

## **2009 State of the County Address**



**Michael W. Altizer, Chairman  
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors  
Tuesday, November 17, 2009  
Green Ridge Recreation Center**

**“New Horizons”**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Thank you for that kind introduction. On behalf of my fellow board members and the staff of Roanoke County, I want to welcome you to the Green Ridge Recreation Center. I am extremely pleased and honored to be able to present this year’s State of the County Address at the site of a project I am deeply proud of. For years, our Board has recognized the important role that tourism and sports marketing play in our community. We’ve also expressed a belief that in order for our region to flourish, we need to retain and attract young professionals while continually striving to better serve the citizens who already call Roanoke County home. It is my sincere belief that construction of the Green Ridge Recreation Center will

be a significant factor in helping to attain all of these goals and is a project that citizens and visitors to the Roanoke Valley will enjoy for years to come.

## **OVERVIEW**

While our country has experienced difficult economic conditions, the fiscal strength of Roanoke County remains strong and 2009 has been a year of many accomplishments. By January first Green Ridge will officially open to the public. And if the past few months are any indication – the number of folks using this facility will surpass all of our expectations. This facility is unlike any other in the Roanoke Valley and I predict will become a recreation destination for this region. But as anyone who has followed Roanoke County for the past year can attest it has been an amazing year for other reasons, too. Just last month, we celebrated the opening of a new fire station and garage. And a mere two weeks ago, we completed an upgrade of our public safety radios. Plus, we recently broke ground on a new library. Ladies and gentleman the message I'm here to share with you this morning is that "The State of Roanoke County" is one we can all be proud of.

## **GREEN RIDGE RECREATION CENTER**

I would like to begin my comments this morning by talking about the facility we are gathered in today. At the conclusion of my remarks, the Board, County staff, and I invite each of you to tour the building and experience for yourself all that it has to offer. Certainly there are some finishing touches that must be made before our grand opening but I feel certain you won't be disappointed. What you will see is that Green Ridge is more than a gym; it is a multi-use community center available to residents of all ages, abilities, and incomes.

It was only 18- months ago that we stood near this spot and broke ground for this incredible facility. Since then it's been a whirlwind of activity and construction. The result: this large facility housing approximately 75,000 square feet of family fun that includes what our citizens told us they wanted including:

- the gymnasium you are in today
- a fitness center
- two aerobics rooms
- three multi-purpose rooms

- and an indoor aquatics center complete with slides and an adjoining birthday party room that more than 50 people have already signed up to use!

In addition, the Center includes a 20,000 square foot outdoor leisure pool with large slides and a lazy river dubbed “Splash Valley.” The indoor walking track, located just above our heads, offers sweeping vistas of the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. As the invitation to today’s Annual Address states – we are reaching “New Horizons.”

When we made the decision to construct this Center, it was with the understanding that it would be an affordable facility that would be open to persons of all ages and abilities – a facility that would build upon the County Parks, Recreation and Tourism Department’s outstanding reputation for providing a wide range of programming. To date, more than 1,300 people have become members of Green Ridge – people not just from Roanoke County, but Roanoke City, Salem, Botetourt and Franklin Counties and yes, even Montgomery County. These are individuals who signed on before the doors have even opened. They say build it and they will come -- we at Roanoke County are proof of that.

I think we would all agree we must do more to attract new companies and retain young professionals to the region by providing recreational

opportunities such as those found here. This is essential to the economic health of our valley, and is a key component in our continued prosperity. I believe this facility will be able to further that goal as well as assist the region in promoting tourism and sports marketing. Green Ridge will be capable of helping host national and regional sporting events such as AAU basketball. The facility will also compliment the region's aggressive sports marketing efforts. For those who don't know, "sports marketing" is a major economic driver in our region with an economic impact of over nine million dollars in the Roanoke Valley this year alone. I am convinced the addition of Green Ridge will only bolster that success. When competing against other regions to host a national sporting event what better way to "seal the deal" than by promoting a state-of-the-art facility where parents and their children can spend time before or after tournament games?

At this time, I would like to thank the people who've played a major role in the success of this endeavor - Assistant County Administrator Dan O'Donnell and Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Director, Pete Haislip and his talented staff. Thank you for your enthusiasm and for making this a first-class project we can all be proud of.

