

A portrait of Danielle Hornberger, the Cecil County Executive, smiling. She has long dark hair and is wearing a red blazer over a black top. In the background, there are American and Maryland state flags.

State
OF THE
County

**CECIL COUNTY EXECUTIVE
DANIELLE HORNBERGER**



January 23,
2024

2024 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Good evening.

Madame Council President, members of the Council, community leaders, special guests, and fellow citizens:

As Cecil County prepares to celebrate its 350th year, it is my great honor and privilege to stand in front of you this evening to offer my fourth State of the County address.

For Cecil County residents, the year 2023 gave us much to be thankful for as we continued to set the standard for how conservative government can work within the great State of Maryland.

That said, much like the major storms we've wrestled with in the last two weeks, there's a storm brewing in Maryland. And the forecast doesn't look so good!

In fact, just last month, I attended a Maryland Association of Counties conference titled "Eye of the Storm" that presented a rather grim forecast.

They said, and I quote: "It's time to batten down the hatches and prepare for potentially choppy waters ahead. With budgets stretched to the max, and looming but uncertain county-funded commitments on the horizon, local governments are in a precarious position ... and it's easy to see the perfect storm is brewing." End quote.

That, my friends, is the feeling right now among county leaders across our state. And while I'm not saying Cecil County is completely immune to the effects of a downturn or state tax increases—if that is indeed where we are heading—I have every confidence that Cecil County is in the best position to meet whatever challenges may confront us in the years ahead.

This confidence is born from a willingness to make tough decisions for our future.

Three years ago, I stood in this very room, and took an oath to the people of Cecil County that I would remain steadfast in my commitment to conservative budgeting and living within our means, just as every household must.

Over the coming weeks, our governor and state legislature will be wrestling with a variety of issues that will dominate local conversations and highlight the envious position we have worked so hard to achieve here in Cecil County.

For example, while the governor is forecasting massive cuts to state budgets, leading many to believe that tax hikes are inevitable, here in Cecil County, we are continuing to lower taxes and invest in our local infrastructure at record levels.

And while neighboring counties express grave concerns about paying for the state's wildly expensive Blueprint mandate for public education, here in Cecil County, we remained a step ahead, creating a ten million dollar committed fund—an education lockbox—to ensure that we continue to fully fund our schools without being one of the many counties that will experience historic tax increases to cover the expense.

So, while those in Annapolis and other jurisdictions around the state are desperately trying to figure out how they're going weather the impending storm, here in Cecil, we have created a safe harbor for our citizens. And that gives me every reason to be optimistic for our future.

In fact, it's what allows me to report tonight, with full confidence, that the State of our County is not only strong ... but that it has never been stronger.

Where others see dark clouds ahead, I see boundless opportunity.

And the best part is... we're just getting started.

Despite everything going on around us—tonight’s message is full of success stories and optimism. Stories of partnership, shared values and an unrelenting desire to serve the citizens of this great county.

Stories that simply could not be possible without the many dedicated men and women in County Government who chose a path of service and have worked tirelessly these past four years to make our administration’s vision a reality.

People like Karen Nusic in Risk Management who helped Cecil County earn the distinguished Services Award for excellence in loss reduction and best practices in risk management; an award that was only given to six Maryland counties in 2023.

People like Finance Director Shon McCollum whose meticulous work helped Cecil County claim the 2023 certificate of achievement for excellence in financial reporting; a reflection of our commitment to being good stewards of your tax dollars.

People like Aaron Harding, who spearheaded efforts to secure discounts on flood insurance for Cecil Countians through an upgraded community rating by FEMA.

People like Kordell Wilen in the Department of Land Use and Development Services, whose efforts in administering the Bay Restoration Grant Fund program have connected more residents, who couldn’t have afforded it otherwise, to our public sewer system, and improved the health of the Chesapeake Bay for current and future generations.

This is one of many examples where, under this administration, hardworking employees have stepped forth and raised their hand to take on programs that weren’t being fully implemented before this administration took them on.

These are just a few of many success stories; stories of unsung heroes whose accomplishments individually could seem small, but when looked at cumulatively, are indicative of a unique focus on small things County Government is doing every day to have a big impact on the quality of life for its residents, and saving money, while doing so.

Tonight, I offer my sincerest thank you to the more than 700 hundred county employees for their support and dedication.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: While programs and budget figures are certainly significant indicators of our success, our most valuable asset has, and will always be, our people.

We also take this opportunity to recognize the countless citizens who volunteer for our county boards and commissions, and who selflessly give of their time and energy to make our community exceptional.

I am equally grateful for my partners in government; the public servants who are making a difference every day.

Sheriff Scott Adams.

State’s Attorney James Dellmyer.

