I have to be perfectly honest with you, we will have financial challenges on the capital side. We learned earlier this month that SPLOST 7 funds will be less than anticipated and budgeted. The major reason is lower gas prices and the impact of HB 170. That's good news for our personal wallets and pocketbooks, but not good news for the city budget. Additionally, we have again seen a decline in the tax digest for the sixth year in a row. As we maintain our commitment to use the majority of SPLOST funds, more than \$1.6 million, to pay down the water and sewer debt, we have to face the reality of how that limits capital expenditures that were previously funded by SPLOST. Instead of \$2.0 million to fund important projects, we now have less than \$400,000.

Even with those financial challenges, I remain relentlessly optimistic. It means we have to become more innovative in finding and securing revenues to make up for the shortfall. Last year we found one innovative avenue by selling tax liens. We will need to find others this year as creativity is the key to meeting this challenge. We are not considering another millage increase. It does mean we will give greater attention to prioritizing, staying rigorously focused and managing those 'it would be nice to have's', being judicious. It does highlight the need for bringing more revenue generating businesses into Camden County and St. Marys. Homeowners cannot continue to carry the full burden. The most effective and well managed cities operate with a balance of industry, business and homeowner tax revenues and that is a model we will strive to emulate.

To achieve that goal, we will continue and even increase our collaboration with the Camden County Joint Development Authority. We will continue to enhance our excellent relationships with the Submarine Naval Base Kings Bay and the Coast Guard, two major players in the health and the future of St. Marys. We will continue to support county leadership as they seek a way for Spaceport to co-exist with our unique and special environment. And we will become more pro-active in strategizing and accelerating growth in St. Marys in a way that makes sense for our citizens, our economy, and our environment in this place we all call home.

It is natural to be nostalgic about the past and to value its lessons and history. But we cannot continue to live in the past. We have to find a new direction. We have to close the door behind us and move forward... We have to move forward! We do not have the luxury of standing still and waiting for something good to happen. We must be pro-active. We may even need to be aggressive. We may need to take risks. But we cannot just sit back and cross our fingers and hope that good fortune will descend upon us. The cliché of taking charge of the future applies to St. Marys right now. It applies to the city leadership. It applies to all our citizens, business owners and property owners. We must be in this together. To succeed, we must stick together and work together.

St. Marys has a lot going for it. We have a great location with proximity to I-95 and an international airport. We have incredibly talented and knowledgeable residents who love this city. We have marshes, rivers and wetlands that enhance our locale. We have a top rated school system, an award winning hospital, and a friendly and cooperative military establishment.

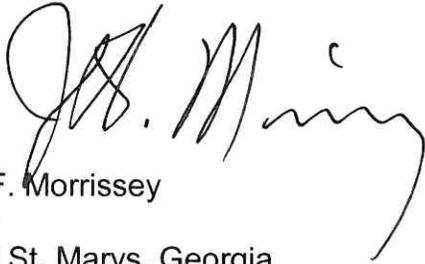
But I will say it again. We cannot wait for good fortune to fill our city coffers. As with other communities trying to find their way in this rapidly changing global economy, we must accept that change is inevitable. Let's manage that change. Let's embrace it; change can be a good thing. Let's seek out opportunities. We are finally able to be competitive. We are ready. Let's not wait for someone to do it for us. I see 2016, the third year of my administration, as the year in which we take full charge of our destiny by leading the way, not following others and not waiting for random fortune.

To all of those I thanked earlier, I need your re-commitment to this ongoing effort. To those of you, who are not yet involved, please get involved. Volunteer to serve on our Boards and Committees. Participate in the Master Plan surveys, focus groups, charrettes, and community meetings coming up this spring and summer. Those of us who live here, have businesses here, have investments here...all of us must get involved in shaping our future. We have closed one door. It's time to open another one. It is time to move forward with purpose.

We have a great city, but we all know we can make it better. We can improve our economy. We can protect our environment. We can make St. Marys a city of the future.

I invite all of you here tonight and watching on video to join us.

Thank you for your attention tonight and for the role you will play in moving our city forward in 2016.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John F. Morrissey". The signature is stylized with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

John F. Morrissey  
Mayor  
City of St. Marys, Georgia