

# Words of advice for Richmond Mayor-elect Levar Stoney

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*The Times-Dispatch asked some prominent members of the RVA community to offer their ideas and suggestions to Levar Stoney, who becomes mayor of Richmond a week from today. Here, in alphabetical order, are their words of advice:*

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## Wallace Adams-Riley

We were put here to look out for one another. So Bethlehem teaches us.

And so the holy stories and holy people have always taught. The babe born in the manger cried out for help. Just as you and I did; just as every child does. Yes, we were put here to look out for one another. It is the highest form of worship, it is our highest calling. Everything else is secondary.

Levar, my brother, you have been given a great gift and a profound responsibility, to lead us into a better future, as indeed we look out for one another. It's a new day in RVA. And God is with us.

Having been invited to offer you counsel as to how to move our city forward, with all my heart I offer you the following two recommendations:

1) Currently 80 to 90 percent of jobs in metro Richmond are not accessible via public transportation. It is estimated that greater Richmond could see a 20 percent increase in economic vitality were that to change. This month, the Commonwealth's Department of Rail & Public Transportation published a regional vision plan for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). What is needed now is a feasibility study for the regional BRT trunk (main artery) network and the public support to move the project forward.

I urge you a) to begin the push for the feasibility study and b) to begin gathering key community members who can help you build the necessary momentum, including all the college and university presidents; the heads of our hospitals; our largest employers; the chamber of commerce; and 250 faith leaders. We will help you lead us to a better future for this city we love.

2) For our city to be as great as it can be, we need, yes, great schools. We have had strategic plans for Richmond Public Schools; however, we need something more. We need what we might call "A Plan for Success," where the superintendent, the School Board, the City Council, and the commonwealth unite



Stoney photo for page E5, 12/25

Levar Stoney begins his four-year term as mayor on Jan. 1.

behind a five- or 10-year plan unlike any we've seen before, a plan where we actually plan for success. It will be expensive, yes; and it will be more than worth it. We need to ask what excellence and success in our public schools will look like, and then we need to plan to get there.

Levar, if you do these two things, you will help change our city forever. If you do these two things, you will help all Richmonders take two momentous and brave steps forward in looking out for one another. Just as we were born to do, my brother, just as we were born to do.

*The Rev. Wallace Adams-Riley is rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Richmond.*

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### Jack Berry

I am confident that our new mayor will be highly successful. Here are 10 suggestions that I believe would help ensure that success.

- 1) Leadership is everything. Build a team based on experience and ability, not politics or relationships. It is all about service delivery, not partisanship or patronage.
- 2) Build a solid relationship with the superintendent of schools. Both of you need to be on the same page. Quickly make the tough decisions necessary to resolve the school consolidation issue. Get this longstanding problem behind you so you can focus on school renewal. If the two of you agree on school funding, other elected officials will follow your lead. End the bitter fighting that repels parents.
- 3) Get a handle on the money. Do whatever it takes to get the financial statements completed on time. If you don't straighten out the city's finances, and fix the beleaguered accounting system, you will have no credibility to do anything else.
- 4) The deadline to produce the next budget is only 60 days from your first day on the job. Demonstrate that you can make tough decisions, cut costs and eliminate wasteful spending, so you can redirect resources to schools and essential services. Guard the debt and fund balance policies with your life.
- 5) Schools are failing in large measure because many kids are coming to school not ready to learn. Family situations characterized by intense poverty and toxic stress create handicaps for kids who otherwise would be thriving. Fully engage city leaders in Richmond's Trauma Informed Care Network, which is helping parents prepare their children to be successful. This effort can lead to breakthroughs in our public schools. Put power behind it.
- 6) Your credibility will be tied to the city's ability to provide basic services well. Re-build the capabilities of the Public Works Department. Do whatever it takes to get the leaves picked up before Christmas and the snow removed expeditiously. Cut the grass, fix the streets, care for the trees, and invest in the parks, just like other great cities. Prioritize neglected neighborhoods; don't ignore South Richmond.
- 7) Violent crime is at a 45-year low, for which we owe a debt of gratitude to our police officers and their long-term commitment to community policing. The reduction in crime is one of the biggest factors that has

enabled the re-birth of the city. The recent reversal in the homicide rate is alarming and should be attacked full force. Every good thing that is happening in Richmond can come to a halt if the city is not safe.

