

Making City Hall Work for All:

DR. AVULA'S SIX-POINT PRESCRIPTION

**for a More Effective and
Responsive City Government**

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Summary: Dr. Danny Avula's Prescription for a More Effective and Responsive City Government

Improve the performance, effectiveness, trustworthiness, and accountability of Richmond City government operations. Danny will prioritize the financial responsibilities of a high functioning agency. Danny will regularly attend City Council meetings to update the Council on the city's progress and answer questions. He will also meet regularly with residents to hear their concerns.

Undertake a comprehensive assessment of leadership and personnel — starting at the top. Danny will not hesitate to make necessary changes and hire top-quality professionals to run City Hall. Moreover, he will be hands-on, engaging directly with department heads regarding key decisions and interacting regularly with all City Hall employees.

Demand transparency in decision-making. Members of Danny's leadership team will be expected to clearly define and justify the issue at hand, do their research, make timely, researched-based decisions that take public input into account, and communicate those decisions promptly and clearly. Danny will hold himself to these same standards.

Improve the core areas of government: human resources, information and technology, procurement and finance. Implementing technology that effectively meets Richmond's needs, making sure employees are well-trained, and creating a professional climate and compensation structure will make the city a competitive and positive place to work.

Elevate the Office of Performance Management. Led by a Chief Transformation Officer, this office will undertake assessments of departments, oversee audit responses, and work to drive transformational change throughout the organization. This will allow real-time information about challenges on the front lines to be communicated regularly to senior leadership.

Mandate city agencies to publish detailed plans, which outline goals and include specific information such as personnel needs, numerical targets, and budgets. This transparency will drive accountability, management, and accessibility. The public should be able to see and understand how their tax dollars are being deployed.

Support and uplift employees. Danny will follow both the letter and the spirit of the city's collective bargaining agreements while continuously working to improve salaries and the work environment at City Hall. When employees are happy and feel valued, their service delivery is better, and their interactions with the public reflect that.

In my years of leading large government agencies, I have learned what works and what doesn't. I have the organizational skills, the interpersonal skills, and the determination to build a stronger, healthier Richmond — and it starts at City Hall.

- Dr. Danny Avula

Intro



I believe deeply in the power of local government to make a difference in people's lives and to create stronger communities.

I believe equally deeply that the way that Richmond's local government serves its residents can be much, much better.

Improving the performance, effectiveness, and trustworthiness of municipal government operations in Richmond is both a civic and social justice imperative. **We must do better.**

We need a city government that is capable of delivering essential services well to all residents and implementing policy and programmatic initiatives that impact the quality of our residents' lives. Without a well-functioning government that people trust, the city cannot reach its potential.

But it's not just about efficiency. It's about attitude. We need a City Hall that is eager to solve problems and resolve issues for every single taxpayer—be it a household or a business—and that is responsive to citizens' input.

I want to be clear—City Hall has many capable and talented employees devoted to public service, and every day our city agencies provide essential services to city residents. From paving roads to helping residents in need to providing quality parks, libraries, and recreational facilities, the work of city government is critically important to the well-being of Richmonders.

And we have seen the city make progress in some important areas—including achieving a AAA bond rating, joining the Virginia Retirement System, and strengthening an outstanding park system.

Too often, however, ineffective and inefficient municipal processes hamper even the best efforts of employees, and cause confusion and distrust with residents and businesses. This is not a criticism of past or present leaders—it's just a statement of fact.

Improving City Hall is without question one of the most important issues in this year's mayor's race. Richmonders need and deserve a government that can perform its most basic functions—like tax collection—with accuracy and professionalism.

Most candidates in Richmond this year will put forth ideas about how to fix City Hall, and certainly as Mayor I will welcome good ideas no matter the source.

But here's the difference: **I have proven, executive-level, public sector experience, handling and solving complex problems with life-or-death consequences.** I led the Richmond & Henrico Health District during the pandemic, led the Commonwealth of Virginia's COVID vaccination effort on behalf of Governor Northam, and have also overseen one of the largest agencies in state government, the Department of Social Services.

