

## **STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS**

### **FREEPORT, FL – 2017**

Good evening and thank you for attending tonight. It's great to see each and every one of you!

Forty-seven months ago, I proudly accepted the Office of Mayor of Freeport with a vision to bring economic growth to our community, to bring jobs and conveniences to our community while restoring confidence and trust in our city government. The results, thus far, have been monumental and rewarding for Freeport and this achievement would have been impossible not for the efforts of our citizens, employees and our City Council.

Today the State of the City of Freeport is improved, but we continue to push forward as much work remains to be done to ensure Freeport is prepared for the future. We must be cautious with our budget and use it efficiently to promote growth and provide added value to our town and its citizens. I'm proud to say, over the past 4 years the current administration has not borrowed any money to help with the updating and development of new and existing facilities and infrastructure for our City, yet we've been able to move forward with the necessary projects that we needed to act upon. We must be able to deliver services more responsively and efficiently to make Freeport a place that people will want to not only visit but to call their home.

Jobs and economic growth, in tandem, remain my highest priority. Working with Walton County EDA Board and others in our community we have successfully pursued companies to come and set up operations in our fair City. Our community is now witnessing exciting growth with new housing developments springing up all around and companies have visited City Hall Planning Department with hopes of relocating and/or starting up operations in Freeport which not only provides job but increases our tax base as well. The neighborhood of Hammock Bay which is located within the city limits has brought approximately 3,000 new residents to our City and the building process is just beginning. In the last year alone, I'm proud to say that we've brought in 39 new businesses with over 350 jobs added to our payroll and local economy.

To prepare for new economic growth for our City we need to be prepared making sure the necessary tools are in place to achieve success. To continue to grow our tax base we must add population through volunteer annexation. Over the past 4 years we have annexed properties into our City limits helping with the current tax base. We are still in much need to clean up our confusing boundaries in all areas of the City. During the past year we have been able to obtain some much needed \$500,000 in CDBG Grants to help our elderly citizens with renovation or replacement of their homes. We have also been awarded grant money to be able to increase our park and recreation facilities while bringing new recreational options to our park.

The Council have been working as liaisons with the various city departments helping to bring the much needed repairs and replacements in each department, and because of their inclusion, much progress has been made and the departments feel they have a say in the decision making of each department. This past year the Council appointed a new Recreation Board to listen to the associations that use the fields and perhaps make recommendations to the Council that would improve the facilities and the working relationship between the city and the community.

To elevate our economic development efforts and remain truly competitive, we must do a better job in letting people know what we have to offer. We have some of the most beautiful waterways around for people to enjoy whether it is fishing, recreational boating or just swimming. We are known as the Gateway to the Emerald Coast leading to some of the world's most breathtaking beaches. This task can be achieved by branding our City and making sure that everyone is aware of what we have to offer enticing them to visit and perhaps set up residence here in our lovely City. We can use this new brand to inform people letting them hear our story in a fresh and exciting way with the goal of raising Freeport's profile.

To encourage investment in our City, we must strengthen and improve our neighborhoods. Today professionals can work from their homes or anywhere they choose and companies have a multitude of options. The success of cities today will be driven by investment in their different neighborhoods whether it be downtown or residential – we must create a safe, attractive and inviting city with beautification where people will want to shop, live, work and play.

We're also working hard to keep our neighborhood clean and attractive and with the support of the City Council we must strengthen our code enforcement ordinances and reform the way we handle cases. We can no longer allow owners of delinquent properties to delay action for months, and some instances, even years. I'm pleased to say, there is a newly formed group of youths in our community and I would love to engage them in a monthly Mayor's neighborhood clean-up to help with the beautification cause.

We are currently working on Safeway paths for our community extending our sidewalks up Business 331. This will not only enhance the beauty of our City but will also provide safety as well. In addition, new Welcome to Freeport signs, street lights and a performing arts facility have been included in our 5-year CIP plan.

Our employees are dedicated and hardworking professionals and with the budget constraints we have made every effort to provide employees with as many amenities for them as possible. From pay raises, uniform allowances, insurance both medical and life, to comp time, in addition to, time earned both annually as well as sick leave. Through research in the past year we've actually been able to substantially reduce our insurance premiums while maintaining the same coverage for all employees. For some time now we have talked about Freeport potential; now is the time to act!

I firmly believe we can be a leader through technology and innovation, where business can grow and thrive. We are both blessed and fortunate to have top rated excellent schools where every child has the perfect opportunity for education locally and great university opportunities within close proximity of Freeport. I also believe that we have an opportunity to create great things to come and could be a good model for other cities as how to grow their population and tax base. As your Mayor, I am committed to the endless possibilities for the City of Freeport. I will continue to work tirelessly to move Freeport forward because together we can continue to create economic opportunities for everyone. We can continue to improve and reinvent our neighborhoods while promoting a healthy environment and continue to restore trust through transparency and positive actions. Together, we will meet and exceed the expectations for the citizens and taxpayers of our great City.

Page 3

As we move forward I would like to thank you for allowing me to serve as your Mayor for the past 4 years. It has been an incredible informational and mind opening experience for me and a wonderful opportunity for me to serve and give back to my hometown.

The future is very bright for Freeport and great things are on the horizon. Again, it has been a pleasure to have served you over the past 4 years and I'm excited and looking forward to seeing what the future will bring. Thank you all so much for this opportunity tonight. God bless each of you and God bless the City of Freeport.

Russ Barley  
Mayor