

## Mayor Stoney battles mediocrity - RTD Public Square: Mayor Stoney on schools, leaves, potholes, alleys, and beating mediocrity

*Richmond Times-Dispatch (VA) - May 7, 2017*

- Edition: 2
- Section: Commentary
- Page: 1E
- Readability: 4-5 grade level (Lexile: 760)

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We've provided funding in the budget that allows (the Richmond Police) to get up to full strength of 750 for the next two recruiting classes .. that will allow them to do what they want to do, and that is police. And stop running from one incident to another.

I don't know about you, but I loved going to school. I loved it. I enjoyed it. I want you to have that same experience. Because if you don't have that experience, you may decide not to go to school.

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney - as he neared the end of his fourth month in office - dropped by The Times-Dispatch on April 25 to answer a few questions. As the featured guest at the 71st RTD Public Square, an early afternoon affair held at the paper's East Franklin Street building, the mayor spent more than an hour in civil conversation with our audience of about 150 people. RTD Publisher Tom Silvestri moderated and opened with a couple of questions before turning things over to the public. We present highlights here today. To see video of the entire event, please visit [Richmond.com](http://Richmond.com).

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Tom Silvestri, RTD publisher: ... In the first 90 days, you want to make sure you understand the landscape. Get to know your people. But after 90 days, you own it. ... So the opening question, if you can give an introduction, is, what do you gladly own, and what are you still getting your arms around?

Richmond Mayor Levar Stoney: ... I woke up every day for the last 100-plus days, with a smile on my face. Because I believe I have one of the greatest jobs in the Commonwealth of Virginia. But every day I wake up, there's always a new challenge that the city faces. And my opinion is that we have to take those challenges head-on. We no longer can ignore, or push off, or kick the can down the road on some of challenges that the city has faced.

And so, I think we've been proactive. The first week, we were hit with a snowstorm. I think that our team handled that very well, but we know there's still room for improvement. Every day, I'm preaching to not only my staff, but to 4,000 employees who work in City Hall, that we have to wake up with excellence on our minds. Not coming to work with the goal of being mediocre, or being average. But being excellent. How many of you all wake up every day shooting to be average? ... I tell my team, I want to win every day. I want to win every week. I want to win every month. I want to win every year. You know, there's 52 weeks in a year. We're not going to win every single one of them. I'm not that naive. But we can be 42 and 10. That's not that bad. We can be 45 and seven. That's not that bad.

I started out with four priorities. Number one, public education. We all know that we face challenges in public education. But I believe that we can be a city that owns the issue. Right? Working with the City Council, working with the School Board. And that's why we've been championing, the education compact. That's why we added an additional \$6.1 million for the budget from last year. More than any mayor has added to public education, to ensure that we retain the best and brightest teachers, right here in the city of Richmond.

We want to focus on keeping every neighborhood safe. No matter what zip code you live in, you deserve a safe neighborhood. And that's why working with the chief, we added an additional \$1.3 million to their budget, from their bottom line last year. So we can keep and retain the best police officers right here in the city of Richmond.

We want our focus on poverty mitigation. On community wealth-building. And for me, community wealth-building is not just about focusing on people who live in that 26 percent. It is about economic development. It's about job training. Creating a workforce for the future. We can be attractive, and win all the accolades that the country's been offering us. But if we don't have that workforce for the future, we cannot compete. And so over my time, in the last hundred days, we've brought in 500-plus new job. Owens & Minor brought 300 downtown. That's a plus. But do we have the pipeline of individuals, of home-grown talent, to fill jobs moving forward? That's going to keep us on the map.

And lastly, I'll end with, what everybody cares about is, how do you go about transforming City Hall? Now, this has been the toughest. This has been the toughest. 'Cause this is a culture issue right here, right? I began by talking about how mediocrity and being average

has kind of permeated throughout City Hall, sometimes. I want us to own our problems, not push 'em off on anyone else. But to own them.

So, for instance, we recognize that we don't pick up the leaves well. That we don't actually repair your alleys. We don't repair your sidewalks. We don't repair your potholes. I think it's my job, our administration's job, to be the truth-teller. And tell you why we don't do that well. And so we recognize that. In the budget, we added \$700,000 extra to fix alleys, \$300,000 to actually cut the grass, so we don't actually encounter that same unpleasantness that you had last year, when grass was growing, and we were expecting you to mow the grass.