I have spent my career working to improve public health, to make people and communities healthier. In my roles at the Richmond City Health Department and later the Richmond and Henrico Health District, I served in leadership alongside both City Hall and Henrico County government for years.

Consequently, I know both what works and what doesn't work in local government. I know how to recruit and support talented public sector professionals who do outstanding work. I have

consistently and effectively partnered with the private and nonprofit sectors to solve difficult problems that government can't tackle alone. And I have the organizational skills, the professional relationships, and the sheer persistence to get difficult things done, even in difficult circumstances.

I plan to be a hands-on Mayor. *I'm going to take personal responsibility for making sure this government works more effectively.* I will do so through strategic and sustained action that addresses our most serious shortcomings while also lifting up best practices and a positive vision of public service.

We don't need another study to tell us key processes in City Hall are broken. We need an experienced, capable and dedicated Mayor who can both deliver tangible near-term improvements and provide sustained attention and investment into making City Hall a model public sector organization.

Here's my six-point plan to make that vision a reality.

- Danny

1 Commit to Communication Collaboration and Consensus Building

Change starts at the top.

As Mayor of Richmond, I will unite our community around a shared vision of an inclusive city, supported by the nuts-and-bolts operations of a competent and capable city government that delivers.

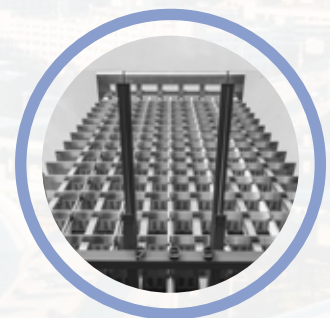
I have great respect for the leaders who have held this office since it was created over the past twenty years. Richmond has progressed in so many ways.

But to go further, and especially to go further in the direction of equity, we must do so together.

I believe Richmond residents want and need a Mayor with a vision for what our city can be. But residents also want a Mayor who will build consensus on the practical steps needed to realize that vision.

As Mayor, **my priorities will be communication, collaboration, and consensus-building. I'll ensure that every plan the city undertakes is rooted in an inclusive, participatory process.** I will model and hold city employees accountable to a higher standard of transparency. I will treat Richmond City Council and Richmond School Board as essential and valued partners in the work of government. I will demand that my staff and the City of Richmond team treat residents and businesses with care and respect at all times and be reliable and accountable.

This doesn't mean I won't stand up for things, and it doesn't mean I won't lead. I'm willing to take bold stands and more important, bold actions, when they are merited or demanded. But I also understand



it takes extra work to bring people along when you are doing something different or new. I will respect the doubts, clarifying questions, and even critical questions that come my way when I or my administration propose something new.

I am not running to be a “five vote” mayor who pushes things through a single bloc of Council. While I will not always be able to get every vote on policy initiatives, I will always try. **I plan to adopt the City Charter Review Commission's recommendation of attending City Council meetings once a month to provide an update on the city's progress and answer public questions from Council members.** And I will do everything in my power to maintain cordial, professional, and respectful relationships with all members of Council and indeed all community members.

And when things go wrong, I will take responsibility— both for owning what happened, and for working towards resolution.

I understand it takes a lot of patience and extra work to do it this way. But this is who I am, and this is how the role of Mayor and the Mayor's office can act to unify and elevate our city. I know that I and my team won't have all the answers all the time. We need the input and wisdom of the members of Council, and that of the broader public as well.

I know this can be done, because I have done it throughout my professional career, over and over, including in high-stakes situations. When Governor Northam entrusted me with the responsibility of distributing life-saving vaccines statewide, I proceeded by establishing relationships of trust with elected officials and community leaders across the state. I showed up in communities, and provided information and data about the vaccine, but I also listened to people's questions and concerns. Through those efforts, I was able to build trust and respect in all corners of our state, allowing us to become one of the most successful states in getting residents vaccinated and finally curbing the pandemic.

