

**Mayor Bob Coble
State of the City Speech
February 10, 2005**

Thank you Charlie, and thank you all for being here tonight. I would like to recognize the members of Columbia City Council who are here: Anne Sinclair, Daniel Rickenmann, Hamilton Osbourne, Sam Davis. E.W. Cromartie, and Tameika Devine are out of town.

I also want to recognize my wife Beth who is here. Also my daughters Elizabeth and Lucy, and my son LaBorde.

The city has hundreds of hard working employees whose dedication to our city makes Columbia a great place to live and work. I would ask all of our city employees present tonight to stand and be recognized. Thank you all.

Our city is blessed to have the tremendous leadership of our City Manager. Charles Austin has brought stability and a new sense of purpose to our City. Chief Austin, thank you for your leadership and continued ability to bring us together and move us forward.

In Columbia, I am proud to say our relationship with our neighborhoods and neighborhood leaders is strong. Everything we do in Columbia is measured against how it improves our neighborhoods. Tonight we have invited our neighborhood Presidents to be here, and I would ask now that they stand and be recognized for their commitment to their neighborhoods and to our city.

Current State of our City

Ladies and gentleman, tonight I am proud to say that the State of our City is strong and growing stronger every day. Last year at the State of the City, I outlined Columbia's renaissance over the last decade. We have, without question, made progress

that is unprecedented in Columbia's history. We have before us unparalleled historic opportunities. **However, we have much work to do.** We have unresolved problems, and we face many new challenges.

2004 saw our renaissance continue. From the Main Street construction to the Meridian Building, from the First Citizens Bank Headquarters, and the streetscapings on Lady Street to Two Notch Road to Five Points to Farrow Road, 2004 was a year of renewal.

At last year's State of the City, we placed creating jobs and expanding Columbia's economic infrastructure as the city's biggest challenge and number one priority. From 2002 to 2003 the Columbia region lost 10,000 jobs. In 2004 that trend reversed itself. We increased jobs, and now rank 88th out of 318 metro areas for job growth. According to the South Carolina Employment Security Commission, in the last year, the Columbia region has gained over 12,300 jobs. Columbia's unemployment rate remains the lowest of all the metro regions in South Carolina.

In 2004 we made great strides in entering the information and technology economy. Engenuity continued to lead the region in implementing our Technology Strategic Plan. In August City Council approved WiFi on all new city projects, and staff will soon present a plan for WiFi cloud over the entire center of our City. The City and University signed the lease for the Laurel Street Technology Incubator in November. A groundbreaking was held for the USC Research Campus in December. Midlands Tech continued to be a strong technology partner. We have established a clear plan of action to create a Next Energy Strategic Plan.

Unitrends is a great example of our work. The city partnered with Trelys, the only venture capital fund in Columbia, to invest in start up technology companies. Unitrends is a pioneer in the development of data protection software. Last year they had thirty (30) employees. They just recently announced they have secured over eight (8) million new dollars in investment and will expand their payroll to seventy (70) high paying, high tech jobs in Columbia. Tonight we have with us the President of Unitrends Jacques McCormack, and Robert Fletcher of Trelys. Please stand and be recognized.

I am also pleased to announce that Trelys has, just this week, made another investment in another Columbia company, Ometric. Ometric is a start up from the Nanotechnology Center at USC.

Last year, we outlined the need to make visitors a more integral part of our economy. In September we opened the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. In 2004 we established a new branding campaign, "Columbia Riverbanks Region- Where Friendliness Flows".

In 2004 we completed the transformation of the old Confederate Printing Plant to a new Publix. Since the Publix opened last fall, there has been \$50million dollars of new private residential development committed to the area. The Canal embankment opened in November. Yesterday, City Council heard proposals from two of the most successful developers in South Carolina for CanalSide. A decision will be made this month. The Kline Iron and Steel property will now be two magnificent office buildings. This spring we will break ground on the Columbia Hilton.

In 2004 Main Street made tremendous progress. The Meridian building has been completed. Two blocks of our streetscaping of Main Street have been finished, and the headquarters of First Citizens Bank is underway. We are and will continue to promote housing in downtown Columbia. A critical part of that strategy is to bring the City Center "alive" with culture, arts, and housing to create a vibrant City Center. We are near the completion of a project with the Center City Partnership for a Downtown Housing Study that is looking at every parcel in the City Center to determine if residential adaptive reuse is practical and economically sound, especially when compared to the costs of suburban sprawl.

We are making progress in revitalizing all of Columbia. The East Central Consortium completed planning and this City Council has committed \$335,000 to implementing those very ambitious plans to revive some of the most historically significant but historically neglected areas in our City.

