



## News Release

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### **Panel: Region making great strides despite pandemic**

Danville Mayor Alonzo Jones and Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors Chairman Bob Warren told area business leaders Tuesday that the region has made great strides despite the challenges presented by the global pandemic.

The mayor and board chairman joined Danville City Manager Ken Larking and Pittsylvania County Administrator David Smitherman in a panel discussion of the “State of the Region” hosted virtually by the Danville Pittsylvania County Chamber of Commerce.

“We remain in unprecedented times with COVID-19, but since our State of the Region address a year ago, we have made great strides,” Jones said. “We still have work to do—and that is exactly what we are doing—working for a better future.”

Warren added, “I take great pride in saying though we have faced some significant challenges in the last couple of years with COVID-19, under the leadership and guidance of both Mr. Smitherman and Mr. Larking, we have seized these times as a chance to rise to the occasion.”

All four panel members thanked city and county workers for their hard work. Jones summed it up, saying, “You’ve heard me say this before: They don’t always get the credit they deserve, but believe me, life as you know it would not be the same without them.”

The panel addressed four topics: 1) use of federal and state American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funding; 2) economic development; 3) public safety; and 4) education.

ARPA and CARES funds have been used to assist citizens with utility bills, rent, and mortgages, as well as small businesses with payroll amid revenue shortfalls. Funds also have been used for city and county operations and capital needs.

For example, Smitherman said the funds enabled the county to place five new ambulances into its volunteer fire and rescue services, build a new emergency medical services station and invest in personal protection equipment for first responders and law enforcement officers.

Smitherman and Larking both mentioned that sales tax revenue increased during the pandemic because of online shopping and the state's move to collect and remit to localities money collected from those sales.

"We are much more financially solvent today operationally than before the pandemic and our services are in a much more prepared state because we have been able to invest in the things we do for our citizens," Smitherman said. "It has been a surprise."

Going forward, Larking said new funds will be used in several areas, including economic development with a focus on assisting historically disadvantaged populations, housing, and public safety.

Despite the pandemic, economic development activity is as high as it has been in at least the past decade. The panel noted that over 2,000 new jobs and \$875 million in investments have been announced in the last year. Those numbers include the casino resort being developed in the city and Tyson Foods' new facility that will be located in Ringgold.

With that success, the panel talked about the need to develop new housing and upgrade existing housing for the expected surge in the workforce.

"We are at the place in our economic development program that we think strategically about 'what happens when,'" Smitherman said. "What happens when we land the Tyson's (Tyson Foods), Morgan Olson's, and all these other great companies that will change the fabric of our employment base.... How do we adapt."

Larking also talked about plans to create additional tourism staffing to promote existing tourism assets such as area racetracks, Smith Mountain Lake, the Olde Dominion Agricultural Complex, and when it opens in 2023, the casino resort.

Public safety highlights include the county's first-year efforts as a provider of emergency medical services, construction of a public safety facility in Hurt, improved emergency

medical response times and calls answered in the county, and a new fleet of cars and computers equipment for law enforcement.

In the city, Larking talked about the fire department maintaining its international accreditation and ISO fire rating, a 35-year low in crime activity, additional community policing efforts, and continued gang intervention efforts.

In education, the panel noted there are enormous challenges from COVID-19's impact on learning to infrastructure. Each panel member encouraged the area business leaders to support the referendums in each locality that allow a 1% sales tax increase to support Danville Public Schools and Pittsylvania County Schools.

"We have great leadership in our school systems and wonderful teachers who deserve many, many thanks for all that they are doing," Jones said. "I am so thankful that the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors voted to support the referendums in each locality. You (area business leaders) can show your support of the school systems by supporting the upcoming referendums. This funding is badly needed."

Larking and Smitherman noted that revenue generated from the sales tax will allow both localities to service the debt on renovations of decades-old school buildings and therefore free up existing revenue streams such as real estate and property taxes for other projects. For the county, Smitherman mentioned the need for a new jail and 9-1-1 call center.

Larking said the City Council has placed education as its top priority. "The sales tax is the best way to fund school capital needs, especially when you consider 'what is the alternative,'" he said. "The sales tax is the one that makes the most sense."

He noted the casino and other economic activity will bring many people into the area that will spend money and pay the sales tax for the school systems.

"What I have said to a lot of folks is that we have had a lot of success in economic development, public safety and other areas, but if we can get education fixed, then really there is nothing holding back our community," Larking said. "... It is for the benefit of us all."

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