Our county delegation to the Maryland General Assembly.

The mayors and councils of our eight wonderful municipalities.

And, of course, my colleagues in County Government, our members of the County Council.

So please join me in a round of applause for Karen, Shon, Kordell, Aaron, the members of our boards and commissions, all of our elected officials, and the over 700 county employees who work on behalf of our citizens every day.

Thank you.

Change is certainly inevitable; but we strive every day to keep the things we love about Cecil County from changing: its small town feel; the feeling that you're safe and that your neighbors are looking out for you, the endless acres of beautiful farmland, the miles of beautiful waterfronts, and our renowned rural heritage. Our Quality of Life.

As 2024 marks our County's 350th year and we take time to reflect on why Cecil County has long held a special place in our collective hearts, most arrive at the conclusion that it's the quality of life in Cecil County that is what people love most about our community. It's certainly what I love most about being a Cecil Countian and what makes serving and protecting this community such an honor.

And so, as your County Executive, this is where I have placed my greatest focus, by every day answering the question: How do we maintain and even improve our quality of life here in Cecil?

Fundamentally, it comes down to these three things: Affordability. Safety. And Opportunity.

It starts with affordability, which is one of my Administration's guiding principles. That's why I have committed to not only cutting your taxes but resolved to put more money back into the pockets of our citizens.

But what good is it to be able to afford to live somewhere if you and your family don't feel safe?

Over the past four years, we have made tremendous investments to address nearly every aspect of public safety within our community.

First and foremost, we are investing in the people who are putting their lives on the line every day to keep us safe.

That's why, this past year, in addition to regular increases, we provided a historic \$10,000 dollar salary increase for Cecil County public safety professionals, which includes our three public safety unions: law enforcement deputies, corrections officers, and paramedics, as well as emergency services dispatchers – being the first people you reach when you call 911, and prosecutors within the State's Attorney's Office.

For our Sheriff's Deputies, we also provided a property tax cut for Cecil County law enforcement, and funding for a new, state-of-the-art Public Safety Training Center.

In partnership with our State's Attorney's Office, we've fully funded a new Domestic Violence Division, which includes a dedicated Assistant State's Attorney and a Victim Witness Coordinator, and we've committed funds to stand up a new specialized drug prosecution team to target and put away drug kingpins who provide illicit drugs to vulnerable citizens in our county.

For our dedicated volunteer fire companies, we have provided over two million dollars in funding for fire company apparatus, including two new ladder trucks and grant dollars to support much needed equipment testing.

And for our county Department of Emergency Services, we have committed funding for two new paramedic stations, a new DES communication system benefiting all public safety, and of course, we honored the life and legacy of the late Frank Muller with the opening of the Frank W. Muller Emergency Services Training Center to prepare the next generation of emergency responders in Cecil County.

Tonight, we have with us, Frank's sons, Will and Rob, who have followed in their father's footsteps as public safety leaders in Cecil, and who I know will continue to make him proud. Thank you for everything you do and for sharing your father with us for so many years.

Through these investments, we are creating safer streets, rapid emergency response times, and neighborhoods where our kids can be kids and our parents and grandparents can be worry-free.

Next to Affordability and Safety is, of course, Opportunity.

It is my belief that people should be able to live and work right here in Cecil County. And that is precisely the environment we are creating for this community.

We are creating opportunity not by relying on one or two industries to support our workforce, but by building a robust and diverse economy that will provide generations of Cecil Countians with lucrative career prospects and high-paying, family-sustaining jobs.

Jobs in areas like science and technology, as evidenced by the 250 new rocket scientist positions at Northrop Grumman and by innovative local companies like Fluoron in Elkton, which is making state-of-the-art products for Fortune 500 companies like Space-X.

There is no reason that our youth should need to leave this community to have a rewarding, challenging career.

Creating quality job opportunities means that your children and your grandchildren will have all of the necessary resources to achieve academic success and pursue exciting opportunities right here at home.

That's why we continue to make strategic investments in new school construction, first-class libraries, our local college, and workforce development programs to ensure that early and continuing education leads to a lifetime of learning for our residents both young and old.

Cecil County has been built on generations of family investment and this focus on learning and local job creation will afford all of us more Sunday dinners and family gatherings which create precious family bonds that many communities simply don't enjoy.

When discussing job creation in Cecil County, we simply cannot ignore the efforts of Dr. Mary Bolt and Cecil College in preparing workers for skilled jobs in manufacturing, automotive services, and contracting.

Recently, I attended a ribbon cutting for the College's brand-new Marine Service Technician program.

This new offering is tailor-made for our community and provides students hands-on training in a high-demand skilled trade that guarantees employment for every student completing the certificate program.