Our Empowerment Zone has completed twelve (12) loans to EZ businesses and twenty-five (25) façade grants. Our investments in Edgewood Place, the Martin Luther King Neighborhood, the Lyon Street Community and the Historic Waverly Neighborhood are transforming those areas. The HOPE 6 Saxon Homes redevelopment

and the Drew Park Wellness Center are literally coming out of the ground. Arbor Hill is an exciting new development. North Main Plaza, the Burton Heights subdivision and the North Main Streetscape project are revitalizing North Columbia. Millwood Avenue and Devine Street are blossoming. The Rosewood Hills' groundbreaking will be March 1st.

Our work initiative program had a very successful year with over one hundred (100) graduates and a very high retention rate. Our newest class started two weeks ago with twenty (20) enrolled. Graduation is scheduled for April. Councilman E.W. Cromartie took the lead on this initiative. City Council funded the School to Work Partnership of the Midlands Education and Business Alliance. The Alliance's mission is to partner with business, local communities, and our schools to insure that our high school graduates are prepared, through internships and training, to enter the workforce.

2004 also saw changes in the way the city does business. Council approved procurement reforms and most recently passed a lobbying ordinance. We now have meetings at night and if you still cannot make it, our meetings are televised. These changes will put more sunshine and public input into our City government.

Charles Austin took major steps to make the City government run more efficiently. He has created the Department of Development Services to cut red tape. He has directed staff to work on a comprehensive plan to make Columbia an easier place to do business. He has worked to expand our GIS system and has developed an Existing Business Program.

We have opened the door for opportunity for more people in 2004. At City Hall we are in the process of completing a disparity study. That study will allow us to continue to insure that the doors of opportunity are open to all. In August we created and opened the Office of Business Opportunity, and we created the Small Business Regulatory Review Committee.

In 2004 we continued our commitment to basic services and neighborhoods. City Council funded \$400,000 of CANDO grants to our neighborhoods. We created the

Livability Court and the Quality of Life Task Force in October to address long ignored code enforcement problems. This year we will target for removal four thousand (4,000) abandoned vehicles in Columbia. The city hired a new police chief, Dean Crisp, and a new Fire Chief Bradley Anderson. Our new traffic signal system will be completed this month. I want to thank our newest Council Member Daniel Rickenmann for his commitment to improving our basic services, especially police and fire.

We approved the Way Finder Master Plan in September. And we reaffirmed the 3 Rivers Musical Festival as the city's premier entertainment event. The City of Columbia is proud of our park system--from Finlay Park to Isaac McClinton Tot Lot. This year, we will begin construction of our new tennis center off Garners Ferry Road, and Canal Front along the Columbia Canal. We know that one of the many aspects of our city that make Columbia a great place to live and work is our park system. However, we know that we cannot take our parks for granted. Maintenance of our parks is essential for all of our citizens and our visitors to enjoy them. Our focus for this year will be to closely assess the state of our parks and ensure that each of them is well maintained, safe, and beautiful.

All of this was done with a no tax increase budget. We have not raised property taxes in four years and only once in the last ten years. The passage of the local option sales tax will result in a 30% decrease in property taxes for Columbia property owners. A special thank you to Hamilton Osborne for always fighting for the taxpayer.

Agenda for 2005

Columbia has made real progress.

We have before us historic opportunities.

But we face serious challenges and problems. In 2005 we must work to tackle those challenges and problems.

Let's talk first about our challenges.

Additional Police Officers

There is nothing more important to the quality of life in Columbia, than safety and fighting crime. Columbia's crime rate decreased by twenty-five (25%) percent from 1993 to 2003. There was an even greater drop in the per capita crime rate during that period. However, last year that downward trend stopped. The violent crime rate for Columbia increased by two (2%) percent and property crime increased by seven (7%) percent in 2004. Additionally we saw last year the clear emergence of youth violence and gangs in our community.

The City Manager asked Chief Crisp to do a strategic review of the size and operations of our police force. That review will be presented to City Council during our budget process and will recommend increasing our patrol areas and increasing the number of police officers. Adding additional officers must be our top budget priority in this year's budget. I believe that we should commit ourselves to a three-year phase in, depending on the recommendation from staff. I also believe that the hospitality tax is one appropriate source for paying for new officers. City Council, our City Manager, our Police Chief, and the entire Columbia Police Department will do everything in our power to fight crime and make Columbia the safest city possible. Our commitment to safer streets and neighborhoods must be our number one priority.

Gang Violence

Last year we saw the emerging problem of youth violence and gangs. Tonight we have with us Mrs. Diane Dixon, mother of Courtney Dixon. Courtney was a very dynamic twelve year old who was lost to violence last fall. (We also have with us Mrs. Barbara Merchant whose energetic and kind son Terrance was also lost to the same violence). *Our pledge tonight is to never forget Courtney and all the children who have been lost to senseless violence and to never quit working to prevent such violence from happening again.* Mrs. Dixon (*and Mrs. Merchant*), will you and your family please stand and recognized.

