

Town of Ponce Inlet

Mayor's State of the Town Address

January 21, 2021

Happy New Year! With the start of a fresh New Year, many of us take time to reflect on the prior year. The Town does this as well and we provide this information to you each January through this annual State of the Town Address.

Town's Financial Health. We'll start with the financial health of our Town. The Town received another excellent audit for the prior fiscal year. We have a general fund reserve of approximately 2.8 million dollars, which equates to approximately 6 months of our current operating expenses. The Town has a long-established goal to keep the general fund reserve at a level between 3 and 9 months of operating expenses. The Town's composite millage rate at 19.4726 mills remains the 5th lowest out of 24 primary service delivery taxing districts in Volusia County; the Town's specific millage rate is 5.9 mills of this total composite amount. We strive to meet our stated mission to provide you with excellence in service delivery while ensuring you obtain the greatest value for your tax dollar. With that in mind, I'll describe some of the specifics of what we have done this year in this Address.

Town's Response to COVID-19. 2020 was wrought with the unprecedented challenges of the Coronavirus Worldwide Pandemic, also known as COVID-19. We pooled our executive and elective resources with Volusia County and our neighboring cities to navigate this collectively to reduce confusion. There were weekly meetings of Mayors, City Managers, Fire Chiefs, Finance Directors, and HR Directors; some of these meetings continue today to ensure interlocal coordination remains intact through this event. The Spring of 2020 was a period of information overload; many expected governments to respond with force and mandates while others cited personal liberty concerns. Park closures, temporary facility closures, reduced capacities, face masks, quarantine, daily body temperature monitoring, plexiglass barriers, cancellation of events, Zoom meetings... We all experienced these inconveniences. The Town reopened its facilities as quickly and as safely as possible. We still offer the Zoom meeting option for all Town Council and Town Board meetings; we have done this since May and will continue to do this at least until our most vulnerable population has had the opportunity to receive vaccinations. We maintain our plexiglass barriers, we require masks of employees and masks of the public if entering our restricted work areas, and we check employee temperatures each day. We continue these prudent protection measures for the welfare of all. Our staff timely filed and attained all of the COVID-19 funding available to the Town from various sources, which totaled \$160,873. We used approximately \$25,500 of this funding for a significant infrastructure upgrade that we promptly initiated to enhance air quality in our government-owned buildings for the safety of our employees and citizens. This was the addition of ultraviolet lighting to our air conditioning systems. Buildings completed include the Community Center, Town Council Chambers, Town Hall, and the Police, Fire, and Public Works Department buildings. UV lighting is used in the air handlers as an efficient means of

killing germs, bacteria, and viruses as air processes through the system. We hope you and your loved ones have been fortunate and remained healthy through this pandemic. We know that some people who have contracted the disease have mild symptoms, while others become very ill and sometimes die. Our hearts go out to those who have suffered with this illness.

Fire-EMS Service Discussion. I know that many of you are interested in hearing from me on the subject of contracting Fire-EMS service to Volusia County and I want to make sure that I provide you with all of the factual information that we have obtained to date, understanding that there will be more to come in months that follow, and possibly even more information will be available between the time that we prepare this and the date it is published. I have sworn to always do my best as your Mayor to provide you with honest and fact-based information. Ponce Inlet citizens deserve nothing less.

Town's Request: Over the past two years, the subject of the number of firefighters needed per shift, type of equipment needed, and possible advantages in contracting fire services has come up in a variety of forums. There have been estimated efficiencies to include greater access to additional personnel and equipment when paying for a service from a larger agency when service level requirements are the same, which they are for Fire-EMS service. Several months ago, the Town Council requested that the Town Manager obtain a quote from Volusia County and find out more about contracting Fire-EMS service. Volusia County staff provided proposals which include two staffing options: one with four firefighters on a shift and one with five firefighters on a shift. These two staffing options are broken out with two contract options. One option is to contract the maintenance and replacement of vehicles and equipment and one is for the Town to continue to maintain vehicles and equipment. In any scenario, the Town maintains ownership of the fire department facility.

Call Process: The process for placing a call to the fire department would not change from what occurs now. All calls are currently received and dispatched through the Volusia County Sheriff's Office dispatch center to each fire department within Volusia County, whether a city or county operated fire department.

Personnel: All of the Town's present personnel are to be retained at no less than their current pay rates. Many, if not most, of the Town's firefighters would receive pay increases with a transition into the County pay band system. Both the Town and Volusia County provide the same retirement system, so there is no retirement plan change. Volusia County firefighters receive a full array of employment benefits at least equivalent to those currently received by the Town's firefighters and have greater promotional opportunity.

