

FY '27 Budget Address as Prepared for Delivery

Thursday, March 19, 2026

President Congo and members of Council, thank you for inviting me here tonight.

And for your constant collaboration over the past year.

To City leaders, members of the business and non-profit sectors, and my fellow Wilmington residents, thank you for joining us this evening.

Before I begin, I'd like to thank my wife, Tracey, for her support and partnership over the years. I know it's difficult to be the spouse of an elected official and you've done it well.

It's a special privilege for me to lead a city where we've lived and raised our two boys, and one that we care so much about.

Thank you, Tracey, for your support and for your patience.

As we approach the 250th Anniversary of America's founding, it's fitting that we gather here in the Old Town Hall. For more than a century, this building served as the center of social and political life in Wilmington.

It is a reminder that the work we're charged to do is built on a bold experiment established by our founders. I believe it's my obligation as your mayor to try, with the resources we have, to make good on those promises.

The budget that I present tonight is grounded in the values of our country's founding.

It attempts to move us closer to a city where everyone has access to freedom and opportunity and a clear path to the pursuit of happiness.

That begins with an unwavering focus on our shared priorities.

As always, budget realities challenge us to be both principled and clear-sighted. We have to control our own spending, as we work to meet the needs of all our residents.

The budget I present tonight aims to strike that balance.

It does so by limiting our ongoing budget growth and by responsibly using our reserve for critical one-time needs and priorities.

We do this recognizing that residents are recovering from the fallout of property reassessment, skyrocketing electric bills, and the frustrations of two big snowstorms.

It's with that in mind that my budget includes no increase in property taxes and that we limit increases in our water and sewer rate to 9.95%.

Our proposed fiscal year 2027 general fund budget is two hundred twelve million, six hundred sixteen thousand, one hundred and seventy-seven dollars.

And the water and sewer fund is one hundred million, two hundred ninety-four thousand, six hundred and sixty-nine dollars.

This budget reflects the priorities I've heard over the past year in conversations with residents, and through communication with Council. It also reflects what I heard knocking on over 11,000 doors during the election.

Here in Wilmington, we can help deliver on our founders' promise of life and liberty by making sure our neighborhoods are safe.

And we're moving in the right direction.

Data from last year shows that we achieved significant, sustained reductions in crime, including the lowest number of shootings in over two decades.

That progress is a tribute to the leadership of Chief Campos and his team.

It is a tribute to a department that has worked for many years on a holistic, community-based approach to policing. And to the community leaders who have helped to build that partnership.

It's a tribute to a strategy that is grounded in intelligence and data, a strategy that recognizes that effective policing requires building trust with the people you serve.

Today, we see our officers at civic association meetings, hosting resource fairs, partnering with local organizations, and troubleshooting safety concerns directly with residents.

And the numbers show that this approach is working.

Please join me in thanking Chief Campos, his command staff, and his officers for their continued commitment to our safety.

Despite this progress, we all agree there's more work to do – one lost life is one too many.

We will not let up. We will do what it takes to stop the violence.

That's why earlier this month, with the support of many of you, I signed an Executive Order officially establishing an Office of Community Safety.

This will give us one central office responsible for coordinating safety initiatives and for driving progress on this challenge. My budget funds a director for this office.

This approach, sometimes referred to as a “whole city” approach to safe neighborhoods, has been championed in much larger cities across the country.

The Office of Community Safety will work with police, fire, and other partners to coordinate our efforts. We will now have a full-time staffer laser-focused on making neighborhoods safer across the entire city.

We've already put this approach into action with the creation of a citywide ambulance service operated by the Fire Department.

Since we took over this service in June, our medics have responded to over 14,000 emergency calls for service.

Our units are the busiest system in the whole state. And yet, their average response time is just over 5 minutes – well within the national benchmark.

Faster response times save lives and make Wilmington a safer place for all of us. Please join me in thanking Chief Looney and his team for their management of this critically important service.

Our medics are often the first ones on the scene with people experiencing mental health and drug-related episodes. I saw this firsthand on a ride-along I did with an ambulance crew one afternoon. In a very short time, the crew responded to several of these types of calls.

And to better meet this expanded mission, the budget will add 12 new Firefighter EMT positions, building on the success we've already seen on our streets.

