

## **Full Text: County Executive Matt Meyer March 26, 2019 Budget Address**

On Thursday morning, March 14<sup>th</sup> at 08:38, an emergency call came into the 911 center to report a house fire on Mill Creek Road. Several area fire and emergency agencies responded and battled the raging blaze. Captain Dave Smiley, Jr. a volunteer rescue captain from Minquas Fire Company of Newport was among those responders, and he suffered severe burns when he fell through the second floor of the engulfed house.

Dave remains at Crozer Burn Center this evening, where my staff and I visited him last week. Dave is in good spirits. His father, Chief Dave Smiley Sr. is here tonight. Dave please rise so we can recognize your son's service. I want to begin this evening with a moment of silence for Dave's fast and complete recovery.

Thank you.

It is great to be here tonight. Thank you to Council President Hartley-Nagle and all Councilmembers for your service and for inviting me into the people's chamber. Your collaboration is critical to moving the county forward, and let's have a round of applause for County Council. Thank you too to Clerk of Council Nellie Hill and Maria Sacco in my office for making the arrangements for this evening.

We are joined tonight by our Clerk of the Peace Ken Boulden, Sheriff Scott Phillips and Recorder of Deeds Mike Kozikowski. Register of Wills Ciro Poppiti is unable to be here this evening as he is serving with the Judge Advocate General Corps of the Delaware Army National Guard.

Please join me in recognizing our county employee union presidents. Please stand when I say your name: John Spence, Johnathan Yard, Joseph Cochran, Saul Polish, Chris Shetzler, and Frank Gentry.

Please join me too in thanking our County employees, who are the lifeblood of county government – and who are the real stars behind many of the accomplishments we will discuss tonight.

Thank you to Chief Administrative Officer Vanessa Phillips, Chief of Staff Aundrea Almond, Chief Financial Officer David Gregor and all his staff, most especially Vicki Ford and each of the chiefs and general managers who have worked very hard for months to deliver a budget to you tonight in the best interests of the people of this county.

Tonight we present our budget. We present to the public how we are using your tax dollars to get value for your family and community. Everyone in this room knows that there are certain individuals and groups that go above and beyond, in collaboration with your county government, to generate better value for you. Throughout my address tonight I will highlight a

few of these individuals, individuals like Sandra Anderson, who recently stepped down as a member of the Planning Board after over two decades of selfless service and Tony Felicia, who recently stepped down as chairman of the Board of Assessment Review also after over two decades of service. Tonight we honor those individuals and all individuals who selflessly give of their time and money so that our county community can do just a little bit more.

Tonight I can report to you that the state of this county is very strong. We are creating jobs at a record pace.

Last year we announced a job creation initiative that streamlined land use processes called Jobs Now. As I stand here tonight there are projects in our Land Use Department, in our Jobs Now pipeline that will support 9,280 jobs– including the first Wegmans store in the state. (pause for applause). In a county of 560,000, 9,280 jobs is a lot of future career opportunities for our residents.

The need for economic opportunity created right here at home is also why we partnered with Garry Johnson to launch the First Founders Accelerator, a boot camp for start-up businesses, with an emphasis on underserved communities. This Accelerator is set to graduate ten new entrepreneurs in May. Please join me in thanking Garry for his leadership of this innovative program.

When the economy thrives and jobs are being created at a record pace, that is good for our communities. But it also creates risks, and we, as a county community, must recognize those risks and provide appropriate controls. The remaining farmland and open space in this county is precious. Once that open space is gone, it usually is gone forever. Our Land Use Department has begun an intensive and inclusive planning process. We are asking communities from the northern tip of Claymont to the southern end of Townsend and north Smyrna to come out to meetings, to describe what we want our communities to look like and how we should plan to move around to the places we live work and play in future years. We must collaborate together, with a diversity of views and opinions to preserve communities that provide an ever improving and healthier quality of life.

Our county is safer than it has been in a long time. We are solving crimes efficiently and in collaboration with conscientious residents – our homicide clearance rate for 2018 was 100%. Our public safety response times are faster than ever and emergency public safety outcomes are better than ever. Usage at our libraries and parks are setting records. And we are collaborating with municipal governments and groups and individuals across this county to produce value for you like never before.