8) RVA has come a long way in the past 20 years due to a very intentional emphasis on enhancing the quality of life, supporting the arts, protecting the environment, developing the downtown, and attracting young people. The strategy has worked. Make the city great for young professionals and families. It is your best economic development strategy.

9) Value our city employees and teachers. Change the culture. Make it fun for employees to come to work. Create teams. Recognize performance. Give them the tools they need to be successful. Streamline the processes; build better systems; embrace new technology.

10) Mobilize the community and region to care for those who have been left behind. The best way to attract partners in this effort is to demonstrate that the city government is honest, focused and high-performing. (See Nos. 1-9 above).

*Jack Berry is the former executive director of Venture Richmond and finished second in the 2016 election for mayor of Richmond.*

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### Annie Campbell

Dear Mr. Stoney,

Today is Christmas. This is the day we can ponder how imagination and hope can intersect with public policy in your administration. The national discourse and mood have slumped since Trump's election. I read it in the news and I see it in my third grade classroom. Citizens who want to make a difference work to resist their own enervation in the face of national politics that seem suddenly harsh.

Cynicism has always had a role in democracy. The political arena under the wry eye of Aesop resulted in fables that supported the common good and mocked power-hungry and vain leaders. With Aesop, social criticism became comedy. Aesop's legacy is alive and well in late-night comedy. We embrace it, relieved when truth is named and spoken and can make us laugh. But we need more than that. Cynicism alone drifts and shifts into disdain — a threat to the common kindness and respect that is the bedrock of democracy. The antidotes to cynicism are imagination and hope.

Where can imagination and hope fit with policy in our city? We have the structures for it. Look for the public places that bring us together, rather than divide us. Look for the public functions and resources that provide access to knowledge, inspiration, and celebration. These include our public schools, public libraries, public museums and public parks. Please do all you can to protect, promote, and enrich them. Protect our natural resources, bike trails, and green spaces; this supports the environment and provides equal access to nature, promoting health and well-being for all of our citizens.

On the night of the Grand Illumination, my husband and I made our way through the just-lit Christmas lights and walked across the T. Tyler Potterfield Memorial Bridge. In a year that the national conversation

has been about building walls, Richmond built a bridge — a walking bridge — across the James River. It is beautiful; it helps us appreciate both the river and the city.

You, the council, and the School Board are not alone. Look for the bridge builders in a city of citizens who use time and resources for the common good. We are rich with artists, writers, volunteers, and creative philanthropists who use private resources to create our common opportunities.

I have growing gratitude for local politics. And I am grateful for you today, as you prepare to lead us.

Merry Christmas.

*Annie Campbell is a third-grade teacher at William Fox Elementary School in Richmond.*

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### Kim Gray

Richmond long has been defined by its past and history, so it is exciting to watch as we pass the mantle of leadership to the younger generation.

Congratulations to you, Levar Stoney. Your election represents for me renewed confidence in my belief that it is youth that has reinvented the world's perception of our city.

Our first two elected mayors swept into office on a wave of goodwill, but neither benefited from being so much tied to the future as you.

As I reflect on this opportunity to offer advice to you, I'll resist the temptation to list my own project priorities or political laundry list of to-dos. Instead, I offer this more general advice:

Sometimes what we think we know can limit our willingness to invent what is possible.

But a word of caution. As you enter office, remember that government is itself an invention. While your opportunity is to help reinvent government, your greater opportunity is to serve as faithful assistant to our community's real creators. These curious inventors have shown themselves willing to take risks on new ventures and new ideas, and our people must be the ones to continue to innovate.

Past leaders have talked often of investing in our people — of empowering them to build a better Richmond. Your true measure of success will be your ability to empower more Richmonders to find their own greater potential to build the Richmond that they want.