We invested in technology, for City Hall. At the end of the day, this is about being excellent. You cannot be an excellent city if you fail to recognize your problems and your challenges. ... To me, this is about advancing the idea and the mission of building one Richmond. No matter who you are, no matter how you may look, what color your skin might be, what might be in your bank account, what language you may speak, what your immigration status may be, that you have a home right here in the city of Richmond. Not just a home, but a high quality of life. That's how we compete. That's how we attract people to move to the city. That's how we ensure that everyone can be successful and prosperous in the city of Richmond. And that's the city I'm proud to be the mayor of. (APPLAUSE)

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Silvestri: So, let me just ask a couple of questions, and then we'll get right to the audience. What is it about this leaf stuff? Even when it's not mentioned, it becomes news. Is it a symbol? Is it a metaphor? Or is it an example of what the public sees, and what they believe? You mention it quite a lot.

Stoney: To me, it's an example of a core service that you expect your city hall to deliver on, that we just can't. And, for a long time, it's an example of a sort of service that we have committed, and sometimes over-committed to the public. But then we go about underfunding it. And then when it doesn't happen, we all go, "I don't know." But the expectation is for us to actually do it. And so, I'm being honest with the public, saying, "Guess what? We don't do it well." And that's why I'm asking folks to help us out. We need you to help us out by bagging your leaves, just like Henrico and Chesterfield do. I know, people want to shake their heads. But if you want the leaves to be on the ground on March 22, raise your hand. (No hands raised.) Thank you.

Silvestri: I don't know if we've ever gotten a unanimous vote in the Public Square - ever. Duly recorded. So, the big stuff in the news is your budget, and Richmond public schools. I know you're going to get questions about the schools, so let me take it from the top end. What do you know about what's happening in Richmond Public Schools - what's going on?

Stoney: ... The School Board made a decision. And, you know, I support their decision. And I think that Dr. (Dana) Bedden, (superintendent of the Richmond Public Schools, who is leaving the post this summer) did a really good job. And I think a lot of people, the people who got elected to the School Board, me, members of the City Council, they were elected because folks have grown impatient when it comes to public education.

This is one of the examples where we've accepted mediocrity and average. Seventeen of 44 schools are accredited. And I know it takes time. And I think - as I said, I think Dr. Bedden has done a good job. And I thank him for his service. But I believe that what they may be looking for is someone who's going to be transformative. Someone who's going to take schools to the next level. ... I see this as an opportunity. Now, I wish that the school board would explain a little bit more to the public. I think the public is owed that. ...

And so if the School Board were to ask me to help them find the next superintendent, as they should ask every member of this city, every citizen, I'm going to roll up my sleeves and do my best to find a transformational reformer to public education.

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Silvestri: Biggest surprise in your ... first 100 days?

Stoney: The biggest surprise is how slow government can be here in the city. And local government. I worked across the street, as you all know, as the secretary of the commonwealth. And there's a sort of speed that you can expect. Here, I request something, and it may take me 60 days. And so we have to do a better job in being more efficient. And once we're efficient, you can see that effectiveness throughout the organization. I think every day, we are creating a culture where it's not as slow.

It's going to take time. This is not a wholesale change. We made some serious changes at the top in different departments. You all saw that early on in my first 30 or so days. But with the performance review that will be released into the public (in) May. I think you'll see that there's some serious culture changes that will probably need to be made. That's my expectation.

Silvestri: Ready to take some questions?

Stoney: Ready to take some questions.

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Charles Pool, Richmond: ... As you know, Friday is Arbor Day. And as you're probably also aware, since December, we lost 14 mature

trees in Monroe Park. And there's now a plan to cut down a magnificent magnolia and maple tree, for of all things, corporate tenting. ... I'm asking, could you please, for Arbor Day, go to bat for these two mature trees, and ask them to follow the recommendation of the Urban Design Committee, and consider alternatives to cutting down these two mature trees which are actually older than I am. And that's getting up there. Consider alternatives to cutting down these two trees for temporary tents? Thank you very much.

Stoney: I can do that. But also, Charles, I want to let you know, we've also planted additional trees, beyond the trees that were removed, as well. So, I think you gotta give the city some credit for that. But I understand where you're coming from, on trees that are being removed, as well. I understand.

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Kathryn Stoneman, Richmond: ... I live over in Bellevue. And recently, I've started on a quest to find 55-and-over housing, for seniors, in the city of Richmond. Specifically in the north side of Richmond. I'm wondering if the Department of Economic Development, and your office, and the city administrators, are thinking at all outside of the box to possibly have some senior housing in the north side of Richmond. New housing, not refurbished. Thank you.

Stoney: You know, that is part of our general plan at the moment. When I first came in through my transition, we talked about, one, looking at how we can reform the way we do economic development and community development. Economic and community development. Thinking about actually splitting out that actual portfolio, focusing one department on economic development, one department on neighborhood and community development, particularly housing. We have a community that's getting younger. But also, we have a lot of baby boomers who are living in our city as well. And as they age, they're going to be looking for more affordable housing as well, right here in the city. And so that's something that's been put on our agenda to take a look at. I don't have any plans to announce today, but I ask that you bear with us, as we you know, we've just gotten 100 or so days ... here at the top. So, this is on the list. Thank you. Thank you, Kathryn.