For example, the Police Connections Alliance is an unusual collaboration between our county police and mental health professionals. Think for a minute about the types of situations we know that police officers encounter. So often, there are issues of mental health that are the root cause of these incidents. Today, thanks to the excellent work of Col. Bond, Capt. Treadwell and Ofc. Kearns as well as an effective partnership with Connections, and funding assistance

from the Criminal Justice Council and the Department of Justice, our police department is achieving extraordinarily positive outcomes.

Between November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018 and January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, an actual county resident named Bill called 911 231 times. We opened 65 cases involving Bill. We dispatched officers to his residence 22 times in these six weeks. In January our Police Connections Alliance team began to work with Bill's family to address the root causes of Bill's illness. Today, ten weeks later, Bill lives a healthier and more sustainable life in an assisted living facility, receiving the proper medical care necessary for his medical and mental health conditions. For years and years, an individual like Bill would likely have been arrested and incarcerated, in a facility not designed to address the root cause of Bill's problems.

The primary benefit of this program is that we serve citizens facing mental health issues better and we do it more efficiently, preserving our precious first responder resources for where they are needed. Bill was not the only one helped through the Police Connections Alliance. Indeed, over the past 12 months, this new team has performed 866 mental health assessments. They have diverted 63 individuals from incarceration, 14 from hospitalization, and referred 311 people to other needed services. You would be hard pressed to find any police agency collaborating with mental health professionals to create value in this way. Officer Colleen Kearns and Sara Marotta of Connections, please stand to be recognized.

And the Police Connections Alliance is not the only way we are policing smarter. In October 2018, just five months ago our police encountered someone named Judy. In the past, Judy would have been arrested and incarcerated for drug possession charges. Our police offered Judy the opportunity to enroll in our unique Hero Help substance abuse assistance program. As a result, Hero Help immediately enrolled Judy in treatment.

After 5 months, Judy has addressed mental health and addiction issues to the satisfaction of her treatment professional and our HERO HELP Coordinator. As a result of the confirmed compliance with program requirements, our police decided not to process her charges. Judy is now gainfully employed and maintains weekly contact with HERO HELP personnel for ongoing support. I ask Dan Maas, our Hero Help coordinator, as well as Major Rob McLucas, who has been instrumental in getting the program to this point, to stand to be recognized.

In another jurisdiction, these interactions could have had a different ending -- with incarceration of the individual, or worse.

Through these pre-arrest criminal justice reforms, we are taking steps to reduce crowding in our prisons and addressing the underlying causes of crime.

Our goal is not to catch as many people as possible and send them to prison; it is to make all of our communities safer.

And 2018 was an unprecedented year for making our county safer. We deployed new technologies and engaged community policing like never before.

This has led to decreased crime rates and due to bold investments in technology and active citizen participation, a 100% homicide clearance rate in 2018. What that means is on average police departments around the country solve about six out of every 10 homicides. We solved every homicide in our police's jurisdiction in 2018.

To be clear, as Col. Bond says, the goal is not to have 100% homicide clearance rate, but to have no homicides. To bring perpetrators to justice is a step in the right direction.

Last year we also responded to more paramedic calls than ever –we have been facing over a decade of increased calls for service, and, until last year, decreased funding from the state. Last year, we stood together with other counties, members of this Council and our friends in the state legislature to partially restore the state government reimbursement rate from 24% to 30%. This increase in funding has enabled us to continue to deliver the highest quality service to our residents. And in a few days we will be starting our largest and most diverse paramedic class in our state's history.

With this paramedic class and our current police academy class, our Police, EMS and 911 staffing numbers are among the highest they have ever been.

The quality of our paramedic service is unrivaled – the first nationally accredited EMS agency in Delaware. With over 100 cardiac arrest survivors just in my two years in office. We continue to make tremendous impact in cardiac arrest saves, accomplished via an entire chain of survival that includes bystanders who know CPR, 911 call operators, emergency medical responders, fire companies and hospital professionals all collaborating to respond quickly and with quality.