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

Many people consider the abundant natural beauty and the presence of outdoor amenities, such as our greenway system and the Blue Ridge Parkway, as key contributors to the quality of life in the Roanoke Valley – and I could not agree more. While construction of Green Ridge has been taking place, the County has continued its commitment to the development of greenways and trails throughout the Valley.

The Roanoke River Greenway in Green Hill Park continues to be a favorite. Staff is currently working with the City of Salem to connect this section with the greenway in Salem, eventually building a 30-mile connected greenway system running from west Roanoke County through the cities of Salem and Roanoke, and continuing on through east Roanoke County to the Franklin County line. In addition, volunteers have spent over 1,000 hours in Green Hill Park building natural surface trails and installing benches and kiosks.

With several hundred thousand dollars in federal grant monies, staff is working with the City of Roanoke, the National Park Service, American Electric Power and the Roanoke Valley Resource Authority to design the greenway from the Wastewater Treatment Plant to the eastern end of Roanoke County. In addition, trail systems are being designed for the new

library site and Waldron Park. We have seen first hand how popular these outdoor recreational opportunities are and we plan to continue to provide the citizens of Roanoke County with an inter-connected greenway system.

## **PROVISION OF SERVICES**

### **Fire and Rescue Station**

Also contributing to a community's quality of life are the services that government provides. Anyone who has followed our Board knows of our commitment to providing for the public safety needs of our citizens. Last month, the new North County Fire and Rescue Station became fully operational and not a moment too soon. Growth in the northern part of the County, coupled with an aging population and increased commercial development, created more calls than the Hollins Station could answer.

The new station will not only help the Hollins Station respond to calls but help improve response times throughout Roanoke County. When you take on a capital project of this magnitude there is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes and I would like to thank Chief Rick Burch, Division Chief Todd Maxey and the entire fire and rescue department for helping make this much needed project a reality.

## **Emergency Radio Upgrade**

Our Board is proud of the work performed by all of our public safety personnel from firefighters and E-M-T's to our 9-1-1 dispatchers and the staff of our fully accredited Police Department and Sheriff's office. When an officer or firefighter is at the scene of an incident, it's critical that they have clear communication on their two-way radios. This month, we completed the 9.2 million dollar conversion of our public safety radio system from analog to digital capability. The new digital radio system will ensure that Roanoke County's public safety personnel have the best equipment in the field to protect themselves and our citizens. This important capital project was spearheaded by our Chief Information Officer, Elaine Carver. Ms. Carver, many thanks to you and your staff. I know this wasn't an easy project and all of you are to be commended.

## **Fleet Service Center**

Roanoke County also takes pride in supporting our behind the scenes departments like General Services - the department responsible for building maintenance, trash collection, and vehicle maintenance. You may be surprised to know that the County's General Service Department is responsible for the upkeep of over 800 vehicles and pieces of equipment belonging to the County and the Western Virginia Water Authority. As a

former regional manager for Monroe Muffler, I can assure you that this is a significant responsibility. It is our hope and expectation that this job will be made easier by the opening of the new Fleet Service Center, the dedication of which was celebrated by the County and Western Virginia Water Authority just last month. Director of General Services Anne Marie Green and Assistant Director Jim Vodnik – thank you for your hard work and keeping the Board and citizens updated throughout this project.

### **South County Library**

This past month included another big celebration for Roanoke County – the groundbreaking for our new Headquarters Library. The new South County Library will be constructed across from Penn Forest Elementary School and will be the County’s first new full-service library in more than 30 years. The new facility will include many unique features which will set the library apart from others in the area, as well an auditorium for community meeting space. Walking trails will also be incorporated into the site’s natural wetlands. Assistant County Administrator Diane Hyatt and Library Director Diana Rosapepe and her staff have worked countless hours on this project. Thank you for helping bring this project to fruition.

As a footnote, I would like to provide you with some statistics which illustrate the level of usage and popularity of our library system:

- Last year, more than 68,000 County residents used their cards to check out a record-setting 1.2 million items.
- In the process, they visited the six branches in the system nearly 900,000 times.
- Another 34,000 people attended programs and events ranging from story times and parties for preschoolers to computer classes and author visits for adults.

Ms. Rosapepe, please extend to your staff our thanks for a job well done not only day-to-day but in helping to make way for the new Headquarters library.

### **CAPITAL PROJECT FINANCING**

One question that some of you may be pondering is how Roanoke County has been able to continue to construct these capital projects, given the state of the economy. Some have asked if we would be better to hold off some of our projects not knowing what the future economic situation may hold.