Sometimes, people just want to be heard, and they want their honest questions to receive an honest answer. That's an insight I have built my professional career on, and that I will carry into City Hall.

I will lead, but not before listening. That's how we can get better as a city—together.

2 Make Decision-Making Transparent and Invite the Public In

To seek the office of Mayor is to seek responsibility for making difficult decisions, decisions that can have significant impact on not only broad policy but on real people's lives. Some decisions may even have life-or-death consequences.

Here's the template for decision-making I will follow in City Hall—and require all members of my team with significant decision-making power to follow:

- 1** Clearly define problems or decision points and what's at stake on a given question
- 2** Gather and assess credible information from a variety of sources relevant to the question
- 3** Define and assess multiple possible strategies for action, and obtain stakeholder and broader public feedback on those proposed strategies

- 4 Make a timely decision based on available evidence, feedback received, and best understanding of probable consequences and impact
- 5 Communicate that decision widely and faithfully implement the decision in a timely way
- 6 Assess the impact of decisions and policy actions made over time, and be open to recalibrating, reconsidering or even reversing prior policy actions that aren't working out as intended



Following these steps consistently will bring clarity to the policy-making process, improve the quality of decisions made, and make it easier to track the long-term impact of policy steps. It will also help both employees within City Hall and the larger public understand the basis for important decisions.

Item three, opening the doors to public feedback, is a critical step that, unfortunately, is too often overlooked or under-valued. I'm not talking about pro forma, check-the-box meetings to ratify decisions already made. I'm talking about gathering in-depth feedback, from a variety of venues and methods.

Importantly, the city must always make the extra effort needed to assure that voices often left out are included in the process. Equally important, city officials must always consider how enacted policies are experienced by the individuals and communities most directly impacted.

We cannot have a Mayor's Office or a City Hall that is perceived as closed off from the larger community.

I believe City Hall is at its most effective when skilled and knowledgeable practitioners work in concert with engaged residents. This means, often, throwing open the doors of City Hall to allow the public in, even on difficult problems such as poverty, public safety, and ecological sustainability.

Indeed, some of Richmond's greatest successes in the past twenty years have come when City Hall has thrown open its doors to invite the public to share in the work of local government—from the Downtown Master Plan under Mayor Wilder to Mayor Jones's anti-poverty work to the Richmond 300 Plan under Mayor Stoney.

When we listen to residents, powerful change can take place. I learned this early in my career at the Richmond City Health District, when I helped create community health resource centers within each of the city's "Big Six" public housing communities. Our initial goal was to expand access to family planning services in these neighborhoods, but residents told us there was a broader need for access to basic health services, screenings, and information.

We partnered with Richmond Redevelopment & Housing Authority to designate a vacant apartment unit within each community as a health resource center, then hired neighborhood residents to serve as Community Health Workers. We drew on the talents of community members with strong connections to their neighbors, built trust between the community and the health department, and provided meaningful services to residents. That program is still going strong, and it's making an impact.

One of the reasons it has made such an impact is that we listened deeply to residents on the front end, honored the knowledge and insight of those with lived experience, tailored our model to that input, and ultimately earned the trust of the community.

We will make this listening-based approach the norm rather than the exception in City Hall.

As Mayor I will hold regular listening sessions with residents throughout the city, ensuring all parts of the city are heard, and I will require that city agencies recognize civic engagement not as an add-on but a central part of their mission.

I know we will not be able to make everyone happy all the time, and I am not afraid to make difficult decisions— I have done so time and again in my career. For me, doing the right thing will always take precedence over doing the popular thing.

But I can commit to assuring that all significant decisions go through a consistent and rigorous process in which multiple viewpoints are sought and heard, and that the basis for decisions are clearly communicated. Agree or disagree, when I am Mayor you will always know why a decision was made.

Effective Mayoral leadership involves a thoughtful and thorough decision-making process, effective implementation of decisions, and clear-eyed assessment of the results. None of that can take place without a commitment to two-way, constant communication with residents.