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Tawanda Felder, Richmond: ... I reside on the south side of Richmond. One of the things I wanted to find out is, is there a clear plan to curb some of the homelessness that we're dealing with? You know, working in the community, and trying to find some of the homeless people places to go. You know, some of our central intakes, are full. The Healing Place is full. And we don't have a lot of places for them to go. But they're getting charged with trespassing, and things like that. Some of our kids who are aging out of foster care are homeless as well. And I just wanted to find out, what is the clear plan to curb and deal with some of the homelessness that we're facing?

Stoney: ... Every time I'm in the car and I see something, I'll usually point it. ... And it's like, you know, "We gotta do something about that. There's just no reason why we should see any human being sleeping outside anywhere." And you know what? We have a cold-weather shelter, whatnot. But to me, we can do better. And I've seen where they are. You know, where we open up the public-safety building and make that the cold weather shelter, when we dip below 40 degrees. Still not good enough. Still not good enough. And as you said, a lot of our nonprofit partners have come to help us out. But they are even reaching their capacities. I'm loving that CARITAS has some economic development ideas that will actually expand how they can provide more resources towards the problem.

I think it's going to take us getting around the table with the community, particularly the nonprofit community, and us, to solve the problem. We have not, as a city, taken it on as having our own intake shelter. We have not gone the way that some other cities have. And maybe that's something we explore. But obviously, we have finite resources at the moment. We would need some help from not only the private sector, but from our nonprofit players as well.

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Tim Holtz, Richmond: ... A lot of us have things we're asking of you. I want to know some specifics: What do you ask of the citizens? Besides raking our own leaves, perhaps. What are some specific things you know that we need to do, or take care of, to be more involved and to make the city better?

Silvestri: Have you ever gotten a question where somebody asked you -

Stoney: I've never gotten anything like that before!

Silvestri: Congratulations. That's another first.

Stoney: Thank you so much. You know, when I was running for mayor, I said that not only do I want to be a mayor who challenges the employees inside City Hall, the 4,000-person work force, but I also want to challenge our residents as well. We are a very generous community. I think when you look at the sort of philanthropic help we get in the community, we're very generous. But there are some individuals who cannot contribute dollars to some of our problems. And what we need is people to dedicate their time. Venture out to neighborhoods that they may have never helped in before. Not just your own neighborhood. Maybe some other neighborhoods, as well. And so we are in the process of creating an initiative, where you want people to maybe look at giving two or three days of their year, devoted to - whether it's in public education, or helping with the homelessness. ... That's something that we're really taking a serious look at. ...

Many times when you run for office, people say they want their leaders to be decisive. Right? They want their leaders to be bold, and make the decisions that come before them. As mayor, I'm going to choose to do that. I'm going to choose to be bold, and I'm going to choose to be decisive. I want the individuals who stood with me during the campaign, or those who did not stand with me, to allow government to do that. ... We elected all new nine members of the School Board. Eight members, and then plus, one was an appointment. And then we had, you know, some new City Council people. I think the city has been starving for some new, bold leadership. But when you make - you know, when you're decisive - then folks kind of rebel. I need folks to stand with us. If we want the change that they were asking for in 2016, I need folks to have our backs. Thank you.

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Thad Jones, Richmond: ... We live on Bankcroft Avenue. We've been living there for 40 years. I'm also retired from the city of Richmond. The issues I have are with the outlet. From 2016, I complained with the outgoing administration, and nothing was done. ... On January the 25th, 2017, I went to the Department of Public Works and dropped off the condition of the alley behind 404 Bancroft Avenue. Sir, it is not my intent to go out and rent a bulldozer and rake my own alley. You know, I'm not going to do that. So my question to you, Mayor, what are you going to do about it?

Stoney: Thank you. When I was in the transition process, like, November, December, I had Bobby Vincent, ... folks who worked in Public Works, around a table. And I asked Public Works, "So, tell me what you all do well." I want to ask every department head that. "What do you do well?" And Public Works said, "Well, we pick up the trash. We do that well." I said, "OK. That's good. Tell me what you don't do well." And he said, "Everything else."

Now, that's not because the folks at DPW aren't working hard. I've been out there. I've helped fill potholes. I've seen alleys with them. It's because they're short-staffed. We have 100 less people working in Public Works than we had ten years ago. A hundred less. But people don't know that. And so the people who pick up your leaves, who fix your alleys, who fix your sidewalks, who fill the potholes - it's the same people. Who plow the snow? The same people. The same people. So, when it snows, guess what? Your leaves don't get picked up in time. When it snows, they push back your alley repair. ...