The County sold bonds for all of the projects in March 2008, before the economic downturn. Because the County had the funding, it made sense to proceed with the projects as planned. These funds had to be

used for the purpose they were sold, and could not be redirected to ongoing operating costs.

## **BUDGET**

Another question you may have is how Roanoke County has managed to avoid layoffs and major cuts in the service level to our citizens given the state budget shortfall and evidence of a declining economy. I can tell you the past 18 months haven't been easy. Last fiscal year, we had to adjust our budget mid-year in order to avoid a nearly 4-million dollar deficit. It was a challenge that we managed to successfully navigate thanks to the use of one-time revenues, higher than anticipated personal property numbers, and serious belt tightening by our departments.

In terms of the current fiscal year, the information we have received from the state has not been promising and our revenue collections are not what we had projected they would be. This information will not only impact Roanoke County government but our school system as well. While it's true Roanoke County and the Roanoke Valley have a diverse economic base that has been historically insulated from the extreme expansions and contractions of the national economy, it would be unrealistic to think we will not be impacted by higher unemployment, decreased business investment, declining consumer confidence, and the instability of the stock market. This

reality will present challenges for Roanoke County in the days, months, and years ahead. National economic trends tend to reach Roanoke County 18-24 months behind many other regions, so coming out of this recession may take a little longer. We be monitoring the situation closely and ensuring that our departments are responsible in their spending plans. As you are about to hear, we do have a strong economic development strategy that we are confident will also help carry us through.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

I had the pleasure to present the State of the County address in 2005, and our Economic Development successes for that year played a prominent role in my remarks. The economy both locally and nationally was strong, and Roanoke County was in the midst of a multi-year string of major new industrial announcements that resulted in the creation of over 1,000 new jobs and over 100-million dollars in new investment. Expansions by several of our existing industries also contributed to this unprecedented growth. I am happy to report that these companies remain strong and are playing an important role in the growth of our community.

Back in 2005, I remember thinking that this growth could not last forever. To think that we'd enjoy that kind of economic news on an annual basis would be unrealistic. Fortunately, our Board understands the

importance of remaining grounded and committed to a broad based economic development strategy, which includes doing everything we can to build ongoing relationships with our existing businesses, and to work hard to ensure their continued health during less prosperous times.

I don't have to tell you that those times are here. The number of prospects we work with has drastically decreased and there are fewer and fewer major new projects being announced nationwide. In Roanoke County, the continued health and growth of our existing industries is proving to be more important than ever. To that end, an existing business survey was conducted over the summer where approximately 3,000 County businesses ranging in size from micro enterprise to large corporations were contacted to assess their operational needs and concerns. I am pleased to report that over 81% of the survey respondents rated the county as a good or excellent location for their business. I believe that this can be attributed to the County's pro-business outlook, positive fiscal and regulatory environment and the excellent relationships we have established with our businesses. We also identified businesses that felt that we could improve on certain services and initiatives. This type of honest dialogue is a good thing and we are responding to these concerns one- by- one and are pleased with the results. I hope and believe that those businesses are too.

But I don't want to leave you with the impression that there aren't any bright spots within the business community. While times have been tough, there has also been some good news too. Achievements for fiscal year 2009 include:

- the expansion by Coca-Cola into the Valley Gateway Shell building;
- industrial Battery and Charger locating into the Valley Tech Park;
- Pixel Optics locating a new administrative and research and development office at Valleypointe Corporate Center;
- and the announcement of Rose Properties' intention to construct 225 new high quality apartment units along with development of a new hotel and office building.

Several existing companies also announced significant expansions this year. Some of these companies include:

- The West Village Retail Center
- The Hampton Inn on Plantation Road
- Richfield Retirement Center
- and Precision Fabrics Group

These successes don't come by accident. This Board has made it clear that we are open for the right kind of business and we expect much from our economic development team. The Roanoke County Department of

Economic Development is accredited through the International Economic Development Council. In addition, Doug Chittum, our Director, currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Virginia Economic Developers Association. In September, Mr. Chittum and Assistant Director Jill Loope co-chaired the Annual Virginia Economic Developers Conference that was held in Roanoke and brought over 225 economic development leaders to the Roanoke Valley. This was an excellent opportunity to showcase the valley to economic development professionals from all across the Commonwealth.

