

State of the City Address- 2019

Good evening and Thank you for being here.

Let me start off by saying, the State of our City is strong and every day we are becoming more resilient. This city is open for business.

Shortly after the beginning of the new fiscal year I had to declare a State of Emergency for the city because of Hurricane Michael and we were so blessed to have missed the brunt of the storm which came in so close to us but our friends to the east of us had to endure.

The City Council is working diligently to improve the future of our city and working to ensure that our city is prepared for the future- we are stronger when we all work together. The city's comprehensive plan is being looked at and updated as we progress. The City of Freeport was the first city to approve a Resolution out against the Deep Injection Wall and we were commended for taking this action.

Through our budget of \$14,266,570, we have been able to make improvements throughout the city. The city has purchased new vehicles needed for different departments and increased some salaries for our dedicated workforce. Our city is growing, and people, are coming here from all over the world. Part of our goals is to create more complete neighborhoods with access to quality affordable houses, workforce housing, well maintained parks and improved streets as well as work with commercial businesses for convenience and job opportunities for our community. We have quality schools in Freeport with all receiving A+ grades by the education system and this helps attract new businesses from across America. Walton County is the 5th fastest growing county in the US with a 4.5 % increase in population and Freeport is the fastest growing city in Walton County. We are experiencing continued growth every day in Hammock Bay as well as exciting growth in other developments such as Lagrange Landing, Ashton Park, The Canopies, Bear Creek, Marina Village and others that are about to development in our area. The numbers are in and Freeport's economy continues to thrive. We have added since June of 2018 another 17 new businesses creating over 177 jobs adding to our local economy, new construction permits increased by 25% in residential and 15% in commercial.

The city council approved changing the fees for permitting from Impact and Tap Fees to Capacity Fees which allows us to use the fees more readily for

improvements that are needed in different areas of the city. The city council has passed a resolution to move forward with exploring the possibilities of hiring a City Manager with the growth taking place and the added responsibilities that is being put on the city. Strategic growth requires good planning- we plan everything from city utilities to land use, parks and open space to our comprehensive financial plan. This planning is critical to managing land development and maintaining service levels.

We are continuing to pursue annexation for the city boundaries which would also increase our tax base as well as help define the city and clean up the boundaries in all areas of the city. This past year we were able to continue with the CDBG Grants to assist our income eligible citizens with renovations or replacement of their homes. The city council has also development a branding for the city with a tag line of Anchor Here-Grow Here hoping to be able to increase the knowledge of people considering moving here giving us the opportunity to let individuals know about our beautiful waterways and all of the recreational opportunities we have to offer as well as raising the City of Freeport's profile.

We were able to purchase a new stage for city sponsored events. This will be used in our annual city festival "Bayfest", and our annual Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony as well as other events that may take place .Our Parks and Recreation Department has been extremely busy this past year upgrading the equipment at Casey Park, the City Pool, and the Sport Complex at Hammock Bay. A new Splash Pad was added to the complex with funds that were budgeted and was opened in May of this year.

As I have stated before in previous addresses, we must create a safe, attractive and inviting city where people will want to shop, live, work and play. The city hall was painted over this past year and a new billing system for our city utilities was installed, new Sensus Water Meters have been installed and will continue to be until they have all been replaced which will make us able to be more accurate and timely with our utilities bills. A new Walk of War Monument was added to the Veterans Memorial , with four more individual monuments being added this year which adds to the beautification of our fair city .Over this past year the council has been able to secure a Florida Commission Trails Grant which helps with developing the Trails at the Freeport Regional Sports Complex at Hammock Bay as well as a DOT Beautification Grant for the upgrade and beautification of Highway 20. A grant was awarded to us for a Barrier Free Park which is located on the west side of our city hall property. New Welcome to

Freeport Signs have been in development for the past 5 years but now are about to be installed which will make the entrances to the city more welcoming. The city has continued to work for our community with clean up in various areas with the purchase of 5 new dumpsters that can be used for the cleanup of code violations. We are continuing to work on Safeway Paths extending our sidewalks to the schools and hope to complete this project in the very near future. Other projects the city has been working on is the sewer project in the Brandon Oaks Subdivision, the city along with the county have worked together to complete the issues that had developed with the septic systems and now all of the residents have been put on city sewer. The city has also been awarded a grant/loan from USDA in the amount of \$14,000,000 for upgrading our Wastewater Treatment Plant to ensure that we have everything in place for our future growth. Furthermore, the city has also received a grant/loan from the State Revolving Fund to upgrade the city's sewer transmission facilities from US 331 to our treatment plant. The Billing Department has developed new policies and procedures which will help with upgrading and enhancing the quality of that system. As you can tell, the council and staff have been busy this past year and next year will be just as busy, I look forward to working with the department heads as well as all the employees as I have for the past 6 years. They have a passion for this community, as I do. I very much enjoy serving this community as your Mayor and we still have work to do and projects to see through. Thank you for attending tonight, God bless the City of Freeport and God Bless America.

Russ Barley
Mayor