On August 2, 2018, David Gruber and Debra Mingoia initiated CPR on their co-worker Jennifer Connors, who went into cardiac arrest at their workplace. Thanks to the quick response of David and Debra, and the excellent work of our 911 team, Wilmington Manor Fire Company, Delaware Air National Guard Fire Department, our paramedics and Christiana Hospital, Jennifer came out of the incident doing great. And we are so happy that you joined us tonight. Would Jen, David, Debra and all those involved in her chain of survival please stand to be recognized.

Your 911 calls are getting answered more quickly than ever. The year before I took office, there was a 60% chance your 911 call would be answered in ten seconds or less. Today more than 91% of calls are answered in ten seconds or less, thanks to the excellent work of Chief Jeff Miller and his staff and the commitment of this County Council. We have added technologies like Text 2 911 and just last week RapidSOS, software that in most cases informs our 911 operators of a mobile caller's location.

We have also proactively implemented RAVE, the active shooter and crisis software, in 271 facilities across the county and are doing so in every school district, as well as houses of

worship, hospitals, day cares and shopping centers. RAVE gives first responders access to on-site security cameras and direct communication with staff at a time when seconds could make all the difference.

We are not only making New Castle County a *safer* place to live; we are also making it a *better* place to live.

We are tackling the problem of vacant properties across the county with a comprehensive Vacant Spaces to Livable Places initiative, that in its first year resulted in a 30% decrease in vacant properties in our neighborhoods and collected over \$1 million owed in school and county taxes and code enforcement fees.

We also collected a record \$16 million in delinquent taxes and fees, driving a historically high 99.45% collections rate for 2017 and 2018 county property taxes.

From building our first new park in 15 years in Edgemoor Gardens to our community planning efforts south of the Canal, along 202, in North Claymont, and the Route 9 corridor,

From unlocking over \$1.6 million in the Housing Trust Fund to expand affordable housing to opening our Section 8 housing choice voucher program for the first time in years,

From delivering innovative programming in our Route 9 Library to designing Southern New Castle County's largest library ever,

From expanding our summer youth employment program to hosting the Special Olympics national equestrian team at Carousel Park,

From attracting a new craft brewery to Claymont to bringing Wegmans, rated as the third best employer in the US, to Barley Mill,

We are, together in every department of County government and in collaboration with County Council, making New Castle County a better place to live, work and play.

Before we look ahead to the Fiscal Year 2020 budget, let's remember where we were a year ago.

You can see on this chart that for years, starting in 2013, our expenses exceeded our revenue. We approached a breaking point last year where we had to choose devastating cuts or increases in revenue coupled with spending reductions. Working with County Council members and partners in the General Assembly, we passed a compromise budget last year to balance expenses with revenues going forward, and we diversified our revenues and recovered millions of dollars in delinquent taxes and fees. We are in much better shape today than we were 12 months ago.

The fiscal challenge also showed in our tax stabilization reserve.

This slide shows our tax stabilization reserve starting in 2013. Had we done nothing last year, right about now our tax stabilization reserve would be zero. We would have no savings left.

Because of our work last year, this reserve is now stabilized and a reliable reserve for the foreseeable future.

Here you can see our Fiscal Year 2020 Recommended General Operating and Sewer Budget. This is, again, a balanced budget that has responsible spending controls that will keep our tax bills low for the foreseeable future. We propose \$207.7 million in General Fund expenditures, \$83.4 million in Sewer Fund expenditures, as well as \$6.3 million for the Light Tax Fund and \$3.7 million for the School Crossing Guards Fund, a total operating budget of \$301 million.

We also propose a Capital budget of \$75 million, including \$18.5 million of General Fund Capital spending for parks, libraries and public buildings and \$48.5 million of Sewer Fund Capital spending.

This slide shows some of the changes from last year's operating budget. The biggest changes are \$4.5 million of additional debt service and \$3.14 million of additional personnel cost. Most of that additional personnel cost is an increased pension contribution. A few months ago, for the first time in county history, the number of pensioners exceeded the number of active employees. People are living longer, in part, because as I mentioned our paramedics, 911 operators and fire companies are doing incredible work. It is a great thing. I hope it continues to be true as all of us age, but, when it comes to pensions, it does cost more money.

The \$9.2 million of budget growth would be even greater, if not for \$2 million of health care savings, savings we realized thanks to the great work of our human resources staff and collaboration with our union leadership. We did so without any change to the quality of health benefits to our fine employees.

