

2026 State of Walhalla Remarks

I want to welcome everyone to the third annual State of Walhalla event – both those who are here in person and those watching via the City's YouTube account. We have special guests here with us: Representative Bill Whitmire, County Council Chair Matt Durham, and County Treasurer Gina Acree.

Tonight, I want to start my remarks with gratitude – thank you to our city employees, who demonstrate every day that they view public service as more than just a paycheck, but rather as a noble calling. Without them, we would not have overcome the challenges that we faced in the past year. They are the glue that holds the city together and the citizens of Walhalla are well served.

Thank you to Mark Thompson and the Walhalla Performing Arts Center board and staff for allowing us to use this facility and helping us stage this event. The Walhalla Performing Arts Center is a true mainstay of our City and we are fortunate to have it here. If you haven't seen a show here yet, you should. It is first class!

I want to recognize our City Council – Mayor Pro Tem Josh Holiday, Council Members Sarai Melendez, David

Underwood, Lynn McClain, Jessie Bunning, and Chris Grant. Josh is on a well-deserved family vacation, but the rest of our Council is here. Would you all please stand up?

I also want to thank the many people, both from inside and outside of the City, who have donated their time and services. They have participated in trash pickups, beautification work, and volunteered to work in city events, among many other things.

Local government is the last level of government that we can easily reach out and touch. Actions taken by local governments have the potential to impact us more readily and profoundly than those actions taken by state or federal governments. So, I encourage everyone to become engaged and don't hesitate to reach out to your local elected officials directly with questions or concerns. Don't rely on social media posts – go straight to the source. We are all in this together.

Past Year Overview

What a difference a year makes. Last year at this time, we were dealing with a Department of Environmental Services rating of “unsatisfactory” for our water plant -

the lowest in years. After last year's State of Walhalla address, two of three pumps failed at our water plant. Pumps that were supposed to have a 20+ year lifespan only lasted around five years and the state would return in July and reassess our water plant as "needs improvement." An upgrade, but not where we wanted to be.

Let me be clear about these ratings. They were never about the quality of the water produced at our plant. The state and our in-house personnel regularly test water coming out of the plant and at random locations throughout the Walhalla water system. Our water quality has never failed to meet or exceed EPA standards this century. Instead, the low ratings were largely due to undocumented operational procedures and lack of a backflow prevention program, both of which have been addressed.

Today, our water plant has the highest rating the state awards and we have corrected the operational issues that caused our pumps to fail in the first place. We owe this to the determined efforts of our Public Utilities employees led by Zane Thompson, our water plant operators led by Tommy Crooks, and our Streets and Facilities Department team led by John Galbreath. Thank you for your work. If

any of you are here today, please stand up to be recognized.

I want to recognize the members of the Citizens Water Advisory Committee: Cliff Powell, Casey Grey, Steve Harvey, Donnie White, and Gwen Owens. Their work culminated in recommendations to improve our system that Public Utilities Chair David Underwood is working with city staff to implement.

Our Public Safety Committee, led by Councilman Chris Grant, did a thorough job in spearheading our efforts to find a new police chief for our city. They choose well. Chief Alexander, would you please stand up? I also want to recognize the City's newest police captain, David Carr. Any other members of our police force here tonight, please join him.

Walhalla is one of the safest cities in the state, but violent crimes do occur. On November 27, 2025, after Walhalla resident Zachary James answered his door he was attacked by two armed assailants, sustaining severe injuries and has since been on a long road to recovery. It could have been far worse if not for the quick work of Lt. Zack McCall who made sure that Zachary received prompt medical attention and led the investigation that

resulted in the arrest and incarceration of Zachary's attackers. Zachary James is celebrating his birthday with his family and not able to make it tonight. Lt. Zach McCall would you please stand up?

Our fire department welcomed a new truck this year in a push in ceremony in which I was honored to participate. We also have a newly certified fire marshal. Congratulations to Jeff Dover. Although they now have a significantly reduced service area, this is the most "can do" group of individuals that I have ever met. Chief Sanford will you please stand up? Any other members of our fire department here tonight, please join him.

I want to also recognize our new Athletics Director Jonathan "Petey" Ridley and our new Recreation Program Director Kim Hill. Welcome!

Our Public Sanitation Department, headed by Russ Price, has over the last two years dealt with inclement weather events and extra demand. Russ has received ample recognition for his team's responsiveness to our citizens. Thank you for the hard work you and your team have done.

And, I must acknowledge the person who put this all together and on whom we have come to rely on in the short time he has been with us, Council Clerk Ed Halbig.

