



2025 State of the County Address

**David F. Radford, Chairman
Roanoke County Board of Supervisors
Wednesday, December 10, 2025
Green Ridge Recreation Center**

Good morning! And welcome to Roanoke County!

I'd like to recognize and thank my fellow board members for their dedication to our community. While each of us proudly represents our own district, we come together as a team, united in our commitment to enhancing the quality of life for everyone who lives, works, and plays in Roanoke County. I also want to express my appreciation to County Administrator Richard Caywood and his talented staff for their hard work and support, which make our shared goals possible.

Thank you to Eric and the Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce for their ongoing support of this event. We're proud to work alongside an outstanding organization.

And I also want to thank my wife, Lisa, and my son Tim, for their support, which makes it possible for me to serve our community.

It's a pleasure to be here today among so many leaders, partners, and neighbors who share a common goal: building a stronger future for Roanoke County and the region.

The video you just saw shares a piece of my family's story as home builders, and the pride we've always taken in watching an idea grow into something that becomes part of the fabric of our community.

That same spirit of building is happening across Roanoke County. From new roads and greenways to expanding businesses, housing developments, and the rising Career and Technology Center, growth and progress are everywhere you look.

And on a personal note, I'm especially proud that one of my earliest experiences with Roanoke County government was helping to build Green Ridge Recreation Center, right here where we're gathering this morning. It's a reminder of the foundation we continue to lay together as a community.

But that foundation of growth and progress extends beyond our roads, greenways, and facilities. It's also happening across our economy.

Roanoke County is fortunate to have a diverse and resilient economic landscape, with strength in manufacturing, technology, healthcare, tourism, and recreation.

One highlight of that momentum was Governor Youngkin's recent announcement of Elbit America's expansion in the Hollins District. Virginia continues to be a premier place to do business, and this project reflects the strong partnership between the Commonwealth and Roanoke County to grow advanced manufacturing and skilled jobs in our region.

Elbit America is investing over \$30 million dollars in facility improvements and equipment. This investment will create nearly 300 jobs and grow its overall workforce to more than 1,000 employees, making it one of our largest private sector businesses. This expansion is a tremendous win for Roanoke County and a clear sign of the company's confidence in our business climate.

Through strategic investments along the Plantation Road corridor, we've worked to make our community an ideal place for companies like Elbit America to grow and thrive. The War-Fighter Systems facility has produced world-class night-vision technology here since the 1950s, and we're proud to see that legacy continue. And, as many of you know, Elbit America is located next to Wells Fargo, which is moving forward with its \$87 million dollar investment and 1100 new jobs.

Progress can be seen throughout other parts of the County. Redevelopment is underway along Electric Road at Tanglewood Crossing, bringing new retail and office space. In the Town of Vinton, Extended Stay Hotel has broken ground on a \$12 million dollar investment. Other ongoing expansions include Mack Truck's \$14 million dollar, 72,000-square-foot expansion. And along Brambleton Avenue, Publix has officially broken ground, generating a great deal of excitement in the community.

Since 2023, Roanoke County has seen well over \$150 million dollars in new project investments, creating more than 1500 new jobs. Our vibrant economy now includes more than 2100 businesses across retail, dining, a variety of industries, and more.

To sustain this momentum, our business partners need skilled talent, which is why workforce development remains a top priority.

Once again, Virginia earned the number one ranking in the nation from Business Facilities for customized workforce training. In Roanoke County, we're doing our part through a strong partnership with Roanoke County Public Schools.

Together, we connect students and educators with career pathways through programs like Manufacturing Day, which introduces students to modern manufacturing careers. And

Industry Insight Tours give teachers a firsthand look at local companies and the opportunities available to our residents.

Supporting business growth is also essential to us. I'm proud to report that over the past two years, our "Business Equipment Acquisition Program Grant" has awarded more than \$200,000 dollars to 27 businesses in Roanoke County and the Town of Vinton, to purchase new equipment to boost their operations.

We also recognize that our success is tied to the success of our neighbors. Our strong partnerships with Botetourt County, the City of Roanoke, the City of Salem, and the Town of Vinton make our region stronger.

When companies like Google and Amazon choose to invest in nearby localities, we celebrate those wins because they lift the entire region. Their success reinforces what we know to be true. In Virginia's Blue Ridge, there's a place to grow a business, raise a family, receive an excellent education, and enjoy the outdoors.