The 21 fire companies across New Castle County are an integral part of our public safety system, as they respond to fires and medical emergencies big and small. These heroic men and women arrive on scene during what is often the toughest moments of our residents' lives. As the calls for service and financial demands on the county fire service increase day in and day out, my proposed budget includes an overall increase for the fire service of \$200,000, including funding for the first time for ladder trucks.

Here you can see some of our proposed capital spending. For decades we have been working through our Library Master Plan, building beautiful new libraries across our county. We all know it is time for us to build a beautiful new Appoquinimink Library. The current Appo Library usage numbers are great. The population is growing. The community and the city and town councils are all eager to collaborate to build an extraordinary community learning facility.

We made a commitment, evaluated sites, purchased land, and are launching on April 8th the first of two public meetings to gain your feedback on the amenities and programming you want to see in this library. An investment like this requires LOTS of partnership -- with the State Division of Libraries and the State government, providing financial support for the land purchase and construction, the City of Middletown, DelDOT and the Friends of the Appoquinimink Library. The Friends are not just partners in this endeavor. This is their library. They have committed to significant fundraising activity to turn this dream into reality. Some members of the Friends of Appo Library are here tonight – please stand so we can recognize your efforts. I forgot to mention that if you just clapped you committed to contributing and paying for two bricks in the new library.

We also are making investments in our Public Safety Vest Protection Program, in Surratte Pool – the only swimming pool in a county park, Jester Walking Path and Structure Rehabilitation, Delcastle Park, and a number of other parks and greenway improvements and important waste water improvement projects.

Governor Carney, House Speaker Pete Schwartzkopf, House Majority Leader Val Longhurst, Senate President Pro Tem David McBride and Senate Majority Leader Nicole Poore have all been effective partners as we have built a more collaborative relationship with the state. When the Statewide Paramedic Service was created in 1990, the state committed to pay 60% of our paramedic bills. Today that state share is 30% and we are working closely with our partners in this Council, Kent & Sussex Counties, and our state legislative allies to achieve a 50/50 cost share for this critical service.

Let me close with three points.

First, as I mentioned, a challenge we are facing across so many communities in this county is the struggle to maintain open spaces and farmland. We are hosting an important forum this Thursday to chart a path forward. It is at 3 pm. at our Gilliam Building in New Castle, and I encourage all to attend.

Second, last year we shattered a county record. 15,078 county residents pledged in writing not to pour harmful fats, oils and grease down their drains. Students in schools across this county were actively involved. And not coincidentally in 2018 we had our best year ever for harmful and costly sewer overflows, only 22 of them, compared to nearly double that, 40 overflows in 2016. The problem now is we are trying to beat 15,078 pledges from last year. I need your help. Please go to [GreatSchoolsCleanStreams.org](http://GreatSchoolsCleanStreams.org) today and encourage any school and every student you know to get involved. Winning schools receive cash prizes to fund campus projects!

Third, I believe democracy is more than just picking your leaders and showing up to vote. It is about engaging with each other to help make the key decisions to move our communities forward. I welcome YOUR perspectives and questions so we can have a dialog on how we can continue to move forward as a county. We invite you to one of multiple upcoming interactive town halls to discuss this budget.

In closing, we are doing very well. And we share that success with friends groups who volunteer their time with tremendous dedication. Groups like the Friends of Appo Library, as I mentioned earlier, Friends of the Mounted Patrol and the Rockwood Park Preservation Society. There are so many great volunteer friends groups across this county. They are always looking for good volunteers and financial support. For volunteers, it is a tremendous opportunity for you to play a part to make sure cherished community investments thrive into the future, investments like our beautiful and award-winning Clydesdale horses at Carousel Park and our ghost-filled mansion at Rockwood. There are many active friends groups across this county, committed individuals who find gaps in county services and expand our community's reach. Representatives of the Friends of the Mounted Patrol and Rockwood Park Preservation Society are here tonight. Please stand to be recognized.

Together, collaborating like never before, we are stronger, governing smarter, creating jobs, preserving open space and farmland and investing in our future. Let's continue to work together to win that future.

Thank you and g-d bless.