

STATE OF THE CITY

VIRGINIA, MINNESOTA

The City of Virginia has a rich history, long standing traditions and a legacy that dates back to the early 1900's. From infancy to the present the City has experienced growth in residential and economic development, education, and business development. In the early 1900's Virginia's infrastructure was completely rebuilt when a fire decimated the town's wooden structures. Over the years despite the adversities and challenges like the fire, the City of Virginia has, "endeavored to persevere".

In 2015 we will carry forward the traditions of our predecessors by working together to promote growth and improve upon the positive accomplishments and continue overcome several challenges that are barriers to a safe, healthy, and vibrant community.

Street and alley repairs, crime, recreation and culture, blight, absentee landlords, main street revitalization, Olcott Park restorations, fiscal discipline, economic development, neighborhood infrastructure, core services, and utility rates and restructuring are issues to address as we move forward.

Crime statistics show that major crimes are down. Some felonious activities still plague our neighborhoods. Property crimes and illegal drug sales and drug use are some primary offenses that lead offenders to commit more serious crimes. Police Officers who patrol the city streets with the assistance from concerned residents have identified private homes and rental properties that are havens for criminal activity. The Police Department and crime task forces continue to work diligently in an ongoing effort to eradicate this scourge.

The City is fortunate to have employed a dedicated and professional workforce. Each employee has a unique set of skills that enhance their contributions to the

work environment. The City provides in service and professional training for those employees who are required to maintain a certificate or licensure. In the coming months the City Council will meet with the City Administrator to outline and implement a reorganization plan for all city departments. The goal is to improve productivity and efficiency without jeopardizing core services.

The city will update the long term strategic plan. Preliminary steps have already been taken at the administrative and city council levels. Successful implementation of this plan will require a significant investment of time and input from residents, businesses, and key community leaders. Professional services may be required. A plan is mandated by the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board (IRRRB) in order to access grant funding for city projects. Funding for this endeavor will include a grant from the IRRRB that will be used to leverage other available financial resources to produce workable outcome.

Economic development is an integral part of the strategic plan. We have been successful in recent years in attracting new business development. We anticipate the partnership for funding will continue at the local, state, and federal levels. Innovative approaches for land acquisitions have been the subjects of debate but there is no doubt that our economic development plan has proven fruitful. Future development is on the horizon. The challenge is to procure the needed funding mechanisms from the IRRRB and other legislative partners to attract new businesses and jobs to Virginia.

Slum and blighted properties are cancers that eat away at the very fabric of our community. It affects the health and safety of our citizens and is a major contributor to our crime statistics. Our city public works crews have demolished several residential properties in 2014. More are scheduled for eradication in 2015. We must continue to attack the slum-blight issue by requiring private residents and single and multi-housing rental properties to comply with new maintenance codes designed to improve living conditions and surrounding property values. Communication, cooperation, education, and enforcement are key mechanisms.

The condition of our streets and alleys has significantly deteriorated over time. The problem is compounded by the antiquated steam system on both the main thoroughfares and throughout the residential steam districts. A Street and alley repair plan was recently upgraded. The challenge is to ensure the steam lines are strong enough to accommodate a reconstruction or overlay of the street. In the past, new streets were excavated to repair a broken steam line. This is not acceptable. The second challenge is to acquire adequate funding from local, state, and federal partners for a massive overhaul of our utility system.

The city must diversify the economic footprint and attract new business ventures that are not necessarily affiliated with the mining industry. Technology, bio-chemistry, film production, training venues, and high grade manufacturing plants are some examples.

The Mayor and City Council will build consensus, working together, to achieve common goals and objectives. Decisions about policies, processes, proclamations, resolutions, or other matters affecting city government must be made through a professional, methodical process free from influence by political party affiliations or personal bias.

Virginia faces both short and long term challenges. Overcoming these challenges is dependent upon increased revenue streams from both within and outside city council authority. We cannot burden our citizens with unreasonable levy increases. An expanded commercial tax base through economic development may temper the need for these increases. Federal, State, and IRRRB funding is becoming more difficult to access. Unencumbered grant funding without matching dollars are increasingly rare.

The city has experienced positive growth in commercial development and there have been some success in the construction of new residential housing. However, old housing stock, increasingly expensive utility rates, slow growth in

neighborhood revitalization, and other economic factors are impediments in attracting new residents to Virginia.

The Public Works equipment and work environment is aged. The city is currently working on a plan to partner with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on a joint facility to be opened in 2019. The current city public works facility adjoins a residential neighborhood. This land could be redeployed for additional housing or light industrial use.

The City of Virginia is one of only two fire-based Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in the area that employ full-time firefighters and Ambulance Paramedics. Our licensure requires that we provide service to rural regions, other cities, and townships in the surrounding Quad Cities area. This service is operated and completely funded by the City of Virginia through service fees and general budget resources. Firefighter/Paramedics are on call 24 hours per day, seven days per week, 365 days per year.

Revenues from the Ambulance Enterprise Fund do not cover expenses leaving a significant funding gap. Overtime continues to rise and the city can no longer support an Advanced Life Support (ALS) Ambulance system in the current form. We call upon our legislators to authorize a revenue stream to bridge the gap between cost and service. One idea is to consider a taxing district in those communities that are covered by Virginia ALS. Another option is to develop an Arrowhead based EMS system that incorporates Ambulance and Fire Services from the quad city and local townships. This facility would be centrally located and jointly gap funded by local governments and other revenue sources.

Summer and winter recreational and programs for children and young adults are few and far between. Volunteers are needed to help facilitate a variety of activities at playgrounds, for community service projects, and city beautification efforts. Community groups will be called upon to resurrect programs designed to improve the city's aesthetics.

There are community projects that have been on the back burner or are in various stages of completion. The Miners Memorial Community Center Expansion Project, the Joint Public Works Facility, the Fire-based EMS building, and the Public Safety Training Facility and Public Range to name a few. Funding for Miners complex and field house project was rejected in previous legislative bonding sessions. This venture is one of our highest priorities.

The Greenhouse needs a new focus. Innovative projects through a volunteer system with city support are welcome. The Greenhouse should not be limited to plant growth. It is an evolving venue for the cultivation of food sources that could be sold to help fund the greenhouse operation or to help provide products for the Salvation Army, Food Shelf, Bill's House, or other entities whose mission is to provide for individuals and families in need.

To bring these projects to fruition it will take a coordinated effort between the Mayor, City Council, State and local Representatives, Community Leaders, Business Owners, Parents, Clergy, and Educators. Virginia is our home, a place for our children to grow and prosper, and for our local businesses to flourish. The actions that we take, what we say, how we act, and what we decide will have an everlasting impact on the successes and future of Virginia, Minnesota.

At the end of each calendar year the City will publish an annual report to be made available through a variety of venues that includes, but is not limited to, facebook pages, city website, and in written form. The purpose of the annual report is to encapsulate the accomplishments made by each department of city government, highlight the contributions from volunteers and other stakeholders, and outline project plans for the next calendar year.

Success is achieved when citizens and organizations have a voice at the table. We need to partner with the Virginia Foundation, service and non-profit groups, the Virginia School Board, Downtown Business Merchant's Association, Tourism Bureau, the Laurentian Chamber, local clergy, and other groups and individuals to

develop and implement a strategy to help improve the quality of life for everyone.

I wish us all success in the coming year as we tackle the difficult challenges of our time. There is a lot of work to do. Let us all work together to make our community better.

Respectfully,

Larry A. Cuffe Jr.
Mayor of Virginia