Too often we've been limited in our creativity as much by what we know as by who we know. It is time to empower new voices to create what we have not yet dared imagine.

As a young black man who invented his own future rather than accept what was known, your ability to imagine possibilities for our communities can serve you — and us — well as our mayor. For many years, our lowest-income communities — the ones we now refer to as “emerging communities” — have not been allowed to emerge to their fullest potential. They've not had opportunity to help invent our city's future.

I look forward to your ability to imagine ways to bring new thinkers to the table.

It is an exciting time for our city and an opportunity for all of us to show the world that Richmond's future will not be defined by its past.

*Kim Gray represents Richmond's Second District on the School Board. Next week, she begins a four-year term representing the Second District on Richmond City Council.*

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### Osita Iroegbu

Richmond is rising. It's a city growing in incremental strides. But for growth to become greatness, our next mayor must lead a transformative change in all parts of our city, not just some.

A socio-economic excavation of the ills plaguing Richmond's low-income neighborhoods will reveal an intentional effort of social isolation that has led to the disenfranchisement of these communities on multifaceted levels. This intention is seeped in a historical past of oppression that should not be overlooked. Ignoring such a nuanced history only leads to the framing of issues, such as poverty, as individual failures while disregarding external forces that have helped shred a community's social and economic fabric.

As the isolation of our low-income communities was deliberate, I implore Mayor-elect Stoney to be equally intentional and strategic about holistically addressing the plight of these communities. Resurrect summer jobs for youth who live in public housing, a once-burgeoning practice that created positive engagement and career-building opportunities. Address the crucial issue of public housing transformation and how it will affect the nearly 20,000 people in low-income and Section 8 housing — more than half of them children.

Visit Richmond's public housing communities to actively engage residents who can share their own experiences and wisdom. And include a representative number of those residents in decision-making processes. Far too often, marginalized populations are brought to the table and told what's good for them and what's going to happen to them. They should have a hand and voice in shaping their community and future.

Families, children and social networks that have been developed and sustained over decades are at stake. Marginalized populations must be included in every action and policy that affects them, from affordable housing and public safety to redevelopment and public transportation. And our next mayor must ensure that all public school students in Richmond — including those in the South Side and East End — receive a quality education in safe, quality buildings.

If Richmond is to truly transcend its past and rise toward excellence, we must no longer neglect our historically forgotten people — including the city's homeless population, persons with nonviolent felony convictions who tirelessly struggle to obtain gainful employment for years, even decades, after serving their time, and a growing number of African and Latino immigrants who call Richmond home.

Furthermore, a commitment to fully honoring and memorializing sacred sites such as the African burial ground in Shockoe Bottom would help honor this city's rich African and African-American history and move us toward collective healing and progress.

I remain hopeful that Mayor Stoney will rise to the occasion and lead all, not just some, Richmonders on an elevated path to inclusion and excellence. It will take consistent and open communication and a fervent commitment to center the less fortunate in all things Richmond. Only then, will the city as a whole truly soar.

*Osita Iroegbu is an educator and activist in Richmond and a former reporter at The Times-Dispatch.*

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### Laura Lafayette

Mayor-elect Stoney's rallying cry — "Building One Richmond" — reflects his understanding of the inequities that plague our city and his commitment to change — transformative change that will advance equality of opportunity for all Richmonders.

If the mayor-elect is to succeed in transforming Richmond into a community of opportunity — with affordable housing, safe streets, excellent schools, quality jobs, extensive public transit — he will need the help of many. On this score, he is off to an excellent start with the reappointment of Chief Administrative Officer Selena Cuffee-Glenn.

Mayor Stoney's first task should be working with his CAO to ensure that the culture of City Hall is one of competency, transparency, efficiency, and accountability. Next comes alignment. Leaders in the private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors as well as the faith community are eager for the mayor to enumerate specific goals and enlist their help in accomplishing them.