Qualifications & Training: Volusia County's Fire-Rescue Department is currently among the elite agencies striving toward national accreditation status to develop higher standards and greater accountability to their citizens. Volusia County Fire-Rescue operates a full-

service training facility, in conjunction with Daytona State College. In addition to other training opportunities provided by Volusia County, their firefighters visit the training center throughout the year to take classes, maintain fire and EMS re-certification, as well as training to meet ISO requirements. The site is also used for multi-agency training and provides a variety of educational programs for numerous governmental agencies throughout the year.

Equipment: If the Town chooses to contract Fire-EMS Service, there are two options regarding equipment: Town maintains the equipment or County maintains the equipment. The value and anticipated replacement costs have been calculated into the County equipment maintenance proposal. Except for the new ambulance that we have ordered for the coming year, the majority of the Town fire department's large-scale equipment is reaching the end of its lifespan and will have to be replaced within the next couple years. If contracting with Volusia County, their entire Fire-EMS protection system becomes available to us and it is built with sufficient redundancy to ensure that equipment is available if a sudden replacement is needed. They report having a highly robust equipment replacement system and use top of the line, state of the art equipment. If accepting responsibility for the Town's fire service, the County would perform a risk assessment of Ponce Inlet and make recommendations on the equipment needed to mitigate the specific types of fire risks that we have in our community.

Patient Transport: The Town is currently allowed to transport under the Municipal Transport Agreement and has been afforded this opportunity under some form of agreement since 2012. This is not a municipal right, but we collectively participated in negotiations for this with all of the cities within Volusia County that choose to transport. One of the requirements of the Municipal Transport Agreement is to respond outside of your city's jurisdiction for certain priority calls based upon closest unit response. This means that in order to be able to transport Ponce Inlet residents, we have to respond to calls outside of Ponce Inlet when dispatched. This issue has been raised a lot in the past year with statements made about the Town's personnel being sent to Port Orange, Daytona Beach Shores, etc... Until now, there has been only one other option: cease Ponce Inlet's fire-based transport and wait for EVAC for every call. Now, under the County's proposal, a Volusia County Special Service District could be created for only Ponce Inlet and Wilbur-by-the-Sea and the transport response from our fire department facility under County operations would be limited to that area.

Cost Comparison: A comparison of costs show that personnel-wise, the Town's expenses are comparable for shift personnel and overhead costs. When we look at vehicle and equipment costs, that is where we lose cost-efficiency as a single-station department because we are either paying for extra equipment or lacking redundancy.

Performance Standards & Accountability: Specific performance standards and accountability, to include monthly reporting to the Ponce Inlet Town Council, would be established in a service contract. The Town would also have a liaison to the Volusia County Fire Chief.

History of Fire-EMS Service Delivery in Ponce Inlet: For approximately 20 years, the Town of Ponce Inlet has provided professional Fire-EMS service with full-time staff. The Council of 1994 took what was considered a controversial step toward our current model by initiating a hybrid model to blend professional firefighters with their long-standing completely volunteer service; over the several years that followed, this grew to become our current Fire-EMS Service model. In the past 20 years or so, the Town's Fire-EMS service model has remained pretty much the same with the exception of adding the internal transport component and recently one more firefighter per shift. Yet, over these same 20 years, almost all of the Town's condominiums have been developed, dramatically larger single-family homes have been built, increased historical structure preservation efforts have taken place, including the Pacetti Boarding House restoration project which will soon be underway, and more businesses have come to Ponce Inlet. These significant changes in our community indicate a review of our service delivery is prudent to ensure the continued health, safety, and well-being of Ponce Inlet residents and their property.

Summary: There are a lot of factors to consider regarding the provision of Fire-EMS services and we have attempted to break them down into the various preceding categories. Ultimately, this decision should be based upon which entity can provide the highest level of Fire-EMS protection using nationally established standards for the benefit of the Town of Ponce Inlet's residents. The Town Council welcomes your input in these discussions in the coming months.

Pollard Park "Grand" Opening. In February 2020, the Town reopened the Officer Timothy Pollard Memorial Park, located at 4680 South Peninsula Drive, after completing an approximately one-million-dollar renovation project for which we received about forty percent of the funding from Volusia County ECHO. We were very excited to be able to offer this fun recreational park for our citizens of all ages to use and had a Grand Opening planned for March. Unfortunately, we not only had to cancel the Grand Opening but we had to close the park very shortly after opening it because it was attracting large groups of people and there were executive orders against that at many levels of government due to COVID-19. We knew so little in those early months about surface contamination and masks were scarce. It was great to reopen it after a few weeks and to continue to see so many active residents playing in this park now.

