



**2023 State of the City Report**  
**By: Mayor E. Kirk Rivers**

To the Citizens of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, City Manager, City Department Heads, City Employees, Members of City Council and Mayor Pro tem Spence, A little over eight months ago, The citizens afforded me the opportunity to be the Mayor of Elizabeth City, North Carolina and begin guiding what I've hoped to be the beginning of a transformation for both our City and our Council. Although not even a full year has passed since our swearing in, we have already accomplished great things. And by "we", I mean the City Council and City staff. Please join me in applauding the hard work and dedication of City Council members – Mayor Pro Tem Kem Spence and Councilors Johnson Biggs, Joseph Peel, Javis Gibbs, Rose Whitehurst, Katherine Felton, Barbara Baxter and Johnnie Walton.

We have made great strides together thus far, and I am looking forward to a successful 2023. Elizabeth City, NC which was incorporated in 1794 as Elizabethtown but changed to Elizabeth City in 1801, continues to be the star that is rising in our great state, our star which houses great economic engines as United States Coast Guard, Elizabeth City State University, College of the Albemarle, Mid Atlantic Christian University and Albemarle Sentara Medical Center. Which I am proud to say we are home to these great institutions.

Elizabeth City is the Cultural, Economic and Educational Hub of Northeastern North Carolina and the Albemarle Region. To our 18,800 residents, we have a booming, progressive hotspot, with a thriving downtown. We are the downtown of Camden County, Currituck County and Pasquotank County. We're truly seeing momentous growth here.

I am happy to announce that we are forging partnerships between our council, county commissioners, school boards, regional partners, state officials and federal officials, this is how we continue to achieve growth and stability in our state. We must continue to work as one city, not a republican or democratic city, not a black or white city, not a female or male city but a united Elizabeth City. Our communities are hosting grand Halloween events, Christmas Lighting events, First Fridays, Business After Hours, College Sporting Events, Marathons, cycling events, High School Events, and a lot more that continue to have citizens working together without barriers but enjoying one another and our city together.

Seldom have the stakes been higher for Elizabeth City. What we do and say will make a difference to our citizens, businesses, students, military and visitors.

In order to understand our State of the City, we must look not only at where we are and where we are going, but where we have been. The last couple of years we have had events that have challenged Elizabeth City, with COVID, Andrew Brown, electric system conversions, and workforce turnovers. The City has dealt with these challenges and we are moving forward.

### The Audit of 2020-2021

The Council has provided extra resources to get audits caught up, and a fully staffed accounting department so we do not get in the situation again. Turnover in the director's position and lack of a city manager caused lack of oversight and delayed the audits. The 2021 audit will be in from all indications from the auditor within the next couple of weeks, followed by the 2022 audit. The audit findings will be from almost two years ago. The Council will make sure that our city corrects any findings and keeps moving forward. We will continue to work with the LGC to make sure they are aware of the fiscal efforts of the city. I have been on the phone with auditors and we all understand that time is of the essence.

The Council is committed to engage in professional, collaborative leadership to guide our city with integrity in an effort to provide an economically sustainable and attractive quality of life for all residents.

## 2023 Goals of Council

1. Ensure sound fiscal responsibility
2. Improve the City's infrastructure
3. Strengthen inter-governmental relationships, including institutes of higher learning
4. Provide youth and senior activities
5. Deliver cost effective, quality services
6. Improve the quality and safety of neighborhoods
7. Increase business development opportunities to increase the quantity and quality of job

## Objectives

### Fiscal Responsibility

1. Council identified several areas they'd be interested in looking into for potential money savings, including leasing of police vehicles instead of outright purchase each year and possibly outsourcing trash collection. Budget to Actuals will be distributed amongst the Council each month for review and reference. Short-term goal established to complete both

delayed audits and remain in compliance and on time with each subsequent audit going forward. There is a consensus amongst the Council that they do not wish to have a tax increase present within the 2023-2024 Budget. Important to let the constituents know that they can and should be involved in the Budget process and encourage them to take part. Want to put a spending plan in place for ARPA funds and any potential federal dollars that may be out there. Additionally, expressed a desire to really “dig in” as far as grant funding goes and find additional ways to possibly help not just our organization but our community members if possible.

### Improve Infrastructure

1. General consensus is that there will likely be a water and sewer increase present in the 2023-2024 Budget, as was recommended by the previous Raftelis study and necessary to fund desperately needed infrastructure repairs and improvements. Council expressed concern with the lack of a plan for fixing the infrastructure and has labeled the need for putting an infrastructure repair plan in place as a top priority.

### Strengthen Inter-Governmental Relationships

1. Council’s word of the day was “collaboration”, and the importance of working with other governmental units, as well as our institutes of higher learning was stressed as an item of utmost importance. Council recognizes that there are many areas that they may be unable to tackle alone, but likes the idea of joining forces with other local entities to create task forces to take on problems. Collaborative relationships / task force groups were suggested to address the concerns of homelessness, police recruiting and service, community engagement and issues within some of our rental housing.