We've begun an overdrive process. We're getting to people's alleys. I'm getting text messages and e-mails of people saying, "You've arrived in my alley. I'm glad you came." But folks have said, "It'd been years since you got to my alley." I mean, we're four years behind on sidewalk maintenance. We get 300-plus request tickets on alley repairs a year. We don't ever get to more than half of them. So, that's why I put \$700,000 in the budget to focus on alley repair. So we can stop kicking the can down the road, and actually focus on the disrepair. ... Which is going to allow us to get to about 1,300 alleys. Here's the thing: The 300 ticket requests, that's for the folks who actually report their alleys. Imagine how many alleys are out there that get unreported. So, you have the information for me. Let's see if we can get you in the queue. OK?

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Glen Besa, Richmond: ... I just want to say thank you so much for taking - when there's so many issues that demand your attention - taking time to address the issue of climate change, with the announcement of an 80 percent reduction in your carbon pollution by 2050. It's a bold statement. I just want to say that I think in terms of opportunities it provides the city for economic development. You've got energy efficiency, where you can create entry-level jobs retrofitting homes. You've got the opportunity for making this an even more bike-friendly city, giving people the opportunity to use that as transportation. Electric cars are coming on. Solar panels. There's just so many opportunities to increase the economic opportunities here. At the same time, you're doing a good thing for the environment. So if you'd like to comment on that, I appreciate it. But I did want to say thank you, because I think it really creates great opportunities for the city.

Stoney: Thank you. Glen's talking about our - thank you. (APPLAUSE) Glen is talking about our RVA Green 2050 plan, that we announced ... the week before last. When me and Alicia Zatcoff, who works on sustainability, got together before the press and talked about how we made it our goal to reduce our carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050, like other cities around the country are doing. This is not only going to save people money in their pockets, but also allow for economic development. Us being a cleaner city, as well, and a healthier, vibrant city. And so I think it's a goal that we should shoot for. Is it audacious? Yes - 2050's a long ways away. I will not be mayor in 2050. (LAUGHTER) But I think that's the right direction the city should be moving towards. And my job as mayor is to set out those audacious goals.

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Sharon Person, Richmond: ... OK. So, being bold, and being decisive, right? I am concerned about, what are your plans that we as citizens can follow, to help make our deteriorating school system better for our students, the teachers, and learning opportunities? Because I've just heard someone speak about homelessness. We heard someone speak about the alleyways. So, if things aren't taken care of when they're in the school system, getting them prepared for a better day, we're bound to go back and have the same kind of issues that we're just talking about. So, what are you going to do to lead and help us to support a better school system for our children? Thank you.

Stoney: So, it sounds like you're talking more than just facilities. You're talking about schools and public education in general. You all know that public education means very, very, very much to me. As the first of my family to graduate from high school. And I think it's the great equalizer. It has changed my life. Public education has. Changed my life. And I believe that every child in the city deserves that

same opportunity.

And that's why on day one, I got Dr. Thad Williamson here. I added him to my team, to focus specifically on opportunity for our young people, but for our people in general. And we started focusing on what we called an education compact, that that will hopefully institutionalize collaboration between the City Council, the School Board, and the mayor's office. Beyond my time as mayor.

I think we should remove the yearly conflict that we see when it comes to budgeting, or setting public education as a priority. Yearly, you see - whether it's the City Council and the School Board, or the mayor and the City Council - at one another's throats on how we make public education a priority. I think when you look at my budget, we've made public education a priority. But moving forward, this education compact - if you've not gone to a meeting thus far, we've had a meeting in just about every district. Nearly seven or eight already. We've got a few more coming up over the next couple weeks. I ask that you come out.

What we're doing here is focusing on the whole child. Not just the child in the classroom, but the entirety of the child, right? How could every service that we have in City Hall insulate the child to provide the sort of growth necessary for the individual to be a prosperous and successful adult? So, we're looking at the whole continuum. That's what we want to do. And so, working with the School Board, we had two members of the School Board, two members of the City Council at the table, working on this plan. These goals. These metrics, on public education. This will be something that we have to share together.

So right now, we have a draft document out there. ... I don't have any children. But I know that the future of Richmond, its greatest asset, is in our children. The 25,000 or so who actually go to public schools in the city, that's the future right there. And I've visited nearly, what, 16 schools, in my first 100 days. And it's the best part of my day. Because no matter their circumstances that they're coming from, they're going to go there to succeed. They're coming from school to succeed.

When you're looking at facilities, we don't have the dollars right now in our capital account, to actually build schools. We've maxed out our credit card, basically. So, I think we have to be more creative. Whether that means working with the private sector, to where, are we going to build schools? I think we need to. That's something we're taking a look at.

But also, I know that when we work together - School Board, City Council, the mayor's office, and present a comprehensive agenda as we have with the education compact, that's how you bring the dollars from the private sector in the philanthropic world, off the sidelines, into the classroom. Or, into programs, like after-school programs, for our children. We have to take a holistic view of the child. Not just, we threw money in the public education. But, a holistic view. That's what we want to do. No one-offs.