Our recent statewide gang summit highlighted the importance of this issue and the need to take clear and bold action. The statewide gang summit should be held annually.

We must continue programs that intervene in the lives of our youth and help guide them on a more productive path. We must continue supporting our KOBAN program that includes both the Safe Haven program and the Quantum Opportunity Program.

The KOBAN is a success story that affords young people in our City the opportunity to thrive. KOBAN allows our youth the opportunity to succeed in school and be prepared for continued success. Tonight we have with us students from the KOBAN program. Please stand and be recognized.

Other important intervention programs we should continue funding include our Parks and Recreation programs and our Police Departments Harmony Youth Mentoring Program. The Urban League's work initiative programs must continue. The Boy's and Girls Club, which works with over one thousand (1,000) youth at three (3) locations throughout the city, needs to have our support. We have just implemented our teen hotline to help kids avoid violence and gangs.

We must pass the Anti-Gang Legislation. That legislation will allow us to better define and measure the gang problem and will give us additional tools to fight youth violence and gangs. We must continue pursuing Chief Crisp's initiatives with the Gang Task Force announced in September and continue supporting the US Attorney's Gun Violence program. Our gun amnesty day was a success.

Additionally, we must continue to involve the religious community in our effort to combat gangs and youth violence. We need more prayer vigils like Rev. Mack McClam's "Peace in the City" in December. I want to thank Tameika Devine for her leadership in fighting Youth Violence.

Homelessness

2005 must be the year we get behind a comprehensive homelessness plan that secures a location for our emergency shelter and co-locates as many services for the homeless as possible. We call on the service providers, the business community, the City,

and Columbia as a whole to come together and take action. The Beth and Lou Holtz Shelter cannot stay on Hampton Street forever. Action on our Homeless Summit recommendations this spring will be critical. We must adopt their recommendations, get behind them, and seek funding sources for the plan. I want to thank Anne Sinclair for her leadership on preventing homelessness in Columbia.

RTA Permanent Funding

2005 must be the year that we as a community chart a course that will put our Regional Transit Authority on a path to a permanent funding source. Assuming the RTA makes a number of tough cost saving moves in the next few months, the trust monies from SCANA will be last until 2010. Our challenge is clear. We need to convince our citizens that public transportation is a vital service to many and a key part of our economy for all of us. I pledge tonight to work with the RTA to present an acceptable plan to the RTA and Council in the coming months.

Now let's talk about the historic opportunities before us.

USC Research Campus

The city must be a leader in helping to provide the infrastructure for the USC research campus. The campus will be a mixture of classroom, research, and corporate space that will be complimented by residential and retail development. Groundbreaking occurred on the Horizon Center in December. The necessary infrastructure will include parking and street improvements and will require a new source of funding such as a multi-county industrial park bond or tax increment financing. The five (5) million square foot, two hundred (200) acre campus, will be an example of the "new urbanism" and will forever change Columbia's economy. *The USC Research Campus is Columbia's best opportunity, we will ever have, to increase our per capita income.*

Next Energy

We must establish a long-term strategic plan to create a Next Energy Cluster in Columbia. Hydrogen fuel cell research, a key part of the Next Energy, can do for the University of South Carolina and Columbia, what semiconductor research did for the University of Texas and Austin, and what the oil industry did for Houston.

We have formed our Next Energy Task Force under the leadership of Larry Wilson and Harris Pastides. We have identified our goal of establishing a twenty-year (20) strategic plan for Next Energy in Columbia. The City Council took the first step by funding that plan. 2005 must see the first phase of that plan completed.

Affordable Housing Trust Fund

Addressing the issue of affordable housing needs to be a top priority in 2005. Unfortunately President Bush's budget that was presented this week dramatically cut federal funds that we rely on for our current housing programs. These federal funds are our mainstays for affordable housing.

This year, I believe we need to concentrate on helping with affordable rental housing. I propose creating an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. Rents in Columbia are the highest in the state and many renters in Columbia fall through the housing cracks. Thirty-two (32%) percent of the Columbia region's households are renters. A worker in Columbia earning minimum wage needs to work an impossible ninety-three (93) hours a week in order to afford a two-bedroom unit at the area's fair market rent.

There are two hundred and seventy-five (275) state, city, and county or regional housing trust funds in the United States including in the state of South Carolina. They provide \$750 million dollars a year to support critical housing needs. These funds help leverage additional resources such as federal funds at ratios as high as one to nine.

This trust fund should be a rung on Columbia's ladder of opportunity.