One of these goals is addressing the needs of Richmond's public schools. But schools do not operate in isolation; they reflect the neighborhoods that surround them. Any school strategy must be paired with community revitalization efforts to rehabilitate housing, deconcentrate poverty, and build wealth. These efforts would be aided tremendously by regional public transit; because transit equals mobility and mobility means greater choice about where one lives and the jobs one can pursue.

The conversation Mayor Stoney should lead is not an "either/or" one that perversely pits these needs against each other, but rather an "all of the above" conversation that recognizes that these issues must be addressed in unison.

Mayor Stoney will enter office with a new City Council that includes two former members of the School Board, and with eight new School Board members. If ever there was a time to establish a new dynamic among the administration and these governing bodies, now is that time.

Now is the time to right-size the school system and to identify a sustainable funding model for the system's long-term needs. The same holds true for the redevelopment of public housing: without millions and millions of dollars, it won't happen. The mayor and his team will need to bring their most creative, entrepreneurial thinking to this challenge.

Finally, completing the first leg of the Bus Rapid Transit system is essential. Because what hangs in the balance is the next leg along the Jefferson Davis corridor; that could be transformative.

Mayor-elect Stoney has consistently viewed Richmond's challenges as opportunities. That's the attitude of someone who believes in our city's potential and who is willing to work to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to share in that collective potential and realize their own. I wish him much success.

*Laura Lafayette is CEO of the Richmond Association of Realtors.*

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### Kristen Nye Larson

My advice to incoming Mayor-elect Stoney is less about policies and more about the environment of our city. Simply put — let's build the trust of our community, communicate early and often, and be accessible and visible.

Let's start with access. My advice would be to get rid of any barriers — physical and perceived. I have already seen you in my district. You met with Fourth District residents at several meetings and gatherings. Don't stop! If people see you and know you, they can relate to you and ultimately respect your decisions — even if you differ.

The perceived barriers in Richmond run deep. We have the “north of the river” and “south of the river” factions. We have racial challenges. We also have generational and socio-economic struggles. If you can ignore it all and reach out to everyone where they are and where they live — you'll make progress.

Communication — whether it's good or bad, people want to hear from you. Internal and external communication are both essential. You and I have already communicated several times since the election. Let's continue to keep those lines of communication wide open, so I can share that information with constituents. And, attend City Council meetings when the stakes are high — if you have a big initiative to push through, let's chat about it face-to-face and in public.

Externally, I see public officials who get angry with the media and overwhelmed with public life. I encourage you to work with the media to help spread your message. Lean into it. The easiest way for you to communicate quickly and reach the greatest number of people is via our local media outlets.

Last and most important — is building trust. When I was campaigning this year, it was clear that our residents have lost faith in our city government. We are here to work for them, serve them and support them as they grow and as their needs change. In so many cases we have let them down. You and I both know we can't fix this overnight. We can't fix all of the problems immediately, and the trust will take a long time to restore.

However, together, we can own the problem. We can listen and understand. We can stop blaming the different arms of city leadership for these collective problems. I congratulate you on your new role and I look forward to working together to make Richmond a great place to live, work, and play.

*Kristen Nye Larson represents Richmond's Fourth District on the School Board. Next week, she begins a four-year term representing the Fourth District on Richmond City Council.*

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## Nadine Marsh-Carter

These are exciting times in our great city! This new era of leadership brings a renewed energy and optimism for Richmond's future, which can propel our community to new levels of success. Our mayor-elect's charge is to ensure that success is enjoyed equitably throughout our community. As he considers the myriad of opportunities — and challenges — that his administration must address to lead Richmond to a brighter future, I encourage him to make Richmond's children his top priority.

It may seem a bit clichéd, but that's because it so often bears repeating — our children are our future. An investment in children is an investment in our entire community becoming stronger and better-positioned to thrive. Policies that improve our public schools support the well-being of children, realizing tangible returns in their lives and for our entire city.

Mayor-elect Stoney is positioned to work in tandem with our schools, local industry, the corporate sector, philanthropic organizations, higher education institutions, and workforce development agencies to create opportunities that move children out of poverty, strengthen our city's workforce, and ultimately make our city an even more attractive place to work and live. Public education promotes regional economic expansion, investing in the creation of a highly qualified workforce that attracts new and retains current businesses.