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Cliff Chambliss, Richmond: Have you considered, and will you consider, after-school programs for 14- to 18-year-old students? ... In order for our young people to grasp entrepreneurship, and educational experiences, will you consider sitting with a group of persons to discuss the (OIC Alternative Education Program) design of work experience, funded by public and private funds? ... More than 20,000 persons, many in the city and state, did come through OIC. And they're contributing successfully to our workforce.

Stoney: ... When it comes to after-school programs, I said it then and I'll say it now, the city of Richmond itself as the vehicle for after-school programs, through our parks and recreation, we can do better. Because we know that structured time will lead to greater achievement in the classroom. That structured time out of school will lead to greater achievement in the classroom. And that's why I'm working right now to hire a top-notch parks and recreation director. Because you know what? When I talk to adults who are my age now, or a little bit older, they say to me, "You know what? Parks and Recreation in the city of Richmond had a real hand in raising me. Keeping me out of trouble." And we have a number of nonprofit partners in our community who are already doing that.

And I do believe that, you know what? If we're not a business - if we're not good at a function of government, or great at it, let's say great. Good's just too short of a standard. If we're not great at a function of government, why shouldn't we not let someone else take a hand at it? ...

You're talking about workforce development? Job training? ... That's already a part of our community wealth-building initiatives, as well. But you're saying we can do better. ... Yes, we can do better.

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Ralph Hambrick, Richmond: ... What is the city's priority with regard to the riverfront, and the James River, in terms of what kinds of activities you see going forward, and continuing the progress that's already occurred?

Stoney: You know, we have a riverfront plan. But like a lot of plans in the city of Richmond, a lot of studies, we kind of put it on a shelf. Then it starts to collect dust. I think our river is one of our greatest assets, as a city. And I think you can see that, by the - the popularity of the T. Tyler Potterfield Bridge. How folks love being out on the river. Sometimes you might not be a person who's into recreation, but you love walking across that bridge. It'll get you.

So, how do we move from a city that some consider turns its back on the river, and open ourselves up to the river? There are parts of the riverfront plan that have gone unfunded for a long time. And I'll admit, that's not funded in my budget this year, because of those finite

resources. But, can we take the route of other cities, what other cities have done? As you all know, last week I was in Pittsburgh, visiting Pittsburgh. And met an organization focused only on their riverfront. And I said, "You know what? What they did there was, they didn't depend on city or state dollars to revitalize their riverfront and connect it to their people. The private sector got off the sidelines and got involved."

And I think that's what we have to do here. We want to make that riverfront plan a reality, we've got to go to the private sector, and some of our partners in the philanthropic world, and say, "How do we take it beyond the steps we've already taken?" A lot of people say it's all been low-hanging fruit thus far. I don't think the Potterfield Bridge was low-hanging fruit. That was a big undertaking right there. And it's receiving a lot of awards and accolades from across the country, because it's transformed the riverfront.

But we have some next steps out there, that could be very beneficial to the city. But right now, we don't have the resources to do so. Now, I can't stand here today and say I'm going to dedicate a funding stream for it. But can we actually work with the private sector to get that money off the sidelines? Yes.

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Bill Kinsley, Richmond: ... I live up on Church Hill. ... I have a question about, how do you prioritize where you're going to spend this \$700,000 in patching potholes and repairing sidewalks, and cutting down brush, and things like that. Mowing lawns. How do you prioritize where you go around to do that?

Stoney: Well, the \$700,000 is specifically for alley repairs. So -

Kinsley: Yeah. Well, I just used that as a number.

Stoney: So for that, particularly, it's how long has the alley request, the ticket been in the queue. Right? There's some people who've made a request maybe two years ago. Years ago, and haven't seen a truck from the city in two years.

Kinsley: How about five years? How about five years.

Stoney (smiling): (LAUGHTER) Was that a set-up? Were you walking me into that? Is that what you're trying to do? (LAUGHTER) Good job, Bill. Good job. Yeah. So, that means you have a request already in, then, Bill, right? Up in Church Hill.

Kinsley: I have, yes.

Stoney: And you haven't heard from the city, or seen a truck, or anything of the sort.

Kinsley: No. But I've called them every once in a while, and -

Stoney: Just to play with them?

Kinsley: Well, it's a lot of fun. One of the ladies on the phone one time, started making excuses. And I told her - I said, "Okay." I said, "I'm retired, and I can call you every 20 minutes." (LAUGHTER) She didn't know what to say.

Stoney: She didn't know what to say. Did you call the 20 minutes after that?

Kinsley: Oh, yes. I've called them two or three times. But the work hasn't been done yet.

