

Prince George's County Executive Marks Numerous Successes in Turbulent Economy



Local

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Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson delivers his final State of the Economy address before the Prince George's Chamber of Commerce, Thu., April 22. **Photo by Maurice Fitzgerald**

COLLEGE PARK, MD – Crime in Prince George's County has decreased, while student achievement has increased and residents now have better access to quality health care, Prince George's County Executive Jack B. Johnson told business and government leaders, Thurs., April 22.

In his eighth and final State of the Economy address, Johnson also boasted about paving the way for the Gaylord International Hotel and Convention Center and National Harbor, a \$2 billion, 300-acre mixed-use development project that created more than 3,000 jobs. He proudly listed dozens of other new businesses and pointed to the expansion of veteran companies during his administration.

"I'm convinced that by whatever measuring rod or yardstick is used, it must be said that our stay here has been very successful," Johnson told more than 200 at the Prince George's Chamber of Commerce Ninth Annual Economic Development Showcase, held at the University of Maryland, University College.

He stressed that "two cornerstones of my commitment" to the more than 800,000 residents who live in the "wealthiest African-American county in the nation" were to "bring crime down and improve education."

Johnson noted that the work of Chief of Police Roberto Hylton and the entire law enforcement community helped reduce "the level of violence once prevalent in communities." For example, he said the number of auto thefts exceeded 15,000 per year in 2002 but now has dropped by 10,000 per year.

"Prince George's County is the safest it has been in at least 35 years," he said, but stressed that the "path to record crime reduction was not an easy one."

Johnson said that education was a key priority and the beneficiary of "63 cents of every single dollar that was spent." He said the operating budget has grown by more than \$1 billion, enabling the county to add more than \$600 million to the Board of Education's operating budget. School construction and repairs took \$486 million, he added.

As far as health care, Johnson stressed that \$100 million has been invested to keep Prince George's County

Hospital open. In addition, a Hospital Authority has been formed to investigate health care needs and produce a report that is scheduled for release in May, he said.

The reductions in crime, improvements in education and better access to quality health care have made Prince George's County "a more attractive place for investors," Johnson said, noting household incomes exceed state and national averages. He said 45 percent of Prince George's household incomes exceed \$75,000, a 28 percent increase since 2002; 11 percent of the household incomes exceed \$150,000, a 79 percent increase in eight years. The county unemployment rate is much lower than federal levels, said Johnson, who helped coin the phrase "Gorgeous Prince George's."

Among the new business sites developed over eight years, Johnson listed "M Square," Wegman's, Konterra in Laurel, the Suitland Federal Center, Phoenix International in Largo, the relocation of both Old Line Bank and Capital Lighting, Money One headquarters on Route 202 and Johnson Controls at Steeplechase. Veteran companies that have experienced growth in eight years include Linemark in Upper Marlboro, Bioserve and Antenna Research Associates in Beltsville.

In addition to the Gaylord, four new hotels joined the county, including Walt Disney, which is constructing a resort on a 15-acre parcel of land at the National Harbor.

Born in Charleston, S.C., Johnson said he has devoted more than two decades of his life to public service. He said his mother instilled in him an appreciation for education and its ability to open doors to dreams and aspirations. He said his father was passionate about standing up for what is right and wrong. As a result, Johnson said he adopted a set of core values that include living in faith, doing good deeds and making a difference in the community.

After serving in the U.S. Army, Johnson earned a bachelor's degree from Benedict College in Columbia, S.C., and a Juris Doctor degree from Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C. He worked as a tax professor at North Carolina Central University School of Law and as a senior attorney in the Office of Chief Counsel with the Internal Revenue Service before entering politics.

In Maryland, Johnson served as Prince George's deputy state's attorney from 1987-1994, and as state's attorney from 1994 until his election as county executive in 2002. He was narrowly re-elected in 2006.

Even in his speech, Johnson noted media's harsh assessment of his administration.

"We have not been perfect, who would want to be," said Johnson. "But through it all, we had fun in pursuit of the boldest of civic ambitions, building a great county for great people. As I look back on our efforts, I realize that there is nothing fancy or flashy about the work of building a great community. It was tedious yet substantive."

Leslie Johnson, the county executive's wife who is seeking a County Council seat in District 6, insisted that her husband is "excited to do more" after his term ends.

"When one season ends, another season begins," said Mrs. Johnson.

"I feel that for my husband. He still will love people and never stop doing for people but on a bigger scale."

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