3 Assess Leadership at All Levels and Make Needed Changes

From Day One, I will undertake a comprehensive assessment of leadership and personnel in every city agency, starting at the top and prioritizing the city's most urgent operational issues. That process will begin prior to taking office; in the transition period I will assess and make decisions concerning key city leadership positions.

And, in cases where it is clear that there are systemic deficiencies in a given department or portfolio or other significant leadership issues, I won't hesitate to make needed changes, as soon as day one.

As stated, I will be a hands-on Mayor. This means making sure that all agency portfolios are aligned with my policy goals and that real-time information about issues and challenges at the agency level reach my desk. Under the City Charter, the Chief Administrative Officer holds formal authority over the various agencies, but this need not and should not mean that the Mayor is detached from the work of agencies. I will expect my Chief Administrative Officer to be comfortable with my approach as a hands-on Mayor.

What do I mean by "hands-on"? Here are some key questions I will expect all agency leaders to be able to answer with clarity, at all times:

- What are the core goals of your agency? What are the action steps that will achieve those goals?
- Who are the people specifically responsible for seeing those action steps are taken?
- How will progress be evaluated and assessed, and what process is in place to allow midcourse correction if need be?



These questions have many important follow-ups, like “How are available resources being utilized to support those goals?” “What is the specific role of each employee in the agency?” “How well do agency employees at all levels understand the mission and why their job is important to the city as a whole?”

I will expect and demand that my agency directors, portfolio heads, and Chief Administrative Officer all be able to answer these questions and to implement good government practices, from compliance with legal requirements (such as FOIA requests and procurement law) to sound financial management, sound record keeping, and transparent communication with the public.

But I won't just be delegating this responsibility to others. I will be asking these questions of agency leaders directly. And I won't settle for accepting incomplete or evasive answers. **I want to know where the problems, bottlenecks, and challenges are—and I want to make sure that we have a clear plan to resolve them.**

Here's the thing: I have 15 years of experience resolving complex problems and getting difficult and important things done for people in the public sector. I have the skill set and experience to think alongside my administrative team and help resolve issues—not just as the elected official in the room, but as an experienced public administrator who will command the professional respect of my team. And I know where to draw the line in judging that something is being done well or not well, or that someone's job performance is or is not acceptable.

I also intend to organize the Mayor's Office from day one to be sure it is not siloed off from the Chief Administrative Officer or the agencies that formally report to the CAO. The Mayor's Office—either I personally or a member of my team—will participate in regular administrative meetings convened by the CAO and by deputy administrators.

Problems arise when there is not robust and transparent two-way communication between the Mayor's team and administrators. I'm not just going to rely on curated reports up the chain to understand what's really happening within our agencies and on the front line of service delivery.

My entire professional career has prepared me to be a hands-on Mayor that holds people accountable.

I've been in executive leadership roles for 15 years in local and state government. Every step of that work is making sure the people reporting to you are good leaders, and making sure you have a team that can execute. I believe in building diverse and inclusive teams that reflect the communities we serve and that bring complementary skill sets to the table.

Building a strong culture of success is not something that can happen overnight— it takes time and sustained attention. It's not just about hiring and firing people, although those are both important. It's also about putting in place a robust process to assess leaders, find out what's really going on in departments, and help people see where there is an opportunity to improve. In my administration there will be regular employee engagement surveys in each department, and agency heads will have 360 evaluations on a regular basis. It's hard to be an effective leader if you don't have the trust and respect of your employees, and so I will value employees' voices as well as the voices of other stakeholders.

Sometimes leadership and making progress requires changing how we do things. Change can invite a lot of questions and distrust. When we are doing something new, employees need to hear clearly

from the very top why this change—be it a policy, a program, or a procedure—is being made, and have the opportunity to ask questions and voice concerns.

One of the challenges in City Hall is making sure that the Mayor’s overall vision and agenda reaches all corners of this very large and complex organization, and that all city employees feel they are part of a larger effort to serve city residents. To that end, as Mayor I plan to regularly convene—at least once per quarter—all employees for dialogue and conversation. I don’t just mean all people in leadership positions—I mean all available employees.