Our public safety personnel are especially focused on “hot spots”— areas where those addicted to drugs and alcohol gather to engage in other illegal and nuisance activity. They're predominantly concentrated in specific areas that members of Council have brought to our attention.

Many of these people clearly need our help but so do the residents who live on blocks where prostitution, pan-handling, and drug use exist. Our Police Department cannot expect to solve these problems by arrests alone.

Addressing these hot spots will be done in partnership with our new Office of Community Safety.

The job of maintaining public safety is made easier when we have strong and vibrant communities.

This starts with making sure every citizen has a clean, safe place to live.

I won't mince words: addressing the needs of our unhoused population is a serious and difficult challenge—one that's facing cities all across the country.

We've worked hard to find compassionate practical solutions that acknowledge difficult realities.

By working with community partners, marshalling the social service resources of the State and seeking input from the community, we're doing our best to meet the needs of the unhoused.

We've installed bathrooms at Christina Park and will soon be providing mobile showers. During one of the coldest storms in our City history, for the first time ever, we turned Hicks Anderson into a temporary shelter to keep the unhoused residents protected from the elements. This effort simply saved lives.

We're partnering with Wilmington Housing Authority and the Ministry of Caring to open another dining hall nearby to ensure residents can get a hot meal.

We know that making sure these folks take the help they need for mental health and substance use issues has to be part of the solution.

This is a very complex issue, and while these steps don't solve every problem, this administration will continue to work to get it right.

We also know one important part of the long-term plan is making sure affordable housing stock is available in the city. It's also an important part of neighborhood stabilization.

Over the past year, Commissioner Pabon has been leading the charge to aggressively identify vacant properties.

He is making sure these properties are monitored so they don't become a nuisance to the neighborhoods.

We know that a vacant house on any block can undermine the whole block and ultimately the whole neighborhood.

Working with the Landbank, and with local contractors and non-profits, we have rehabilitated close to 300 vacant properties and sold or rented them at affordable prices to eligible moderate-income residents.

My budget allocates five hundred thousand dollars to the landbank to continue this work.

This is a major part of our citywide housing policy.

Since 2016, thanks to the influx of state and federal dollars, the city has added four thousand total units. At least 20 percent of those units were affordable.

That means 800 more low-income families now have a stable place to live.

It's time to build on that progress.

And so, tonight I'm announcing a one-time infusion of twenty million dollars to create an Affordable Housing Fund.

Our plan allocates over sixteen million dollars to incentivize private investment in affordable housing projects across the city.

It will include \$2 million to transform vacant lots into accessory dwelling units or other productive uses by providing grants for water and sewer connections. That means turning underused land into opportunity and stability.

It will also include \$200,000 for architectural and engineering services for predevelopment work. Because when we remove barriers early in the process, more units get built.

Our plan will also include another five hundred thousand dollars in our home repair lottery.

This program helps long-time residents stay in their homes, preserve generational wealth, and strengthen neighborhoods.

We know that home ownership and stable housing can lift up families and make neighborhoods safer.

The investment I'm announcing tonight is the largest ever made with city dollars. It will be driven and managed by our Department of Real Estate and Housing.

This is more than a housing plan. It's huge investment in strong and safe neighborhoods in our city.

Tracey and I have experienced what a full and beautiful life this city can offer its residents.

This year will be a year filled with all kinds of opportunities for family fun as part of our celebration of America's 250th Anniversary.

We are intent on telling the full story of our nation's history, from 1776 to the present, through new programs and reimagining annual traditions.

The celebration of our 250-year history will also be a great opportunity to enjoy outdoor spaces where residents and visitors connect.

Over the past year, we cut ribbons on multiple park projects – many that have been in the works for several years.

The new Stapler Park playground is better than ever – just ask the enthusiastic children who joined us at the ribbon cutting.

The new Rodney Reservoir Park has been transformed into a community space for gathering and gardening.

We're underway with renovations at Barbara Hicks Park in Southbridge. It will soon be reimagined.

And the Eastlake Park, with the support of the 76ers – will be completed this summer.

We're breaking ground on extensive improvements to Canby Park later this month.

And the master plan for Brown Burton Winchester and Speakman Park is well underway.

