

NEWS RELEASE

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## Mayor Benjamin Delivers 2012 State of the City Address

COLUMBIA, SC – Columbia Mayor Steve Benjamin delivered his 2012 State of the City address this evening at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center.

Below are Mayor Benjamin's full remarks as prepared. Also attached are four graphics from the event's program outlining several key accomplishments from 2011 in the areas of Main Street Revitalization, Job Creation, Public Safety, Infrastructure and Transportation.

### **2012 State of the City Address Remarks as Delivered by Mayor Steve Benjamin January 11, 2012 – Columbia, SC**

Members of Council, Mr. City Manager, honored guests, my beautiful wife Deandrea, our children, my gathered family and my fellow Columbians:

Before we begin, I would like to address a situation of ongoing and growing alarm.

Over the past weeks, in the midst of international unrest and Presidential Politics, one little boy and the family that wants nothing more than to have him home safe and sound has captured our nation's attention.

18-month-old Amir Jennings was last seen with his mother during the Thanksgiving holiday and we join them in our prayers for his safe and speedy return.

If you have any information about Amir, his whereabouts or the circumstances surrounding his disappearance, please call, text or log on to [midlandscrimestoppers.com](http://midlandscrimestoppers.com) and submit your anonymous tip today.

Amir is out there somewhere and we need your help to bring him home.

I also want to take a moment to recognize two colleagues who, when they retire from City Council this year, will leave behind a rich legacy of commitment and accomplishment that exemplifies our highest traditions of dedication, leadership and service.

Whether by working to ensure our city's financial health or by establishing a renewed focus on the arts, culture and creative communities throughout Columbia, Councilman Daniel Rickenmann and Dr. Belinda Gergel (our own personal Honey Badger) have, through faithful action and positive example, challenged us to imagine our city not as it is, but as it could be.

So let me take this opportunity to thank you, Daniel and Belinda, for your leadership, for your counsel and for your friendship. It has been a true honor to serve with each of you and know that, no matter where you go, the thoughts of a grateful city will always go with you.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we join here this evening as is our custom to celebrate the year gone by and, with a touch of hubris and great humility, look forward into this year to come.

I say "hubris" because, when I look around our city, I see a transformation taking place. I see smiles filling faces with comfort and ease. I see neighbors coming together, enjoying each other's company and filling our parks and community gardens with laughter and conversation.

I tell you, my friends, something is happening in our city. We stand taller. We walk with our chests raised filled with pride and purpose. It's as if some long, dark night has ended at last and the bright morning of promise and possibility has finally broken the distant horizon.

It is the rising sun in our eyes and tide in our hearts that brings us here to proclaim that we are a city ready to join our present with our potential, we are a city on the verge of greatness, we are a city eager for tomorrow because **WE ARE COLUMBIA** and the state of our city is strong!

I say "hubris" because it's not arrogance. It's a sense of something bigger, something inspired waiting just over the next ridge.

You can feel it on Main Street where the storefronts are lighting up with new businesses like mast general, whose president Fred Martin has joined us today, and the sidewalks crowd with eager shoppers and diners like never before.

It's the indomitable optimism of over \$1.1 Billion in new capital investment throughout Metro Columbia, more than 8,500 people going back to work in 2011 and over 9,000 jobs open and available right now.

And it is a faith built on the example of men and women like our new permanent Fire Chief, Aubrey Jenkins who this year found himself not only standing at the pinnacle of his profession but having reached that summit in such a way as to earn the full and unqualified respect of this administration, this council, and the entire City of Columbia.

Congratulations on your achievement, Chief, and thank you for your

It is a hopefulness born out of momentum and a confidence buoyed by promises fulfilled.

We promised to foster a new culture that values the arts and creativity and, by leveraging public and private investment, helped to open the new Tapp's Arts Center right in the heart of downtown.

We promised a new death benefit to support our first responders risking their lives on the job every day and exceeded our own expectations by providing that benefit to all city employees.

We promised to make public safety a priority and delivered in grand fashion increasing our funding for police and fire protection to historic levels and secured nearly \$2 Million in additional federal public safety dollars. We've committed to putting 39 new police cars on the street this year and, thanks to first class leaders like our Chief Jenkins and Police Chief Randy Scott, we have promoted more firefighters than ever before and our Police Department is at full capacity for the first time in 15 years.