Every role across the City of Richmond’s local government is important. As chief executive, I want to make sure I am hearing the perspectives of our front lines, and I also want to make sure I am communicating the direction the city is going, so we can all pull together to achieve our goals.

I have not just talked about building cultures of trust and accountability—I have done it. And I will do it in City Hall, too.

4 Elevate the Office of Performance Management and Appoint a Chief Transformation Officer

To that end, one of my first actions as Mayor will be to elevate the Office of Performance Management. Currently, this unit is a subset of the Department of Budget and Strategic Planning.

It needs instead to report directly to the Mayor and to the CAO, and it needs to be given substantially more support. Specifically, the unit should be led by an experienced public sector leader—a Chief Transformation Officer—with knowledge of municipal governance, and its team should also at all times include staff with detailed knowledge of Richmond City Hall. The unit also should have access to external consulting support as it undertakes specific analyses.

What should the Office of Performance Management do, and why does it matter?

- It should organize a process on behalf of the Mayor and CAO to assure that uniform, real-time information is being conveyed to senior leadership on the strategic goals and performance of each agency, drawing on the questions noted above.
- It should proactively communicate the administration’s overall goals and plans to the agencies.
- It should monitor agencies’ corrective action responses to formal audit findings.
- It should, with support from external professional expertise, undertake deep-dive assessments of agencies with recurring issues or challenges and make recommendations for possible reorganization and restructuring.
- It should consider organizational issues more broadly, including potential creation of new agencies, consolidation or realignment of existing agencies, and related questions.

- It should regularly share data on agency performance with Council and with the public in a visible, proactive, and ongoing manner. Members of the public should be able at all times to access the agencies' strategic plans as well as quarterly updates on progress made.

The work of this office will inform the assessments I and my CAO make of agency leadership and major organizational decisions. But I will also meet regularly with agency directors—not just to receive updates, but to ask questions and work through issues as well.

Troubleshooting organizational challenges in the public sector is something I have done my whole career. For instance, in my recent role as Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services, we persistently heard from service providers who relied on our agency to process background checks, that delayed processing on our part was leading to hiring challenges, as many qualified candidates would move on to other opportunities.

To address this, we used the People, Process, and Technology framework to assess our operation. We recognized we simply did not have enough human capacity to process the volume of requests we were receiving, so we hired temporary staff to work through the backlog. We analyzed our entire process end-to-end, removed unnecessary steps, and combined other steps to reduce the overall throughput time. And we built a new user-friendly online portal for our service providers to be able to make requests electronically. Over the course of 6 months, we were able to reduce background check turnaround times that had been taking 6-8 weeks, to under 7 days, which made a world of difference for our providers and their new hires. Resolving issues like this should not take forever—it just takes attention and a commitment to getting it done.

5 Focus on Internal Services and Prioritize Technological Improvement

In my first two years as Mayor, **I will focus improvement efforts on the following core functions of the city: Human Resources, Information & Technology, Procurement, and Finance.** These agencies need to be well-functioning, well-organized, and appropriately resourced. Problems in these departments impact every agency in City Hall as well as all city residents and businesses.

Nothing is off the table in terms of the scope of potential reorganization of these units. But here are some general principles to guide improvement efforts:

- We need to minimize and eliminate reliance on paper-based records, or even working by hand on items involving financial transactions. Archaic systems need to be replaced, and we need to assure that planned new systems are implemented correctly with sufficient training for all employees on the front-end.
- We need to look at how further investment in technological tools can allow us to re-organize some job functions, to allow employees to get more done and eliminate time-intensive, repetitive tasks where feasible.
- We need to prioritize the use of data, including data visualization tools, to guide the reorganization process and the operations of city government in general.

- We need to invest in front-end training of all employees; have a more rigorous assessment process as newly hired employees transition from provisional to permanent status; and have ongoing professional development for all staff, within and between agencies.
- We need to be sure our salaries, work climate, and overall professional environment allow the city to be competitive in attracting and keeping highly talented public sector employees.
- We need to draw on best practices from public sector organizations with respect to these key functions, learning from our neighbors in Chesterfield and Henrico County, from state-level practices, and from national examples.