### Youth and Senior Activities

1. EC-PC Parks & Recreation hosts a number of recreation and special events for our local youth and children, including: volleyball, T-ball, basketball, little league baseball / softball, Summer Camps – featuring cheerleading, ninja, sailing, tennis, flag football, and activity camp, Kids Flix, Independence Day Family & Community Celebration, and the Elizabeth City Christmas Holiday Parade. The recently acquired, standalone Senior Center is teeming with activities and events for our mature population. Council was proud of the direction of Parks and Recreation staff has been taking and encouraged the idea of more promotion so the community will

be aware of exactly how much we're doing and how many opportunities for different age groups we're offering.

### Cost Effective, Quality Services

1. Council discussed our trash truck problems and how best to tackle those for our citizens, be it through outsourcing refuse collection to a third party or purchasing / leasing new vehicles. Most of our services appear up to par, but there are significant concerns with the water and sewer infrastructure, which were mentioned previously, and how best to address that issue. Community Development and Inspections was identified as a department that potentially needed to be "beefed up" with additional employees during the budget process if we wish to continue to serve our community efficiently.

### Improve Neighborhoods

1. Blighted homes, properties and boats were identified as a major problem in many of the wards and an area of some concern for all Councilors. All citizens deserve to live in a clean, safe neighborhood and the City should help make that a reality.
  
2. Increase police presence in neighborhoods, but in order to do that, we'll need to increase the police force. Recruiting and retention is at a low and staff is working on ways to improve that problem. Working with the county and possibly ECSU for assistance was encouraged.

### Business Development & Jobs

1. Continue to grow the downtown with diverse and inclusive businesses. Stressed the importance of being part of the community and frequenting our local businesses. Encourage new businesses to meet with staff about potential grant opportunities and/or to get assistance with applying for grants to drive new business and jobs to our area.

**Strengths** –The Council identified the following areas as our biggest strengths:

- Strong Team / Ability to Work Together
- Great Citizens and Welcoming Employees
- Community Engagement / Sense of Community
- Unlimited Opportunities
- Location / Beautiful Downtown
- Transparency

### **Community Growth / Economic Milestones:**

- The Community Development Department issued 270 building permits from November 2022 to February 2023. Twenty-four of those permits were for new single-family homes. The total estimated construction valuation for these building projects is \$4,989,045.
- The Community Development Department issued Zoning Permits to establish 13 new businesses; and eight permits were issued to enable home occupation enterprises.
- New site plans have been submitted for Texas Roadhouse, Wawa Convenience Store, Dollar Tree, and Tanglewood Self-Storage.
- Major construction on the new multi-million dollar Sentara Hospital is underway

### **Financial Milestones:**

- Received grant approval for more than \$4 million in special state appropriations, the greatest of which is the Grace Drive Pump Station Replacement Project, a \$3.6 million award that will safeguard the growth of southern Elizabeth City, including Elizabeth City State University and US Coast Guard Base Elizabeth City
- Awarded grants for our continuing efforts to strengthen our infrastructure. Public Utilities and Finance staff teamed up to win more than \$6 million in competitive grant awards for water, sewer and streetscaping,
- In addition to current year grant awards, we have several ongoing awards from prior years. Finance and Public Utilities have a portfolio of more than \$12 million in active grants that have tremendously aided our residents while helping minimize utility rate increases.
- In February 2023, the Police Department was awarded the FY2022-2023 Governor's Crime Commission's Local Law Enforcement Block Grant in the amount of \$23,370.00, which will be used towards the purchase of in-car cameras.

- In February 2023, the Police Department was awarded the FY2023 National PAL Mentoring Grant in the amount of \$16,200.00, which funds enrichment activities for eighteen local youth to out-of-town educational trips which provide wonderful opportunities for to experience.
- Elizabeth City recently received notice of a \$641,000 Rural Transformations Grant from the NC Department of Commerce for improving sidewalks, lighting, and safety on Water Street.
- Negotiated new agreement with financial institutions, which led to reduced annual bank fees saving the City over \$12,000. With the additional savings, we were able to add fraud protection to the primary bank account to secure the City's funds and began an onsite check deposit scanning to reduce reading errors that affect the deposit.
- Communicated with cash collections merchants to develop reports to correspond with deposits to our bank account resulting in a timelier recording of transactions.
- This Council was given a difficult burden to bear with audit issues, delinquent bank reconciliations and a myriad of financial concerns to sort out. We are proud to announce that our bank reconciliations have been brought current from being 18 months behind, which is no small feat. As a result, the financial reporting is up to date, which leads to a better outlook of our current financial situation. Additionally, our audits are expected to be finalized shortly.