And on a personal point of pride for our community, Roanoke County's own Economic Development Director, Megan Baker, was recognized as one of the top 50 economic developers in North America by Consultant Connect. This honor is well-deserved. Megan's leadership, persistence, and relationship-building have been central to some of our biggest wins, including the Elbit America expansion, and the Wells Fargo project, both of which she personally led.

Her work, and the work of her team, continues to strengthen our business climate and drive the economic success we're celebrating today.

The strength of our region is undeniable, and we intend to keep this momentum moving forward.

Over the past year, Roanoke County has taken significant steps to better understand and plan for the housing needs of our growing community. We're conducting a County-specific Housing Market Study and have gathered detailed data on the types of housing our residents need, gaps in availability, and trends affecting affordability.

This Study has engaged a wide range of stakeholders, including planning, business, economic development, finance, and housing experts. This will ensure the recommendations are both data-driven and reflective of community priorities. It has examined demographic trends, commuter patterns, and service needs to provide a complete picture of our housing landscape.

As we evaluate the Study's results, we'll gain a clearer understanding of the housing challenges facing Roanoke County and identify opportunities to expand options for retirees, first-time buyers, families, and our workforce. This proactive approach ensures

Roanoke County is prepared to meet the needs of its residents today, and in the years ahead.

Planning for housing strengthens our community, while transportation connects residents to jobs, schools, and recreation. And this year, we've seen a lot of progress.

The new Appalachian Trail pedestrian bridge over Route 311 opened in March. And our McAfee Knob Trailhead Shuttle provided nearly 2,000 rides, easing congestion at one of the region's most popular outdoor destinations.

We also advanced roadway safety with the adoption of "Safe Streets and Roads for All," which identifies our top high-crash corridors, and guides improvements now underway with VDOT.

We celebrated the completion of four major greenway segments, including the Roanoke River Greenway to Explore Park, Glade Creek Greenway, as well as a large portion of the East Roanoke River Greenway. And in partnership with the City of Salem, Phase 1 of the West Roanoke River Greenway. Altogether, these projects represent \$17.7 million dollars in local, state, and federal investment.

Several important projects are also moving forward. A new section of the Greenway through Explore Park will open in the Spring. We've applied for funding to design the next phase of the West Roanoke River Greenway. And we've completed a study to close the final gap between the City of Roanoke and the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Major roadway improvements continue as well. Construction is underway on the Diverging Diamond Interchange at Routes 419 and 220, which will improve traffic flow, and add pedestrian and bicycle connections.

The \$1.5 billion dollar widening project along I-81 in Roanoke County is progressing towards a mid-2026 completion. And within the next two years, construction will begin on key intersection improvements along Route 460 to enhance safety and support future growth.

As we invest in transportation and greenways, we also recognize the value of our natural assets. One shining example of this is Explore Park, which reached a historic milestone this year.

What began as a State vision has become a true County success story. Once a shuttered attraction, Explore Park is now a thriving regional destination, welcoming more than 300,000 visitors every year.

When the Board of Supervisors negotiated a 99-year lease in 2013, we invested in the Park's future, bringing in essential water, sewer, and road infrastructure. And we worked hand-in-hand with the community to shape its next chapter.

Community feedback became the foundation for the Explore Park Adventure Plan adopted in 2016. Since then, the County has invested more than \$15 million dollars in infrastructure, recreation, and operations across the 1100-acre park, which includes more than 300 acres in Bedford County.

These investments have transformed Explore Park from a passive recreation area into a vibrant outdoor destination. We built the groundwork for food, lodging, events, and activities, and added cabins, a campground, and Twin Creeks Brewpub. And we enhanced trails and mountain biking amenities.

We also delivered on the community's vision with features like TreeTop Quest, the mountain bike skills center, and the Mayflower Hills Disc Golf Course, now ranked among the top courses in Virginia and the world.

Explore Park is now home to signature events such as Illuminights, which draws more than 55,000 visitors each year, serves as the Adventure Outpost for GO Fest, and hosts national competitions like the "USA Cycling Mountain Biking Cross Country Championships."

These events bring national attention to our region and reinforce that Explore Park has become a premier outdoor asset for residents and visitors of all ages to enjoy.

After more than a decade of investment under our 99-year lease, Deputy County Administrator Doug Blount and Board of Supervisors Vice-Chairman Phil North began conversations last year with state leaders about a path to full ownership.