Davies Lighthouse Park Project. We had barely completed our work at Pollard Park before we started the improvements project at the Kay & Ayers Davies Lighthouse Park, at 4931 South Peninsula Drive. This project was budgeted at \$350,000 for sidewalk widening to eight feet, decorative lighting along the sidewalk, new pirate ship playground equipment with artificial turf in

the playground area, and new picnic tables and bench swings around the park. This project was completed in November. We hope that you are enjoying the renovations to this park and the new opportunity to stroll in this historic area in the evening hours with the addition of the lighting.

Elber's Park. At the Cultural Services, Historic Preservation, and Tree Advisory Board's request, the Town updated the survey of Elber's Park and the right-of-way in the area for consideration of improvements to this small park located at the end of Beach Street, just off of Front Street. The Cultural Services Board will continue discussions regarding this park in the coming year and may propose recommendation to the Town Council.

Vice-Mayor Lois Paritsky recognized as Home Rule Hero. The Florida League of Cities recognizes an individual as a Home Rule Hero for consistent response to the League's request to reach out to members of the State Legislature and to help give local perspectives on issues. These individuals are considered some of the greatest advocates for municipal issues, and the League calls them "a shining example of local advocacy in action". Ponce Inlet is proud that Vice-Mayor Paritsky has been recognized by the Florida League of Cities for the past two years as a Home Rule Hero.

New Chief of Police & Deputy Fire Chief. In the months preceding the pandemic closures, the Town had initiated a search for a new Chief of Police and a Deputy Fire Chief. By the time we were ready to conduct interviews for both of these positions, it was mid-April and it was tempting to wait until after COVID-19 was over because we didn't know this was going to be a one-year-plus pandemic event. Our capable staff decidedly marched forward though to keep this process on-track using Zoom technology, even before we tried it for anything else. Jeff Glazier, a 27-year veteran law enforcement officer and deputy chief with the City of Atlanta Police Department, was selected as the most qualified candidate for the Chief of Police position. Chief Glazier holds a Master of Science Degree in Criminal Justice from Georgia State University and is a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Economics from the University of Notre Dame. Noble Taylor, a 24-year veteran firefighter/paramedic and deputy chief with Volusia County Fire Rescue, was selected as the most qualified candidate for the Deputy Fire Chief position. In addition to his experience with Volusia County Fire Rescue, Deputy Chief Taylor worked for the City of Memphis Division of Fire Services. He holds a Master of Science degree in Operations Management from the University of Arkansas and is a Certified Florida Fire Code Administrator, an accomplishment achieved by few. Both of these public safety management professionals have been a good fit for our departments and our community. We are very happy to have them as part of our team and glad we didn't wait until COVID-19 was over to hire these new Chiefs!

Police Lieutenant: Retirement and Promotion. Lieutenant Mark Walker retired in September 2020 after 10 years with the Ponce Inlet Police Department. Lt. Walker brought almost 30 years of experience to our department from the Ormond Beach Police Department when he came to Ponce Inlet and spent most of his last year as Acting Chief of Police. After nearly 40 years of service in this honorable profession, we all wish Lt. Walker the very best in his retirement. This was followed

by a competitive internal promotion process in which Sergeant Corey Mead was selected as the department's next Lieutenant. Lt. Mead has worked for the Ponce Inlet Police Department for 24 years, so he is very familiar with our community and he holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Psychology from the University of Central Florida. Congratulations go to Lt. Mead on his promotion!

Septic-to-Sewer Project for Ponce de Leon Circle. Since February 2018, the Town has been pursuing grant assistance for a septic-to-sewer project on Ponce de Leon Circle. We are very pleased to announce that after a great deal of perseverance by our staff, the Town has received approval from St Johns River Water Management District Board for a 75% grant for this project. The remaining 25% will be split between the Town and the City of Port Orange via a cost-share agreement. This project will not only provide a state of the art gravity sewer system but it will also provide stormwater improvements, a new street, and some water line improvements on Ponce de Leon. In all, we have applied for 4 grants and a legislative funding request for this project. In accordance with our Town Goals and Sewer Master Plan, our staff worked to obtain as much funding assistance as possible and we know they will continue to do so for future sewer expansion projects in our community.

Coastal Resiliency Planning. As a community surrounded by water on three sides, Ponce Inlet took a leadership role in the region and invited the American Flood Coalition to make a presentation here in March. This led our Town Council to initiate planning efforts to improve the Town's resiliency and capacity to adapt to changes in sea level. This Fall, the Town will kick-off a study to assess vulnerabilities related to coastal hazards and changing climate conditions, facilitate public engagement and education, and update "peril of flood" policies in the Town's comprehensive plan. This effort will be used to guide future decision-making for development, infrastructure projects, and adaptation to projected sea level rise. Coinciding with this effort, the Town has budgeted for and applied for a grant for a Watershed Master Plan. This plan is the next step as we seek to improve our Community Rating System (CRS) which is currently at a level 5; an accomplishment shared by only two other municipalities in Florida and provides our residents with a 25% discount on flood insurance. Completion of the Watershed Master Plan will allow us to move to a level 4 rating improvement and provide even greater discounts to our residents on flood insurance. This is an ongoing and time-consuming effort by our staff, but it yields a quantifiable benefit for all of us living in this barrier island community.