We've risen to the challenge in Five Points cutting all crime there by 15% while reducing violent crime citywide including a 23% drop in assaults and a 45% drop in homicides for the first half of 2011. If that isn't worth cheering, if that isn't worth a little hubris, then I don't know what is.

But if I say "hubris" for the magnitude of our dreams and the stars just beyond our grasp, I say "humility" for the knowledge that we cannot reach them alone.

And when I say “hubris” for the past year’s accomplishments, I say “humility” because I know that every victory is shared.

Nowhere is this principle more evident than in the dramatic recovery of our city’s financial health.

2011 saw our second straight year of budget surplus, the restoration of our reserve funds, our credit rating improved and a series of employee led reforms that will save city taxpayers a minimum of \$647,000 over the next five years.

But as proud as we are of these achievements, we are even more thankful of the hard working city employees who made it possible.

These dedicated public servants have carried this city on their broad shoulders finding new and creative ways to serve the people with ever dwindling resources. They have absorbed deep budget cuts and worked long hours without objection, without complaint and, for going on four years, without a raise.

They are the men and women who pick up our garbage and make sure the water we drink is safe and clean. They keep our parks open and protect our rivers. They go out in the middle of the night to fix a broken water main and they answer our calls for help when we need them the most.

They are some of the best men and women I have ever known and they deserve better. That’s why, this year, I will be making a 2% cost of living increase for all City of Columbia employees a personal priority.

I don’t expect it to be easy. But we’ve never shied away from a challenge before, and we don’t intend to start now.

We didn’t shy away when the critics said that a New Year’s Eve celebration on Main Street was a waste of time. We pushed forward pulling volunteers from across the community and, leveraging \$15,000 in public funds with nearly \$200,000 in private donations, filled Downtown with some 20,000 revelers from across the Southeast the nation doubling our most optimistic expectations.

We turned a lull into a rush as hotels that normally lay empty during the holidays were filled to capacity. Restaurants like Ruth’s Chris Steakhouse had their biggest nights ever while others, like Drake’s Duck-In, had so many customers they actually ran out of food.

And tonight I’m proud to announce that the Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports & Tourism is projecting a final economic impact of over \$1.5 Million from this one Famously Hot New Year’s Eve celebration. That’s a \$100 return on every one dollar invested by the city.

Don’t tell us what can’t be done. We did it and we’ll do it again next year!

Don’t tell us you can’t create jobs during a national recession.

Tell it to the more than 8,500 who went back to work this year across Metro Columbia. Tell it to the companies advertising job openings right now for Registered Nurses, Computer Programmers, Occupational Therapists, Management Analysts and Operations Managers.

Tell it to Sensor Electronic Technology, Michelin, Aflac, Colonial Life, Pure Power Technology, Blue Cross and Verizon.

Tell it to the five companies including The Boudreaux Group, VC3, and the SC Chamber of Commerce who relocated to The Tower at 1301 Gervais, anchored by IT-oLogy, this year and brought 200 employees back downtown with them and new customers for our downtown small business owners.

Tell it to NuHub as they position our city and region to be a world leader in the new technology of small modular nuclear reactors.

Tell it to the local contractors and business owners who were awarded over \$11.3 Million in city contracts this year thanks to our new local preference ordinance. Let's see if they think this city doesn't support entrepreneurs.

Tell it to Mr. Bob Chen who, last month we named as our city's Honorary Ambassador to Taiwan and the Pacific Rim in order to broaden our capacity to bring new international investment here to Columbia and help our homegrown businesses find new markets and new customers abroad.

Don't tell me about hubris. Don't tell me we can't make this the most talented, educated and entrepreneurial city in the Southeast if not America. That's exactly what we're doing and we're not stopping any time soon.

In fact, I am pleased to report that years of discussions, meetings and negotiations are now bearing fruit as today papers were filed with the city outlining a plan for developing the largest piece of undeveloped downtown property east of the Mississippi; the long languishing Bull Street campus.