State Senator Chris Head and Delegate Will Davis played a key role in securing full ownership by sponsoring legislation that passed the General Assembly. And it was signed into law by Governor Glenn Youngkin in March.

I'm proud to say that the deeds transferring Explore Park to Roanoke County were officially recorded on August 20th, 2025.

At this time, I'd like to invite Doug Blount and Supervisor Phil North to join me on stage. I want to thank you both for your leadership and dedication to working with our state partners throughout this process. Your efforts to advance legislation and guide the transfer of Explore Park were essential to making this achievement possible.

When we look back decades from now, 2025 will be remembered as the year Roanoke County secured the future of Explore Park.

While Explore Park represents a long-term investment in recreation and tourism, the Board of Supervisors continues to focus on everyday priorities that directly impact our residents, including responsible budgeting and tax relief.

In recent years, the Board has enacted significant tax relief measures, including a 6-cent reduction in the real estate tax rate, and a 10-cent cut in personal property taxes. We also approved a 5-cent decrease in the machinery and tools tax, as well as an increased threshold for business license fees.

Altogether, these actions have delivered more than \$47 million dollars in savings to our community.

These efforts reflect the Board's commitment to responsible, efficient government and to providing meaningful relief for our citizens as we work to ease the pressures of inflation.

Education continues to be a top priority and our largest investment, with more than \$104 million dollars of the County budget directed to Roanoke County Public Schools. Our schools are consistently ranked among the top districts in the Commonwealth, and we continue to invest in programs that prepare students for the future.

A prime example is the new CTE Center, now under construction. This \$75 million dollar investment made by the County will provide more than 123,000 square feet of state-of-the-art space, connecting classrooms to local career opportunities.

I had the privilege of attending the Topping Out ceremony in September, where the final beam was placed, and we celebrated the teamwork that brought this project to life. Once completed in early 2027, the new center will add 34,000 square feet to support stronger workforce, and career, and technical education programs.

These initiatives demonstrate that Roanoke County remains a place of opportunity, and one that attracts investment and builds prosperity.

Our commitment to education also includes renovations at Glen Cove and W.E. Cundiff elementary schools, which have reached key milestones and will be ready for students in 2026.

Keeping our students and schools safe will always be a core responsibility. I'm proud to say every Roanoke County Public School has a dedicated School Resource Officer, a \$2.4 million dollar investment funded through the County's general budget.

This year, Roanoke County Public Schools also celebrated excellence in teaching. Matt Neale of Hidden Valley High School was named the 2026 Virginia Teacher of the Year. This is a well-deserved honor for an outstanding educator, and a tremendous benefit to our school system.

Finally, I'd like to recognize Superintendent Dr. Ken Nicely, who will be retiring at the end of this school year after 35 years in public education, 33 of which were here in Roanoke County.

Dr. Nicely, please stand. Thank you for your years of dedication and service to Roanoke County.

We're also glad Dr. Jamie Soltis is with us this morning, who will become the next superintendent in July. Dr. Soltis, we look forward to working with you soon.

Together, these achievements reflect a school system that is thriving today and preparing for tomorrow. From modern facilities, to exceptional educators, and a strong focus on safety, Roanoke County continues to give every child the foundation to succeed.

Our investment in education remains one of our greatest strengths.

Strong schools are essential but so is keeping our community safe. Public safety remains another top priority as the County grows. Investing in the safety and well-being of our residents is a major reason why people choose to live, work, and raise their families in Roanoke County.

In addition to the critical work our School Resource Officers provide in every school, our Police Department responded to more than 33,000 calls for service over the past year. Our Fire and Rescue teams answered more than 17,000 calls, demonstrating their commitment to protecting this community.

This year, we also opened the Bonsack Fire Station, an \$8 million dollar, 12,000-square-foot facility staffed by 18 additional fire and rescue personnel, and has already elevated our ability to protect and serve.

Since the opening of Station 12, response times in the Bonsack area have improved dramatically. Before the station was built, response times averaged just over 8 minutes. Today, Chief Griffith reports that the average is just over 4 minutes.

That's a 50 percent improvement in how quickly help arrives when our residents need it most, and a powerful example of how strategic investments enhance safety and service in eastern Roanoke County.

These accomplishments set the stage for what comes next: a future full of growth and opportunity in Roanoke County. One example of that potential is Explore Park.