Stoney: Well, we'll get where you live after you're done here. I don't want you to tell me the address here publicly. 'Cause I'll be knocking on your door every 20 minutes or something like that. I wouldn't want you to do you like you do us. ... Thank you, Bill. Bill, I'm going to stop by and get your address, so you can stop wasting money on calling us. (LAUGHTER)

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Doug Burford, Richmond: ... I want to know if you're open to new, and some radical ideas that will make Richmond better without costing you a penny.

Stoney: The last part's what I care about the most. Not costing us a penny.

Burford: Well, OK. I have five. One, have corporations sponsor one neighborhood school, making it a wonderful place to learn. Two, transform Broad Street into Broadway, making it a high-fashion destination, offering shops free rent, and shuttle service to nearby parking lots. Three, convert the Coliseum into a multi-screen movie theater, so conventioners will have something to see and do in their spare time. Four, make Richmond a wedding capital by offering Main Street shed and special accommodations for new brides. Five, triple tourism by telling America this is where liberty was born. By calling The Diamond, Patrick Henry Field, and have wandering minstrels to spread the word. Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

Stoney: Doug, that was bold! That was bold, Doug. I picked up - my fiscal ear picked up on some costs in there, though. So. (LAUGHTER) You said it was, you know, no cost to the city. There are some costs in there, though. We can talk about it. (LAUGHTER)

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Paul Malmquist, Richmond: ... I want to ask you if you have talked with Police Chief (Alfred) Durham about the crime situation, and if the Project Exile program was going to be brought back to the forefront in the fighting of that crime in the city of Richmond. Thank you.

Stoney: ... We've got a great police chief, and we've got a great police department as well. And the chief and I talk on a regular basis about crime here in the city. And I'll have to say, the toughest part of my job is that piece. When an individual in our city loses their life because of violence. And I have to call the families of those victims. That's the toughest part of the job. That's the toughest part of the job.

When I was elected, I sat down with the chief and he told me that, you know, his officers, one, are spread thin. They were at, what, 680 - we've provided funding in the budget that allows them to get up to full strength of 750 for the next two recruiting classes that they have in the queue. That will allow them to do what they want to do, and that is police. And stop running from one incident to another.

We've talked about actually forming and creating a unit focused on public housing. You overlay the map of where are violent crimes in our city, where it's happening? It's happening in areas of high concentration of poverty. Particularly in our public housing. So, the chief and RRHA, the Richmond Redevelopment Housing Authority, we've talked about ways we can work together to kind of stem some of that. As I said earlier, we've added \$1.3 million to the budget, our proposed budget, for police officers to stay in the city. They are fleeing the city. I think the chief told me he had 16 or so already this year, that have left their post here in the city of Richmond. To go somewhere else. That's a problem.

I really do believe, though, that in order to get to the root of some of these causes, particularly some of the violent crimes, we have to be bolder about tackling public housing in the city of Richmond, and creating mixed-income housing for our residents. And stop - you know, these are - I call them sins of our fathers, right? Something that every mayor will inherit. But we've got to stand up. Are we going to just kick the can down the road some more, or are we going to do something about it? If you go to Mosby, if you go to Creighton, if you go to Gilpin, Hillside, you name it, the people who live there, the vast - 90-plus percent - want the best for their children, and the best out of their lives.

We learned a stat in Pittsburgh. And this may not fit Richmond. But I guarantee it's not too different. Three percent of the units are responsible for 50 percent of the crime, sometimes. Now, that's one city's stat. But I guarantee, it's not that far off here in Richmond. And so we have to do better - I think we have to be bold, we can't wait around for some HUD choice program to eliminate public housing from the city of Richmond. It is the weight that keeps us back. We're allowing 26 percent poverty to stand in the city. And that's why we have made investments in community wealth-building, and poverty mitigation.

Also, I'd like to opine on this real quick. The infiltration and inundation of guns, illegal weapons in our neighborhoods. The chief can show you the number of guns that he collects, illegal weapons that are infesting our neighborhoods. You know, when people roll up to New York and they're laughing at how many guns they were able to collect in Richmond, that should be a problem for everyone. And do you think those guns are all going in the hands of legal, law-abiding citizens? That's laughable. Because you know they're not.

And so it just can't be the responsibility of Chief Durham and the police department. We need the General Assembly to step up. I know they don't come from the same party I come from. But when you've got kids dying, how can you turn a blind eye to that? In your capital city. I don't care if you live in Shenandoah County. I don't think if you live in Bristol. I don't care if you live in Washington County. I don't care if you live in Page. I mean, there's young men and women dying in your capital city, in your commonwealth. How can you not stand up and do something? (APPLAUSE)

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Mony Dunkentell, Chester: ... I want to know, what funding have you set aside with the decline in federal funding, with nonprofits, to help with the homelessness and the poverty issue in the communities that are at risk?