Model Animal Welfare Regulations. Our Town continues to distinguish itself at the forefront of animal protection, recognizing the status of animals as cherished members of our community. We have amended our animal welfare ordinances in their entirety, setting forth clear standards for their application by our law enforcement officers. Owner responsibilities and animal protections have been clarified and updated. The protections in many of our ordinances have been reviewed and are in harmony with the Humane Society of America, the Florida Humane Society, and the Animal Legal Defense Fund. We are extremely proud that this past year, other Florida municipalities have

adopted one of our more significant protections, the anti-tethering ordinance. This ordinance prohibits the chaining or tethering of unattended dogs as it is viewed to be cruel and inhumane to the animal.

Fire Protection Rating. On December 30, 2020, the Ponce Inlet Fire Rescue Department received the results of its most recent Public Protection Classification (PPC) report from the Insurance Services Office (ISO). This evaluation typically occurs every 5 years, and a lower numerical rating translates into a greater level of fire protection and a possible reduction in property insurance rates. Ponce Inlet Fire-Rescue Department is proud to report that they maintained their previous ISO rating of 3, an ISO classification placing us in the top 14% of the 39,850 communities evaluated by the Insurance Services Office.

South Peninsula Drive Sidewalk Improvement Project. As a small town with big goals in meeting your recreational desires, the Town continues to work with the River-to-Sea Transportation Planning Organization to obtain federal/state grant monies as the primary funding source for a sidewalk expansion project for eight-foot-wide sidewalks along South Peninsula Drive. So far, this funding has resulted in the completion of a bicycle-pedestrian master plan and was followed by the completion of a feasibility study. In 2019 and again in 2020, we applied for grant funding for the design, engineering, and construction of this sidewalk improvement project and have been placed on the TPO priority funding list, from which allocations are made based upon available federal/state funding each year. Our project was submitted under the 10% local match requirement so, while we are aware that considerations have been discussed regarding increasing this requirement, we are of the understanding that our project will be considered under the funding requirements that were in place when it was submitted and prioritized by the TPO. Timing can be everything, so we are hopeful that it lines up for us and that an affordable improvement to eight-foot-wide sidewalks along South Peninsula Drive, wherever feasible, will be coming to you over the next few years.

Planning & Development Permitting. Despite pandemic conditions, housing development continued to prosper in 2020, as demonstrated by the number of permits issued this year. Over the course of the year 1,148 permits were issued (compared to 1,048 permits in 2019), including 17 for new single-family homes (compared to 13 in 2019). We conducted 2,536 inspections with an 98% pass rate (compared to 1,551 with an 89% pass rate in 2019). Our staff works to assist contractors in understanding the requirements of the Florida Building Code with the primary goal to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of our residents. In addition, the Town has implemented over-the-counter building permitting for mechanical permits, sewer connection permits, simple electric permits, and simple plumbing permits. We are also working toward online permitting as an option, but it is not our intent to eliminate the ability for face-to-face interactions with our staff. We remain ready to meet your permitting needs according to your preference.

Town Events. The majority of 2020's Town events looked a lot different than usual. We started off the year with the Historic Racing Parade and Ponce Preserves the Planet, and those were the last of the Town-sponsored events conducted in our usual manner. Our Cultural Services staff came up

with various online crafts and speakers to provide you with some enjoyment from the safety of your homes. Our September 11th Ceremony was our first virtual event. We conducted a “Spooktacular” Halloween Drive-Through that was a nice event even though we under-estimated the turnout, having never done it before. Our Christmas Tree Lighting was held virtually as well. Even Santa could only drive-by and wave “Ho, Ho, Ho” this year.

Volunteers. We know that we are not the only ones who work for our Town. We have about 60 volunteers whose work is directly related to Town government, and there are many other volunteers who give of their time to other various community clubs. In total, there are at least 22 different boards, clubs, or other organizations for a census population of just over 3,000. These volunteers make our Town the special place we all enjoy. On behalf of the Town Council, I want to say thank you to all our volunteers and welcome additional residents to get involved as their time, talents, and capabilities permit.

All of you, just like all of us, are ready for a better year ahead. I certainly wish all of you a happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year!

Respectfully yours,

Gary L. Smith, Mayor