The story of Explore Park is just beginning. With full ownership now secured, we can move forward to expand its offerings and strengthen its role as a premier destination.

Plans are underway to increase overnight accommodations, welcome additional small businesses and vendors, and complete 6 miles of greenway through the Park, creating new ways for people to experience the outdoors.

Explore Park is more than a place for adventure, it's a model for how we can transform our natural assets into opportunities that fuel economic growth, tourism, and community pride. Continued investment in this valuable asset reinforces Roanoke County as a place worth exploring and investing in.

Our vision also reaches beyond tourism.

Explore Park will serve as a connector, linking trails, greenways, and amenities to the broader community. Once completed, the greenway will allow seamless travel from downtown Roanoke to the Park, opening new possibilities for recreation, and economic activity.

And through partnerships with vendors, we will continue expanding lodging, events, and programming that benefit residents and attract visitors year-round.

The potential here is immense, and we're just scratching the surface. Explore Park will continue to evolve as a hub of adventure and a driving force for growth in our region.

As Explore Park grows and attracts new visitors, it opens doors to opportunities that go beyond recreation, from housing and workforce development, to business investment and infrastructure.

Looking forward, housing remains a critical piece of that progress. As more people choose to live in Roanoke County and more businesses look to locate here, we must ensure there are quality housing options to meet growing demand.

Diverse and attainable housing, from starter homes to senior living, is essential for retaining our workforce, supporting local businesses, and enabling families to make Roanoke County their home.

Once the final Housing Market Study is complete, we will use the findings to guide actionable steps across the County.

These may include expanding infrastructure, offering incentives for developers and residents, streamlining processes, and launching initiatives that support a wider range of housing types. We may also focus on higher-density development in areas with existing water and sewer infrastructure, and maximizing efficiency to preserve the character of our neighborhoods.

Currently, more than 1700 homes are either under construction, approved, or in the plan review process, clear evidence of the intense market interest in our community. Providing housing choices for all ages and incomes helps keep Roanoke County vibrant, inclusive, and economically stable.

Economic growth also depends on a strong workforce and the ability to attract new businesses.

The Roanoke metro region ranked 46th among all U.S. metros for manufacturing growth. This places the region in the top 20 percent nationally. And we're preparing sites, aligning talent with learning opportunities like internships and apprenticeships, and fostering new business development to ensure our community thrives.

By supporting local startups and partnering with developers, we're building an ecosystem that encourages innovation, attracts investment, and creates jobs right here in Roanoke County.

Infrastructure remains another key piece of the puzzle. We continue to advocate for expanded broadband access to support education, healthcare, and jobs, improving connectivity across the County. We're also committed to supporting runway extensions and upgrades at the Roanoke–Blacksburg Airport, which will enhance regional connections, attract new air service, and strengthen our economic potential.

Additionally, we must continue pressing for state funding to expand and sustain Catawba Hospital, so our residents have reliable access to the resources and care they need. At the same time, we're navigating significant cost pressures from federally and state-mandated programs, such as SNAP, the Children's Services Act, and rising transportation costs which often rely on outside funding.

All these efforts tie directly into our legislative agenda and our ongoing collaboration with state and federal partners, ensuring greater awareness of our region's role as a gateway to Southwest Virginia, and the economic value it brings to the Commonwealth.

Through our Capital Improvement Program, we are investing in the quality of life our residents value. Over the next decade, more than \$280 million dollars will be spent on projects including the Hollins Library, which will feature multi-purpose spaces, meeting rooms, and outdoor community space. And the newly renovated Hollins Fire and Rescue Station will improve operations and safety for our fire and rescue teams.

Technology is advancing too, with a new Information Technology Strategic Plan focused on cybersecurity, efficiency, and upgraded systems to better serve our residents.

Together, these efforts point to one goal: keeping Roanoke County a place where people and businesses thrive. By building on our strengths and investing smartly, we're ready for today and positioned for tomorrow.

Just as my family has spent generations building homes and projects around the region, Roanoke County is building a place full of opportunity and adventure. From Explore Park to our roads, schools, and businesses, the County is moving forward.

As Helen Keller reminds us, "When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."

In Roanoke County, we're focused on the doors we're opening, creating opportunities, embracing growth, and building a stronger, brighter future.

Together, the best is yet to come.

Thank you for being here today, and I hope you have an enjoyable holiday season!