Access to quality education is a great equalizer — when well-educated, children from every segment of our community get the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to become successful, independent adults. Our city leadership has a moral imperative — and financial incentive — to equip every child with the opportunities that quality public education affords.

It is well documented that Richmond's high poverty rate puts a disproportionate number of our children at a tremendous disadvantage. Tragic realities stem from the “pipeline to prison” faced by too many of our youth. By advancing policies that ensure all children get a quality public education, our mayor-elect holds the opportunity to create a “pipeline to success.”

Strong public schools help children go to college, acquire relevant workforce skills, begin careers, or start a trade. Mr. Stoney's willingness re-imagine the culture at City Hall and reluctance to accept “business as usual” uniquely position him to partner with the corporate, nonprofit, and philanthropic communities to establish creative programs that promote better outcomes for Richmond's schoolchildren.

Simply put, providing children a quality education creates a win-win outcome for our children, the city, the region, and the commonwealth.

*Nadine Marsh-Carter is president and CEO of Children's Home Society of Richmond. In November, she was elected to the Richmond School Board, representing the Seventh District, and begins her term next week.*

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## Donald McEachin

Richmond's next mayor will face many challenges — and exciting opportunities, too. During the campaign, my friend Levar put forward impressive proposals to improve public schools, transform City Hall, and move

Richmond forward. Clearly, voters liked what they heard — and I believe they made a sound choice. I have every hope that the city (and the region) will flourish while Levar is at the helm.

Still, there are always pitfalls. I've been serving and campaigning for more than 20 years, and I want to share a few lessons that I've learned — not just for Levar, but for anyone who's beginning (or considering!) service as an elected official.

First, don't ever lose sight of kitchen table issues. Communities can't succeed unless they're physically safe, with good schools and reliable services. Big new initiatives are great, and some of them are incredibly important, but people need and expect you to get the basics right. Prioritize jobs and education and public safety. Find a way to fill the potholes. Richmonders need and expect that, at a minimum.

Second, listen — really listen — to everyone. No party, no group, no person has a monopoly on wisdom. Democracy can't work without compromise, and people of good faith can almost always find common ground. That doesn't mean we have to abandon our principles — perish the thought! But it does mean we have to always seek new ways of working together and serving the common good.

Third, do the legwork. Take the time to get things right. Politics can be simple, but governing never is. In the General Assembly, I've seen bad bills come back from the dead. When that happens, it's because someone recognized the problem, gathered folks around a table, and then talked with them until they found a fix that worked for everyone. That approach — that willingness to go right back to the drawing board — is exhausting, but it works. It is how we make progress.

Finally, remember where you came from and what you stand for, and how you got where you are! Voters saw who you were, and your beliefs and principles. Be true to the self you showed them. Stand by your values and don't forget why you ran in the first place. Don't lose sight of the mission. Above all, never ever forget what a privilege it is to serve and to have the opportunity to make a real difference in people's lives.

I wish Levar, and all our new elected leaders, the very best of luck — in 2017 and beyond. If I can be of help, please don't hesitate to call on me. Happy holidays, and a happy new year!

*State Sen. Donald McEachin was elected to the United States House of Representatives in November, representing Virginia's Fourth District, and begins his term in January.*

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### Kim Scheeler

Mayor-elect Stoney, you've worked your way into the greatest job in the world, because everyone is happy to tell you just how to do it! So, please take these suggestions in the spirit of support they are given with.

1) Get the financial house in order. I've heard you say that you want Richmond to be AAA bond-rated. Stick to that vision. It's important to instill confidence in the city's ability to balance the checkbook. It will pay off in many ways.

2) Focus on development opportunities. The city is in a unique position. New residents are flocking to downtown. The restaurant scene is booming. More office space is coming. The Richmond Port is growing.

All of this creates opportunity. It grows your tax base and supports big projects like new schools and amenities that attract people.