We are also creating new jobs in health care, food services, textiles, and tourism along the I-95 corridor, where, as many of you know, over 1,200 new jobs were just created with the opening of Great Wolf Lodge's largest resort, right here in Cecil County.

And while I am of course very pleased that we are leading the way in job creation, I am equally pleased that we are doing so in a thoughtful way.

For example, the new 95 interchange at Belvidere Road will support our growing economy while also removing tractor-trailers from our residential streets; providing access to opportunity while working to retain the rural character of our community.

County government is where the rubber meets the road and we are making sure that our residents and businesses have all the tools of a modern economy at their fingertips.

That's why we have leveraged state grant funding to expand access to high-speed Broadband to over 99% of the county.

This accomplishment is simply unheard of in rural communities; however, Cecil County's GIS coordinator David Black (might I say the best in the state) has kept our focus on achieving 100% coverage for our residents.

Broadband access should no longer be considered a luxury. Our world, and our county is increasingly digital and internet infrastructure is a critical component of our future success.

And we are of course supporting all aspects of our local economy to include our generational farmers and those new contributors to Cecil's agricultural industry, which continues to be one of our community's largest economic drivers.

It bears mentioning that while we are very intentional about creating quality jobs for Cecil Countians, my administration is committed to continuing to preserve thousands of acres of our beautiful farmland and our way of life so that our children and grandchildren will have the same opportunities to enjoy what makes this community both special and unique.

At the same time, we are focused on supporting our family-owned small businesses and Main Street, too, because these businesses form the bedrock of a strong local economy.

Earlier this month, I announced an exciting expansion of our Video Lottery Terminal (VLT) Grant Program, to provide grant funds to businesses along the Route 40 corridor interested in revitalizing their businesses and storefronts.

Route 40 has played a large role in our county's history, and I am extremely pleased to launch this new initiative which makes good on my promise to energize the revitalization of this important community asset.

By focusing on these three things – Affordability, Safety, and Opportunity – we are ensuring that Cecil County's quality of life positions us as the best place to live, work, raise a family, and retire.

The past four years of community feedback have solidified my belief that conservative policies work.

For example, this past year, as a direct result of our unwavering commitment toward making County Government more efficient and fiscally responsible, we were able to provide the largest tax rebate to Cecil County homeowners in history – returning nearly twenty million dollars to our hardworking taxpayers during this time of record-high inflation.

I don't need to tell you that everything is more expensive these days— gas, groceries, goods, and services. Which means, year after year, you, me, we all pay more. With seemingly no end in sight.

Inflation keeps skyrocketing, as do our bills.

Except if you live in Cecil County. Because here—at least under my watch—we recognize the challenges facing our hardworking families and seniors on a fixed income, and we value your hard work and your contributions to this community.

Here, we believe that you should keep more of what you have earned.

That's why we've repeatedly cut income taxes and why we've cut property taxes for homeowners and business owners for the third year in a row because, candidly, we believe that you know how to spend your money better than any government does.

It's no secret—when our residents have more money in their pockets, they are far more likely to reinvest that money right back into our local economy—on our main streets and within our vibrant business community.

But our comprehensive approach to saving taxpayer dollars is more than tax relief policies alone; we have taken a holistic approach toward being good stewards of the people's money; your money.

This past fall, it was announced that, as a result of our efforts, Cecil County Government's bond rating was upgraded to the highest rating in the history of Cecil County Government, which was the first such upgrade in the county's Charter Government era.

In fact, Cecil County Government is one of just 31 counties nationwide with a population below 105,000 to have earned this coveted distinction.

But what does this mean to you, the citizens? Simply put, our conservative budgeting and improved bond rating will save Cecil County taxpayers millions of dollars on community infrastructure projects—like new school construction, roads and bridges and more—by allowing us to qualify for lower interest rates.

Our approach to governance has proven to be a winning strategy. And so we must keep going. We must keep striving for a better future and for a brighter tomorrow, and we must continue to be willing to make the tough decisions that have made Cecil County a leader among our peers.

In closing, I'm honored to spend my days working for the betterment of our county and for you, our residents.

My team and I are working hard every day to provide the citizens of Cecil County the best environment to live, to work, to raise a family, and retire in all of Maryland.

A place that is Affordable, a place that is Safe, and a place that has limitless Opportunities for the present and future generations to come.

As we celebrate this important milestone, I am humbled by our success and what we have managed to accomplish together as a community.

There are great people here, and while we continue to forge great partnerships in this County... make no mistake, there is still much work to be done and many new challenges ahead.

I look forward to working with each and every one of you to meet those challenges head on. Because, together, there's nothing we can't accomplish.

God bless you all, God bless America, and God bless Cecil County.