Finally, in what has to be the most challenging one-person job in the City, Cathy Whetstone came on board this year as our new Codes Enforcement Officer. She is already doing a great job. Ms. Whetstone, will you please stand up?

We've had a lot of exciting changes in our Rec Department and Parks and with our Public Works Department. I will let PRT Committee Chair Jessie Bunning and Public Works Chair Sarai Melendez cover these in their presentations.

Upcoming Challenges

Despite our success this past year, we have challenges facing us:

Over the past three years, we have been working to create a budget that keeps recurring expenses and income in balance. In 2024, we adopted a back-to-basics approach that guides that process. However, we still have more to go and it will take time. We are obligated to have a well thought out and deliberated budget process – our

citizens depend on us to do this. Councilwoman Lynn McClain will cover this area more during her presentation.

Walhalla, like many cities nationwide, has water and sewer system infrastructure that needs to be upgraded. We have implemented or completed around \$14.5 million in water and sewer line upgrades since 2024. We will be implementing another \$3 million grant focused on stabilizing sewer lines in the Cane Creek basin this upcoming fiscal year. However, we are far from finished – staff estimates that we will need another \$25 million over the next 10 years to replace old waterlines, the majority of which lie outside of the City - and that may be a conservative estimate. We didn't get here overnight and we won't resolve our water system issues overnight either.

Growth and its impact on City resources will continue to be a challenge for the foreseeable future. Oconee County is one of the fastest growing counties in the fastest growing state in the nation. Effective and thoughtful planning for the future is essential to meet these challenges. We cannot have a seat of the pants approach to planning. A lot of people have asked me if I thought Walhalla was going to follow the model of Highlands or

Cashiers or, even, Greenville. While these are all fine communities, I want to be clear that we are not modeling our city after any other town. We are unique and will grow and develop in our own way. In short, we plan to be Walhalla, keeping those special characteristics that make our home our home.

Finally, we will have to fill vacancies in several key positions, including the City Administrator, the Finance Director, and the Parks and Tourism Director.

Vision for New Year, Mayor Hall

As I did last year, I am going to start with the vision statement that council adopted earlier: To foster a vibrant, affordable, safe and loving community that offers a high quality of life.

I am pleased to tell you that we have applied for Economic Opportunity Zone designation for the former Avondale Mill area – the southeastern part of our town. If successful, this could provide developers with incentives to construct affordable workforce housing that will support the dream of many who desire to own a home but are priced out of the current market.

Council Members Sarai Melendez and Lynn McClain along with Planning Commission Chair Kelvin Bryant are leading our efforts to reset our food truck approach in a way that attracts a diverse variety of these entrepreneurs to our City and I have asked Council Member Jessie Bunning as PRT Chair to work with community leaders to find a solution to repairing our Depot ponds that allows future generations to enjoy them.

Our new \$5 million Community Center will open its doors by August and our new \$4 million police station will be ready by the end of the year. Thanks to City Administrator Celia Myers' diligent work with FEMA, we are finally going to have a new bridge at Sertoma Field to replace the one heavily damaged during Hurricane Helene.

This year will also see the start of a \$1.2 million street paving project for some of our most heavily traveled roads, including Sout Laurel, South Poplar, South Pine, South Spring, South John and South Johnson.

For those that have asked about our pool, replacements for the filters have arrived and we expect an opening announcement by the YMCA in the very near future.

Finally, we are going to make sure that our senior programs are included in our Community Center plans and continue searching for ways to help expand and enhance these programs.

Conclusion

The way forward for Walhalla depends on careful planning and smart resource allocations. We have challenges and always will. However, by working together as a team, we can overcome them and make the sum of the parts greater than the whole. We are committed to continuing to create a successful town for ourselves and for our children and our grandchildren.

Tonight is the last State of Walhalla for our City Administrator, Celia Myers. She has done a tremendous job for the citizens over the last three years and will leave big shoes to fill.

Celia – thank you for the work you have done under some of the most challenging and difficult circumstances that I could ever imagine a city administrator facing – including navigating us through literal and also figurative hurricanes. You have conducted your job with impressive dedication, class, resilience, and dignity and for that we are very grateful.

Thank you for the honor and privilege to serve as your Mayor.

Thank all of you for coming tonight and I want to invite you all to Independence Fest on Friday, July 3, our 250th birthday celebration for this great nation.

May God bless you, may God bless the great state of South Carolina, and may God continue to shower his blessings on the United States of America.