East Central

For the past year the East Central City Consortium, a nonprofit corporation made up of twelve neighborhood organizations, Fannie Mae South Carolina Partnership Office, the City of Columbia, and a host of partnering organizations, has worked to create a

master plan for redevelopment of more than 1,000 acres. City Council has committed the resources to begin the implementation of this plan.

Our challenge now is to implement this plan over a period of years. It will require resources and loans from many institutions and partners. It will require commitment and determination from everyone. However, just as we have seen in Downtown, the Vista, and the Riverfront, a long-term commitment to the redevelopment of an area can produce dramatic results that make an area a desirable place to live and work, and increase the tax base for all of the citizens of Columbia.

North Columbia Master Plan

We must begin a planning process to develop a North Columbia Master Plan. The City must work to expand its efforts, where economically feasible, to preserve and protect existing housing units as a critical means of stabilizing City neighborhoods and enhancing property values. Underlying that commitment is the recognition that housing is intrinsically linked to economic development. To this end, adoption of a Master Plan for the North Main Corridor and North Columbia is one of our top priorities. City Council, at our retreat last year, funded this master plan process. This plan will be a first step and road map in ensuring a quality living environment for the North Columbia Community. I want to thank Sam Davis's leadership in taking on this priority.

Mental Health Property on Bull Street

The one hundred and seventy-eight (178) acres of the Mental Health property on Bull Street, in the heart of Columbia, represent a tremendous opportunity for residential development. The Governor and the City asked the Central Carolina Community Foundation to coordinate a planning process for this property. The Foundation is interviewing planning consultants this month.

Our goal for 2005 should be to have a consensus development plan completed. The Mental Health property coupled with the USC Research Campus represents an unprecedented opportunity for Columbia's economy.

Historic Preservation

I believe that historic preservation should be a greater part of our economic development strategy. Historic preservation makes economic sense. It adds value in addition to our quality of life. We need a better, more defined process for handling historic structures. We need to support the preservation of those structures, and we need to end demolition by neglect.

Reforming City Government

Yes Columbia has made great progress, but our challenges and opportunities are clearly before us. Last month I outlined a plan to review the form of our City government to insure that we have the most effective and accountable government possible.

At yesterday's City Council meeting, this Council voted to affirm the mission and members of the Commission on Columbia City Government Reform and Restructuring.

Reviewing the structure of our government makes sense because of the challenges and opportunities we face. We must have a governmental structure that gives us the ability to solve our problems and take advantage of our opportunities. It has been decades since the last serious look at our City's structure. The challenges that face our City today are not the same as they were in 1950. Much more is required from City government today. Any system or structure needs to be thoughtfully reviewed periodically to see if it is serving effectively. Government should be no exception.

Additionally, I think that the best time to take stock and plan for the future is when the city is not in a crisis, and the current City Manager is not in the hot seat. The best time to plan for the future is when we are not reacting to a problem but thoughtfully looking to the future. Any review of our local government structure should be done for the future and for the next Mayor and Council. It is important to remember that the African American community was excluded from the electoral process for generations. Indeed the first African American members of our City Council were elected only twenty

years ago. If the rules are to be changed the entire community must be part of the process and not feel excluded.

I believe the Commission on Columbia City Government Reform and Restructuring is the best vehicle to conduct such a review.

Home Rule Part Two

Thirty years ago the State Legislature enacted Home Rule. In retrospect they should have called it “No One Rules.” South Carolina has the most fragmented and divided local government in the nation. In Richland and Lexington Counties there are over twenty taxing authorities. This chaos leads to problems going unresolved and opportunities missed.

I would call for the Legislature to enact comprehensive local government reform, “Home Rule Part Two.” The areas that should be examined include cities and counties abilities to grow, plan and have options for revenue sources. Local governments now are handcuffed by urban sprawl and dependence on the hated property tax. Action is needed now.

Conclusion

Over the last decade Columbia has seen unprecedented growth and redevelopment. The City Center, the heart of our City, has been reborn and we have reversed a thirty- year decline in homeownership. Columbia is a renaissance City. Columbia is on the brink of our greatest opportunities. The USC Research Campus, the Mental Health property on Bull Street, and East Central are historic opportunities. However, we have a number of serious challenges and problems. Some of those problems have been before us for years, like homelessness, while others are new, like the emerging gang problem.

Theses challenges and problems are very real and if unattended could derail our great progress and opportunities.

Additionally, our structure of government needs to be reviewed in light of our ability to take advantage of our opportunities as well as address these problems as we look to the future.

Together we have created a stronger and better Columbia. Together we have created a City that counts diversity as a strength.

Together we have created a City of strong neighborhoods with a strong economic base.

Together we have made great progress. Together we will take advantage of historic opportunities.

Tonight we have much work to do.

Thank you for being here.