We're talking about the single largest neighborhood project in our city's history and the stakes are high. But by preserving our historic buildings, providing ample green space and laying out a mixed-use plan where people can live, work and play; I firmly believe that, when completed, this project will be a crowning achievement for our city and a source of great pride and satisfaction for the people of Columbia.

I am confident that Bob Hughes will not only transform 165 acres of prime real estate into a vibrant landscape of design and function, but that he will do while establishing a new national model for sustainable development practices.

I am excited about the future of Bull Street just as I am excited about the future of Columbia. But I know that this moment would never have come to pass were it not for men and women who possess both the courage to embrace a bold new vision of the future and the determination to make that vision a reality.

You see, you can't back down from the tough issues. You can't back away from the difficult questions because those are the ones that need to be answered.

You can't shy away from greatness.

That's why we didn't shy away when the County Penny Tax Referendum fell short in 2010 and it looked like our public transit system was doomed.

We took the challenge head on and, with your support, we made public transportation a priority raising our annual financial commitment from \$1 million to nearly \$4 million.

Today, not only are the buses still rolling, but they also have a new, energetic executive director at the wheel. Today CMRTA has clean and clear financial records and a new, restructured Board of Directors that, for the first time, brings important regional stakeholders like the University of South Carolina to the leadership table.

We're not out of the woods yet and, with service cuts looming on the horizon, the way forward will require shared commitment and sacrifice. But despite the difficulties ahead, I am now more committed than ever to the future of public transportation here in Columbia and throughout the Midlands Region.

I am committed because our economy depends on it, our future depends on it, the hard working men and women of this city depend on it and I will not let them down.

I pledge to you tonight that, come what may, I will not let our bus system fail.

My vision is not of a Columbia that is simply profitable and prosperous. But a city that recognizes the true meaning of service is not found in a balance sheet or profit margin but in our commitment to one another.

In order to be a great city, we must be a city of service and we must be a city that recognizes those who serve us providing the very blanket of freedom under which we rise every morning and sleep every night.

There are challenges ahead, certainly, but now is not the time to back away from those challenges. Now is not the time to lower expectations. Now is the time to exceed them.

As Dr. King would say:

Cowardice asks, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks, "Is it politic?" Vanity asks, "Is it popular?" But conscience only asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when we must take a position, that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but we must take it because it is right.

I realize that I stand here before you tonight the product of our great American Dream.

I have been surrounded throughout my life by people who love and support me. I've had my share of success professionally and politically. And I have the privilege and the honor to serve the wonderful people of this great city.

I can't tell you how thankful I am for all these many blessings God has saw fit to bestow upon my life. But I also know that these blessings must be repaid in service. I know that from whom much is given, much is expected and that's why I am here with you tonight.

Unfortunately, too often those who sacrificed the most to make a life like mine possible, the veterans who defended our liberty and lives with honor and distinction, have the most difficulty finding some measure of that success and fulfillment in their own lives.

But we can do something about that and tonight I'm taking the first step by asking my good friend Doug Rosinski to chair a new Mayor's Committee on Veterans.

This new program will help protect our veterans' welfare, connect them with job training and employment opportunities and serve as a portal through which our servicemen and women can find the variety of programs and services already at their disposal.

But perhaps most exciting, it will help us marshal the wealth of experience and proven leadership that makes these individuals true American heroes and leverage that resource for our children giving them the tools and the discipline they need to thrive in the challenging and ever changing world around us

My friends, I firmly believe, just as we stand on the shoulders of giants from generations passed, we have a responsibility to offer our shoulders for those generations yet to come and commit ourselves to ensuring that all of our children have the opportunity to live up to their God-given talents right here in Columbia.

That's why we have expanded existing programs like our Back to School Drills and Skills Camp, our Let's Move! Columbia program lead by our First Lady DeAndrea Benjamin and our groundbreaking Prime-Time in the Park teen initiative, that's why I have personally visited nearly

100 schools and youth groups since being elected your Mayor and that's why, this year, we are launching a new City of Columbia Youth Commission open to students between the ages of 14 to 18 throughout Richland and Lexington Counties to give these extraordinary students the opportunity to engage in and drive the debate on issues that directly affect them and their peers.

We have a wealth of young talent here in Columbia, a fact proven tonight by the likes of Ashley Jenkins who sang our National Anthem tonight, and Chanique Brown, who organized this whole event.