### **Parks / Facilities / Equipment Milestones:**

- With the growing population, Parks and Recreation has expanded summer camp from 8 weeks to 10 weeks, offering 9 specialty camps and extended hours to meet the needs of working parents.
- During the height of COVID-19, our Par 3 Golf course gained increased popularity for citizens around the city and county. Participation in golf tournaments, leagues and daily golfing continue to increase.
- Elizabeth City introduces the River City Skippers summer college baseball league with Holmes Field located at Knobbs Creek Recreation Center as their home field for their 2023 season.
- Parks and Recreation is happy to announce Elizabeth City is a Tree City town for the 13<sup>th</sup> year in a row. We are dedicated to the supporting and strengthening the urban forestry programs in our community.
- New parks signs have been installed at downtown park locations in partnership with Visit Elizabeth City. Parks and Recreation is continuing this fresh new look to the parks throughout the city and county. Additionally, a few of our parks received new monikers. Sunset/Gosnold Park is now formally known as the Sunset at Johnnie B. Walton Park and Dog Corner Park is officially renamed College Park.
- Renovations of George Wood Park are almost complete. We hope to reopen the park in early Spring. Due to damage from Hurricane Matthew Parks and Recreation was forced to close the beloved waterfront park for safety. Sawyers Residential and Marine Construction have been working diligently to

complete the project as soon and safely as possible for the public to enjoy access to the charming views of the Pasquotank River from George Wood Park.

- The former PAL gym renovations are coming along beautifully. Parks and Recreation plan to open its doors in late Summer 2023. The new location will provide additional space to expand programming and athletics.

#### **City Staff/Employee Milestones:**

- HR reports an increase in employee morale
- Trying to promote / "hire" from the inside / build up our employees

#### **City Council Milestones:**

- After a long struggle to find a permanent manager, this Council made it a priority to secure a manager as one of its first and foremost goals, bringing on Mr. Montre' Freeman in October 2022.
- Re-instated Council Committees to oversee departmental challenges and help reach goals.

#### **Infrastructure Milestones:**

- Water Treatment Plant, WIF Project: 1956 interior rehab complete
- Grace Drive Pump Station Expansion Project via Timmons Group
- Pearl & Main Lift Station (I&I) Find & Fix It via WithersRavenel
- Providence Road Bridge Replaced
- Rivershore-Fairfax Bridge replacement in planning and development phase and completely funded \$1.9M
- Hunter-Dawson, Flora-Riverside, Stormwater Assessment and modeling near complete
- Mid-Atlantic University 24" Force Main Repair Scheduled
- Provided temporary electric service to the New Hospital site for construction of the Medical Office Building and the Hospital
- Ready to energize New Medical Office Building within the next two weeks
- Ordered all new construction materials for Line Extension to provide electric service to the hospital complex.
- Bid is being prepared for Construction of Electric Line to new Hospital Complex.

#### **Quality of Life Milestones:**

- In November 2022, the Police Department revised its Mutual Aid Agreement with Elizabeth City Police State University Campus Police Department. The new Agreement extends the jurisdictional authority of the sworn campus police officers and was done in an effort to further

strengthen our partnership with the University and in greater service to our community.

- Facing extreme officer shortages in the Police Department, the Council authorized a restructuring and monetary incentive program to help our organization and our community.
- We are also pleased to announce that the Fire Department was able to lower its ISO rating from a 4 to a 3/9E. This was done through hard work between the Fire Department, Public Works and our 911 center. This rating is what most insurance companies base their fire insurance rates on. While homeowners will not see much of a decrease in premiums, commercial customers may see some savings after April of this year. This is a huge win for our community.

### **Tourism Development Milestones:**

- The annual Christmas parade has always been one of the most anticipated events for the city, and 2022 was the largest Christmas parade to date with over 125 entries. New to the parade was a "Quiet Zone" providing a safe, comfortable area for citizens with sensory issues to enjoy this hometown favorite event. As an aside, Elizabeth City was recently featured on two national "lists" as one of the "top 21 Best Christmas Towns in the USA" and made the list of The Best 15 Christmas Towns in the US, it was featured in the January 2023 print edition of Our State Magazine, was named a top ten Christmas town in North Carolina, and also made the list of The Best 15 Christmas Towns!
- New businesses are opening, with three new restaurants anticipated to open in the coming months – Allecious, Sago on the River, and The Boathouse. We eagerly await the arrival of the HarborTown ferries and dinner boats on our beautiful harborfront which will provide even more opportunities for our community and visitors to see and experience our harbor. With these additions, downtown will offer 26 dining and drinking options, almost 30 shopping options, almost 25 health, beauty, and wellness options, and a variety of arts, cultural, educational, and experience options.

With this report, I, E. Kirk Rivers proudly announce that the City of Elizabeth City continues to move in the right direction. As you can see, we're off to a great start for our City and I am looking forward to continuing this trend. Our unique location and environment, our friendly citizens and drive for economic development create the potential for positive growth and development over the next several years.

Thank you,

E. Kirk Rivers, Mayor