We heard the former mayor in Nashville describe their convention center and arena as “community furniture.” You need money to buy nice furniture. You need money to lift people out of poverty. Nice furniture includes a robust transportation system, top-notch schools and quality housing. Development is the cash machine that provides you with the resources to accomplish these things.

3) In order to sustain our growth and eliminate generational poverty, we need a high-performing school system. Business can’t function without people, and it can’t function well without well-trained people. People can’t get good jobs without the right education and skills.

A lot has been said about the financial needs of Richmond Public Schools and there certainly are money challenges. But it isn’t just about the money. It’s about transforming the way we educate students. It’s about inspiring them to learn skills they need. It’s about preparing young people in our city for success. We’ve got to get the bureaucracy out of the way and focus on the kids. We’ve got to stop explaining why it’s so hard to make it work. Focus on the kids.

4) Finally, build a spirit of regionalism. The city is the center of the region. Engage the neighboring jurisdictions, but meet them as an equal partner, not with your hand out. They are eager to work with you.

In all of these things, start with the end goal in mind. It keeps the focus on what you want to accomplish, not the process.

Congratulations and don’t hesitate to call on ChamberRVA if we can help!

*Kim Scheeler is president and CEO of ChamberRVA.*

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### Michael Rao

On behalf of everyone at Virginia Commonwealth University, I offer our sincere congratulations and best wishes to Richmond’s Mayor-elect Levar Stoney.

He inherits leadership of a city that is on an exciting upward trajectory and will be even more so by engaging “us.”

By that I mean he should draw on VCU and other civic, business, government, and charitable organizations throughout the region to come together in meaningful collaboration to improve the quality of life for all of our residents within the city and surrounding area.

For example, as a research university with a major academic medical center, use VCU’s expertise and passion in collaboration with the city and other organizations to address regional concerns about K-12 education and health disparities.

As the city’s largest employer with a major footprint downtown, use VCU and other large and small employers and groups as partners to leverage economic and cultural development.

The city of Richmond's potential is limitless if we all work together with the new mayor — if we are available for him to engage us in genuine and open collaboration.

That bodes well for all of us regardless of where we live and work in Central Virginia.

*Michael Rao is president of VCU and the VCU Health System.*

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Cyndy Weldon-Lassiter

Dear Mayor-elect Stoney,

Your thorough plan to make a positive impact on education is commendable, and as you collaborate with a team to transform and strengthen our public schools, I propose a second look at two areas — deepening the resources for which we currently have access and viewing our school structure with an even wider lens.

First, the voices you propose in your education plan include collaboration with local school and community partners. While their inclusion is vital, it would also behoove us to expand our resources by looking at Virginia's public education system as a whole, bringing mayors together from several metropolitan areas throughout the state.

If we can create a venue for sharing best practices in education, imagine not only a local, but also a statewide coalition uniting for the betterment of students in our community and our state. Here is our opportunity to take advantage of lessons learned, to design and then promote innovative education models and share accomplishments. All of this would be achieved in a concerted effort with leaders across our state who are overcoming similar challenges we face in our city.

Secondly, you outline key goals that compel us to see schools from a new perspective, as ones that recognize students' myriad needs, including health and social matters. Although some may believe schools addressing such support services are moving beyond their purview, it is clear those needs must be met before students are fully able to engage in their learning environment.

Yes, afterschool programming is essential as well, but as you mobilize forces and funds to provide much-needed afterschool care for students during the school year, please also consider missed opportunities in the summer months that lead to summer learning loss.

Schools serving marginalized youth have the ability to address the opportunity gap through the thoughtful use of expanded learning time, and that would include extended school hours for enrichment, as well as learning opportunities in the summer months. An extended school day and school year work in tandem to diminish students losing ground academically, and therefore, serve to increase academic achievement.

Transforming our schools is going to be arduous. Your leadership as mayor could be enhanced by statewide, collaborative mayoral leadership and pushing even harder against the way schools have operated for far too long. The collective voices and experiences could help you transform education in Richmond, as well as the Commonwealth of Virginia.

*Cyndy Weldon-Lassiter is head of school at St. Andrew's School in Richmond.*