We have beautiful parks all over the city and they make our neighborhoods special.

Big thanks to the hard work of our Parks and Recreation team.

With their support, we're also reshaping how the city helps with the education of our children.

It's a special priority for me and one that I worked hard on as your Governor.

We formed the Wilmington Learning Collaborative to focus on the needs of our city children – and to give city parents and residents a stronger voice in their schools.

Our efforts led to the building of Maurice Pritchett Academy, a new school on the East Side and the renovation of the Bayard School on the Westside.

But there's still a lot of work to do.

First and foremost is the removal of the Christina School District from the city.

The Redding Consortium has a recommendation. It's just taking much too long to get it done.

Meanwhile our children suffer.

While work continues on the redistricting issue, we will do our part by focusing on after school and summer programming.

In last summer's pilot program, we tutored over 100 children in partnership with Reading Assist, William Hicks Anderson Community Center, and the Wilmington PAL.

More than 80 percent of the children showed measured growth in their reading.

And this summer we intend to do even more working with the community centers to expand participation.

We want to make sure all our children can read proficiently by third grade. That's our top priority.

Because it's clear to me that our success as a city and as a state depends on our success in educating our children.

We can't be a strong and vibrant city without a strong and growing economy.

This means a thriving business district downtown and busy commercial corridors throughout the city.

To be successful, we have to be strategic.

Soon, I will sign an Executive Order establishing an Economic Development Roundtable. This group will work with small businesses and major corporations – reaffirming our position as Delaware's business hub.

This collaboration will help drive the next generation of projects in our city.

Already, we're seeing real investment taking shape in Wilmington's downtown.

Incyte, through its new agreement with BPG, has committed moving at least 200 employees into the old Bank of America building on Rodney Square.

Thanks to the support of Council, the State of Delaware, and the Longwood Foundation, we are also transforming multiple Bracebridge buildings into a new higher-education complex.

Soon, Widener University's Delaware Law School, the University of Delaware Associate Degree program, and Delaware State University's nursing program will all be right here in Wilmington.

This downtown momentum is bolstered by Corteva, which has recently relocated its offices to the city bringing with them over 200 high-paying jobs.

WSFS has recommitted to its beautiful building across from the Wilmington YMCA.

And JPMorgan Chase is investing 400 million dollars in their buildings near the train station.

At the same time, we have grown and diversified the number of small businesses on Market Street.

This is all good for Wilmington's downtown – and for our taxbase, which supports all city residents.

My budget adds four million dollars to the strategic fund to continue to attract more jobs and private investment downtown and to other areas of the city.

Our economic development plan will expand our focus with special attention to our commercial corridors.

We will set aside one million dollars for disadvantaged businesses, the largest infusion of funds to the DBE program since its inception.

We will also pursue legislative changes to strengthen the program:

By focusing on confirmed disparities.

By updating our contract review board.

And by updating our procurement thresholds.

With the help of Council, we are moving forward on the issues that matter.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge so many of our city employees who went above and beyond in helping our city deal with the recent snowstorms.

Police and fire were out on the roads responding to rescue calls, in treacherous conditions, and helping with traffic control as the plows were hard at work.

Our 3-1-1 call takers were busy tracking calls after the storm and helping us direct the location of snow removal efforts.

As the snow piled higher, and eventually turned to ice, our public works team put in long shifts salting and plowing snow-covered streets. Some had never worked a big storm before.

But they worked in the freezing cold to get our residents out of their houses and back to work, our children back to school, and our businesses up and running again.

Please join me in thanking all our city employees for the work they do every day, and especially for the work they did responding to these punishing winter storms.

Tracey and I have lived in Wilmington now for nearly 40 years, and I've worked in public service for most of that time.

I've learned that you make progress when you work together. I know that all of you on Council care as deeply as I do about our city. I know this because I've walked through your districts with you.

We share high expectations for each of these neighborhoods.

The fact is, we represent the same people, and we can make a real difference for each of them in their pursuit of happiness guaranteed by the aspirations of 1776.

There has never been a better time to recommit to these principles. And that should inspire us to do better this year.

It's an honor to serve as your mayor, and I look forward to doing this work together.

Thank you.