As you can see, we are not waiting on the phone to ring with the next prospect, and we are not expecting our challenges to be met by relying on assistance from Richmond or those inside the Beltway. We are not waiting on the national economy to rebound, and we haven't thrown in the towel when it comes to economic development. We are determined to control our own destiny and we are now working harder than ever to continue our record of economic development success and service to our existing business community.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

Whenever possible, Roanoke County seeks opportunities to partner with surrounding localities to provide services for citizens in the most cost

effective manner. In addition to offering cost savings, regional partnerships also serve to avoid redundancy of services. One such example from the past year is construction of the Roanoke Valley Regional Fire Training Tower dedicated on September 11th. This state-of-the-art structure will allow firefighters from across the Roanoke Valley and beyond to train for a range of fire scenarios.

Another example is the Western Virginia Water Authority. In July 2004, the County and City of Roanoke formed the Authority and we are pleased to welcome Franklin County as our newest member – a partnership that was finalized just this month.

The Western Virginia Regional Jail is also the result of collaboration between the County, City of Salem, Franklin, and Montgomery Counties. This facility opened in March of this year and has helped to alleviate the extreme overcrowding that was being experienced in each of the local jails. The success we have had in bringing this many localities to the table has clearly set the standard for future regional initiatives.

In looking forward, I am encouraged by the preliminary studies that have been conducted regarding a possible merger of the County and Town of Vinton E-911 Centers. If such a move is undertaken, it is expected to not just save money, but improve service for residents of both localities.

## **COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR**

Working closely with these projects is our new County Administrator, Clay Goodman. We are fortunate that he has chosen to make Roanoke County his home, and his contributions since his arrival have shown us that we made the right choice. Mr. Goodman came to us with an excellent reputation and more than 30 years experience in local government. His strong working relationships with so many people in the Roanoke and New River Valleys will serve us well. It is our Board's hope that we can continue to build upon the regional partnerships that are already in place, as well as establish new ones.

## **SCHOOLS**

The hallmark of any community is its school system, and the partnership between the Board of Supervisors and the School Board is to be commended. There is no question we work well together, during both good times and bad. This was especially evident over the past year as we worked through tough budgetary issues.

Our partners on the Roanoke County School Board are committed to providing the best learning environment for our students. In April, they celebrated the completion of renovations to Northside High School. Currently, the school administration is in the process of renovating and

expanding three elementary schools: Cave Spring, Green Valley and Mount Pleasant. Also in progress are renovations to William Byrd High School. Early next year, the School Board plans to begin construction on a new Masons Cove Elementary school.

With respect to academics, I am proud to say that every school in Roanoke County once again is fully accredited by the Commonwealth of Virginia. Approximately 90-percent of high school students graduated on-time and of those graduates, 90-percent pursued some form of higher education. These statistics clearly show that Roanoke County is a leader in education.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY**

In looking forward, the County will be focusing not only on the services we provide, but also on their impact upon the environment. Under the leadership of County Administrator Clay Goodman, we have formed a Building Committee which will ensure that all future projects will be constructed with an eye toward environmental responsibility. We have begun to set the stage for this environmental focus with the completion of the Western Virginia Regional Jail, which is already LEED certified, as well as the Fleet Service Center and Green Ridge Recreation Center, which we anticipate will also receive this same designation.

And our environmental efforts are being recognized. The County recently received the Certified Green Government Award from the Virginia Municipal League and Platinum Certification in the Virginia Association of Counties Go Green Initiative.

Over the past year, Roanoke County also received another unrelated but equally prestigious award. We regained the top spot among localities our size in the national Digital Counties Survey. This award recognizes Roanoke County as a leader in not just information technology but government use of social media.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, I want to thank the entire staff of Roanoke County for the great job they do everyday. My fellow board members and I may not always agree with each other, but we are united in the fact we have an outstanding group of people to work with.

I also want to welcome our newly elected Supervisor, Eddie Elswick. Mr. Elswick, we look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead.

I'd also like to take the time to personally thank Supervisor Joe McNamara for his devotion to Roanoke County over the past decade. Supervisor McNamara has been more than a fellow board member – he's

also been a friend. Thank you for your willingness to serve the people of Roanoke County. You have been a leader and gentleman and will be missed.

Right now, I'd like to call Pete Haislip forward. Each of you here today should have received a free one-day pass to Green Ridge compliments of Roanoke County. If you didn't, please see Pete or one of our staff members.

This morning, we're also giving away a free one-year family membership to a lucky person in this room. Pete, if you would assist me in drawing the winning card.