Stoney: You're right, we are going to see some unfortunate reductions from the federal government. I have no faith in the leadership 100 miles away. (APPLAUSE) And I just don't know why people choose to be opponents of cities. Particularly cities like ours. We're doing everything we can. You know, as I told you, we have a finite amount of money that we can spend.

Dunkentell: But you do have grant money set aside for the nonprofit sector to help with the issue?

Stoney: Yes. But could we provide some of these nonprofit organizations more dollars? Yes. It's never going to be enough. They're going to have to go out and actually -

Dunkentell: Of course. But for those of us who are going out into communities soliciting funds, and grant-writing, and doing those things, it is not enough. So, is there funding set aside by your department, the city, to help with the issue? I'm not talking about anybody else. Federal, whoever, state. I'm talking about the city of Richmond. Do you have funding set aside to help nonprofits?

Stoney: We work with a number of organizations who are focused on the issue, yes.

Dunkentell: Awesome. Thank you.

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Roderick Bullock, Richmond: ... On the campaign trail, you got actually to see Armstrong's facilities. Our athletic facilities are atrocious. Armstrong High School, yes. Atrocious. The children: one slip up, one injury away on the athletic fields that the schools - the fields that they play on. What is your comprehensive plan to fix the facilities for Richmond Public Schools?

Stoney: ... I want to touch on, real quick, just high school athletics, or just public school athletics. You know, for some children, we are not only cutting off academic pathways, but we also cut off athletic pathways. As a person who's proud of the city of Richmond, it gets under my skin. It angers me just a little bit, when star student athletes from the city of Richmond are signing letters of intent to colleges in Henrico and Chesterfield. They're going there, because their families believe their pathway to academic and athletic success lie in those counties. And our best athletes tend to migrate there.

So, we have to do a better job of providing the facilities. When I went to the Redskins facility, the training camp, and there was a parks and recreation Little League football game, and there was a Henrico coach - or, it was a Richmond coach who said to me, "Facilities like this, Henrico's - all their facilities look like this. All their facilities look like this." And we should be ashamed of that. That we're not providing those opportunities. And so as I said earlier, Rod, we do have to build new facilities. That is a tough decision that the city will have to make. We have to build new facilities for our children.

But also, we have to also balance that with the School Board exploring ideas on consolidation as well. That's a tough, tough issue to tackle. But they have to do that, in order to get the right. We have to right-size our schools. And build the proper facilities. We can't move children from one decrepit school in disrepair, to another school in disrepair. That's not fair. We've got to step up. And you know what stepping up means? Since we've already maxed out the credit card? We have to explore out-of-the-box ideas. Whether it's looking at historic tax credits, whether it's looking at the private sector, public-private partnerships. That's what we have to do. I'm willing to take a look at it, and then act.

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Tasha Chambers, Sandston: ... Will the community wealth-building department also have conversations with transportation and housing? Because that all kind of goes hand-in-hand. And what I'm hearing from the public and family members who do live in public housing is that they feel like they're being left out of the conversation. So, those who may be representing them at the community wealth-building department, it's not really - it's not an inclusive experience. They're being talked at, versus actually having a conversation, about how this community wealth-building will affect them. So again, how will community wealth-building partner with transportation, as well, to make sure that we're truly lifting people out of poverty?

Stoney: ... You know, I never like to hear when people feel like they're being talked at and that people aren't being a part of the conversation. I think our community wealth-building effort, our effort to get more people into jobs, has gone well. If you're saying, you know, some people feel like they're being left out of the process, that's something we need to tackle. I can't say I necessarily agree. But this is the first time I'm hearing that.

What I want to do is build the capacity of that office, to raise thousands of people out of poverty by the end of my term. If we're not building towards that capacity, it's like we're shooting ourselves in the foot. And when I went to Wall Street and talked to the bond rating, credit rating agencies, about the city's economic health, they said all green arrows are pointing up, going in the right direction. But the one thing you have to do - and we had to show them our plan, our community wealth-building plan - is, you have to reduce poverty in your city, if you want to be considered a triple-A bond-rated city. And that's what we're trying to do.

And that's why there is a proposal before the City Council to add extra dollars to that office, so we can reach more people and then get them in the right job. Train them, and get them into the right job, so they can put food on the table and a roof over their family's heads. And to hear that there's some on City Council who believe that's not the right thing to do, that bothers me. We're talking about someone's life here. ... We're focused on changing people's lives. There are some cities who would just ignore this. We've decided not to. We've taken it head-on. Can we do a better job? Yes, we can.