You see, these remarkable young ladies are two of 42 college and graduate students who came to City Hall through our Mayor's Fellows Internship Program. But they are students no longer and, today, Ashley works under one of our Assistant City Managers and Chanique serves the Mayor's Office as my Executive Assistant.

Today, they and their classmates are making a real difference in people's lives. So if Ashley, Chanique and all the Mayor's Fellows with us tonight could please stand.

This is the future of Columbia, Ladies and Gentlemen, and it is bright indeed.

So much of our lives are determined by circumstances beyond our control. When lightning strikes a house setting it on fire, there is little any of us can do but respond to put out the flames. When snow blankets our city, our only recourse is to clear the roads of ice and warm our hands by the fire.

The secrets of our individual genetic codes predetermine that we will be uniquely resistant to certain diseases while uniquely vulnerable to others and when sickness befalls us we must play the hand we're dealt and take the pain and expense as it comes.

But that doesn't mean we are without recourse. Your odds of developing breast cancer may be hereditary, but your odds of surviving it are largely determined by whether or not you receive annual mammograms.

If your father, your mother and your brother all have low metabolisms, odds are you will too. But it is through healthy diet and exercise that you keep that low metabolism from becoming obesity.

That's why, this year, we will implement a new City Employee Wellness Initiative that builds on proven strategies to build a healthier and happier workforce.

Now, we're not talking about some public information campaign that makes a headline or two and the fades away into the background. We're talking about new health insurance discounts to that put real dollars in an employee's hand if he or she quits smoking and commits to regular physicals.

This isn't a program that provides flu shots and blood pressure readings. This is a new city health clinic where our employees and their families can receive first-class care while reducing their out of pocket costs.

We're not talking about just treating an illness. This about comprehensive wellness, providing access to gym memberships, physical trainers and dietary consultants. It's about giving our city employees an opportunity to completely change their lives.

But let me be clear; this is as much about ensuring our fiscal health as it is about physical health because we know that this program has the potential to save four dollars in healthcare costs for every one spent on wellness. That's a 400% return that not only eases our annual budget strain, but also significantly reduces our annual GASB 45 liability.

I'm talking raising expectations here tonight.

I'm talking about dreaming big about the future and working to make those dreams come true.

I'm talking about making this a truly world class city, taking on what others have said is impossible and succeeding where others have fallen short and sometimes that requires an act of faith, courage and audacity.

It requires us to act boldly because the future is not for the feint hearted.

For too long we have watched every attempt to open our riverfront to its true development potential in a way that encourages connectivity and enhances our quality of life fall short of the mark. We have waited for the economy to improve and for passions to subside. We have waited for a favorable election year and federal dollars. We have waited for our success to be ensured and while we've waited our future lay unfinished.

Well I'm tired of waiting on the stars to align. I'm tired of waiting for promises that never come.

Tonight I make my promise. Tonight I pledge that we will make completing the eastern side of the Three Rivers Greenway from Granby to Gervais a top priority and we will get it done.

My friends, we are a city steeped in the tradition of community built on the foundation echoed in the words of Senator John Lewis Gervais who 225 years ago hoped "the oppressed of every land might find refuge under the wings of Columbia."

My friends, WE ARE COLUMBIA. And as that conviction's descendants we have to start thinking in terms that go beyond property taxes and water tap fees and imagine our city as something more than a conglomeration of neighborhoods and council districts because in this modern, interconnected and regional society the old silos and boundaries no longer apply.

Because, in the end, it's all about people – this interwoven tapestry of individuals and families all struggling to overcome the same challenges and obstacles and claim some small corner of the American Dream as their own.

Matthew teaches us that "A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden."

"You are the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hidden, neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick to give light for all that are in the house.

"So let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven. "

This is our moment, right now, to take a first step into the wider world waiting for us.

This is our moment to grab hold of a new vision of possibility fueled by hubris and humility and set this city upon a hill as a beacon of hope for all.

We will do what is hard. We will achieve what is great. Because we are a city willing to believe in the future. Because we are a city willing to reach for the stars. Because, now and forever, WE ARE COLUMBIA.

Thank you. God bless you. And God bless the City of Columbia.

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