Building on what we learn in these critically important initial efforts, we will then develop a plan for assuring all or virtually all agencies undergo a thorough assessment by the end of my term of office.

I know what it takes to improve core internal services of government—because I’ve done it!

At the Virginia Department of Social Services, we recognized that our internal procurement process was a major bottleneck, impacting our ability to procure goods and services and to distribute money to various partners. So we looked at the entire process in detail—literally representing each of the over 200 steps of the process by a post-it note on a wall in a conference room. Our team wrestled through figuring out which steps were needed and which could be streamlined or removed. We went through this process improvement effort with a fine toothed comb—our goal was to reduce the length of our complex procurements from approximately 180 days to under 120 days—and we got it done.

We can and will get it done in City Hall, too.

6 Building a Culture of Success and Accountability

It’s not feasible to transform all city agencies all at once into high-performing agencies. That will take time, and we need to start where we can have the most impact.

It is feasible, however, to demand accountability from all city agencies from day one.

Every year, city agencies will be required to publish a detailed plan outlining goals with specific numerical targets, personnel needs, and required budgets. I will work with our City Council to assure that each agency is providing a detailed update on its work to a Council committee each calendar year—not just at budget time. And I will publish and publicize these strategic plans so residents can better understand the work of their government.

Here’s my approach to accountability. If you work for the City of Richmond, I assume you are motivated by public service and the desire to serve the public. And I assume that you want to be successful in that service, and to be part of accomplishing important things that help the city and its residents.

Positive motivation that speaks to people’s deepest aspirations to be effective public servants will always be my “Plan A.” I know how to build teams of people that work well together to get things done. I want that to become the norm, not the exception in City Hall, and I want to recruit leaders to City Hall who have those same team-building skills.



But there always needs to be a Plan B for when things don’t go well. When people consistently fail to pull their weight, repeatedly make avoidable errors, or demonstrate unprofessionalism or negligence in their work duties, they should no longer be part of the organization.

To that end, I will hold “at-will” leaders (such as directors and deputy directors) to the highest standards of professionalism and performance. And I will work proactively to build strong relationships with our public sector collective bargaining units, to both ensure fair and needed protections for employees and to be sure the city can be managed effectively in its day-to-day work.

Moreover my administration will follow both the letter and the spirit of the recently negotiated collective bargaining agreements, and will work to improve salaries and working conditions for rank-and-file employees throughout my tenure. My goal is for the city to have a highly motivated workforce that takes pride in serving our residents, with our collective bargaining units as critical partners.

Ultimately, we need to build a culture of success and accountability throughout the organization, so that city employees can trust and rely on one another, and city residents can rely on the city to do what it says it’s going to do, and do it well.

That’s the mindset I will model as Mayor, and will insist that it becomes the mindset of our organization at every level. “Making Government Work for All of Us” isn’t a mantra or slogan for me—it’s at the very heart of my professional life.

At the Richmond City Health Department, I successfully led a fundamental shift in both the mission and the mindset of that agency. We shifted from an organization that was primarily defined by the delivery of clinical services, to an agency that deeply understood its responsibility to improve the health not just of individuals, but of entire populations. Over several years we built new capacities in data collection and analysis, public health communication, and policy development, and used these tools to address the broader social determinants of health that shape health outcomes at the community level.

We can and will shift the mission and mindset of City Hall too. I’m running for Mayor because I believe deeply in justice, in building a more equitable city, and building stronger neighborhoods and cities. To accomplish those goals we must have a City Hall that functions well, that listens to residents, and that residents trust. This is what Richmond residents expect and deserve.

No other candidate in this race has the extensive record of public sector executive experience that I bring to the table. I know what it takes to make government work, to lead organizational change, and to truly deliver for residents.

I look forward as Mayor to leading the hard work of forging a transformed City Hall that gets important things done and that has earned the respect, trust, and confidence of its residents.