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Glenwood Burley, Richmond: ... You talked about the potholes. I'm going to tell you about a hell hole. (LAUGHTER) Respectfully. I have formed a committee of five people, with a liaison of 11. We're about to have our first meeting. We're going to work diligently to get those (police) horses out of that hellhole. And I'm asking you respectfully to support my efforts. ... So, basically what I'm saying, your honor, is that this 11-member committee, liaison, and a five-member team, we are going to get those horses outta there. The public's going to be involved with it, and we're going to do it expeditiously. And I'm confident, because we need to do that for the horses. That's a hellhole down there. It has been for decades. And I'm honored to serve as the participant of this committee, and get it done. So, I want your support and I want to keep you aware of it. Thank you, sir.

Stoney: Looking forward to sitting down with you. (APPLAUSE)

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Matthew Sim, Richmond: ... I'm a student in the public high school system. You mentioned previously that cultural reform and the school system were really important to you. But you also said you needed help, and you need our help. So as a student in the school system, I believe the culture and the school system go hand in hand. And I've witnessed many issues. ... What does the execution on your side look like, to fix this? And how can we, as a generation, help you?

Stoney: Great question. You know, when I look at Richmond public schools, I see it not as some people look at it as, "Oh, there are so many children who are at risk." I say, "No. To me, that looks like opportunity." The 25,000 students who attend Richmond public schools, I see that as an opportunity for the city. Obviously, as the mayor, I do not have the legal authority - I don't control anything in public schools. But as I said earlier, we're going to go together, lay out a path, a shared agenda for public education.

And that means working with a team. Whether it was a new superintendent, school board, focus on transformational change and accountability. That's what we need. I think a lot of us, like I said, won public office because we said that we would focus on public education. What I need from our students, is - I feel like I need, as an elected official, what you see. You said that you've seen - what do you see? I've invited a number of students down to City Hall. ... I say, "You know what? Tell me - tell me what you see. I want to see how we improve it."

Because it's not about the adults who are involved in the policymaking process. It's about you. This is about you guys. So when we're at each other's throats, fighting about money or personnel, re-litigating issues of the past, we're missing the mark. You are who we should be focusing on. How we improve your quality of life as a resident of the city, but also your time in school. I don't know about you, but I loved going to school. I loved it. I enjoyed it. I want you to have that same experience. Because if you don't have that experience, you may decide not to go to school. And when you decide not to go to school, it's like, 600, 700 people in the city right now who are of school age, who don't attend school in the city. They're not in class, they're not in school. Now, where are they? That's what we want to know. That's what I'm focused on. Because it's the key to everything. It's the key to success for the city. So, I want your contact info after this. All right? Thank you.

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Silvestri: That's the last question. Let me ask you this: You've done this a lot. Fairly typical of the type of questions you get when you throw it open to the floor? Questions you never got before?

Stoney: I've visited just about every district in walk-throughs. ... I've gone to every district for a district meeting with the council people. This is typical of the questions I get. As I said earlier, people care about, once you open that front door, what does this look like? That's what they care about. Or when you open that back door, and you see that big old crater in the alley. They care about that as well. That's what I hear about 24-7.

My job is to not only balance that, Tom, balance the day-to-day, how to improve people's lives, but also think about what Richmond will look like 20, 25 years from now. Right? That's going to allow us - that's going to move us forward. I've got to do both. And we're going to do both.

Silvestri: .. Let me give you an atypical ending, that will be a positive memory of the Public Square. I'll be right back.

Stoney: Here we go. I don't know what this is, but... (LAUGHTER)

Silvestri (carrying a big, dark green plastic bag of leaves): These (darn) leaves. I'm telling you. If I can bag the (darn) leaves, so can everybody else in the city, as long as you pick 'em up on time.

Stoney: Yeah! (LAUGHTER)

• Caption: Mayor Levar Stoney answered more than 20 questions at the 71st RTD Public Square. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Mayor Levar Stoney answered more than 20 questions at the 71st RTD Public Square. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Nancy J. Jackson listens during the RTD's Public Square on April 25. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Nancy J. Jackson listens during the RTD's Public Square on April 25. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Mayor Levar Stoney talked about schools, leaves, alleys, potholes, City Hall, budgets, stadiums, crime, jobs, surprises, and a lot more. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Mayor Levar Stoney talked about schools, leaves, alleys, potholes, City Hall, budgets, stadiums, crime, jobs, surprises, and a lot more. ALEXA WELCH EDLUND/TIMES-DISPATCH Charles Pool ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Charles Pool ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Kathryn Stoneman ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Kathryn Stoneman ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Tawanda Felder ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Tawanda Felder ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Tim Holtz ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Tim Holtz ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Glen Besa ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Glen Besa ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Sharon Person ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Sharon Person ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Thad A. Jones ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Thad A. Jones ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Cliff Chambliss ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Cliff Chambliss ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Ralph Hambrick ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Ralph Hambrick ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Bill Kinsley ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Bill Kinsley ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Doug Burford ALEXA WELCH EDLUND Doug

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