

2017 STATE OF THE CITY
COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

Opening Remarks

It is so good to be here with you again to speak about this City – this community that we love and are devoted to.

Today, I want to take a moment to reflect on where we have been over these last six years and discuss why it matters: the successes, the battles, the discoveries and even the shortfalls are important. Those events tell us who we are and what we have left to do to be the city we know we can be. Then, we need to look to where we are, our possibilities and our challenges. And, finally, we need to look to where we can go in these next two years of my term and beyond. The momentum we have achieved is undeniable and it is incumbent on us all that we set a vision that requires that momentum to continue and hold all of our civic partners, our current leaders and our future leaders to that standard.

But, first I want to thank you. Thank you for being here today. Thank you for what you do every day in the pursuit of excellence and civic exceptionalism.

- To our partners at the Chamber who convened this event and who are retooling this important organization, the leadership of CEO Brian Anderson has been a breath of fresh air and a blast of energy. We are so grateful to Brian, his staff, the Chamber's volunteer Board and the Development Authority it administers for their successes, including the amazing work on the Columbus 2025 Prosperity Initiative and this week's Pratt and Whitney announcement of 510 new quality jobs.
- To our host today, Columbus State University, what a spark you have been for the development of young professional talent and for the bustling renewal of our downtown, most recently with the grand opening of the impressive Frank Brown Health Sciences Center.
- To our friends at Ft. Benning who join us in making one of the world's largest military training bases both an economic driver and a community builder, we are thrilled with the recent news of the Security Force Assistance Office and the Military Advisor Training Academy and look forward to working with you on other growth opportunities. We are fortunate to have the remarkable leadership team of General Wesley and Garrison Commander Hilmes.
- To our business community that not only leads our private sector but coordinates with us for public betterment, your creativity in investment and partnership has been a catalyst for many of the great things that have happened in this community and it is a model for others.

- To our neighbors in Phenix City, it has been so very exciting to watch your progress and our partnership grow.
- To our education partners at the Muscogee County School District, we rejoice in the increased graduation rates and the improved college entrance exam scores and standardized test scores. Our community prosperity is dependent on your success.
- To our elected officials who have had the courage to throw their hats in the ring, who bring their important perspectives to the table and who tirelessly pursue a better Columbus.
- To our city employees, including our Public Safety professionals, who silently, heroically and sometimes thanklessly serve. And,
- To our city's executive administrative leadership led by one who the State has declared – and I whole-heartedly agree – is the best city/county manger in Georgia, Mr. Isaiah Hugley;

we thank you for your service and committed partnership. Each of you in your own way and with your own talents adds to the civic tapestry that makes Columbus, Georgia unique and vibrant. Our success would not – could not – be achieved without you and we are so very grateful you have chosen to invest in and till the field of this community.

Reflection

One of the most interesting, and sometimes frustrating, things about public service is the constant moving of the civic goal posts. Because of the epic nature of public efforts, by the time the fruits of our joint labors are achieved, the community has largely moved on, or anticipated the outcome, and so the announcement of success of the previous impossibility or the resolution of a prior mucky disaster is met with a shrug of the shoulders and a nod of acknowledgment for the seemingly inevitable.

I remember quite clearly the pronouncements that we would never get third shift or expanded Public Transit service. We have done that to the great fanfare of those who broke their backs to make it happen - who pulled together the federal, state and local partners to make it happen - but also to the little notice or acknowledgment of those who loudly proclaimed it could not be done. Now, our Metra ridership is up 15% in the first eight weeks and employers cite that transportation infrastructure as an essential component of our competitive viability for jobs and Millennial population.

Clear in my memory is the barrage of emails from, and social media posts by, advocates on both sides of the No Kill versus PETA animal rights issues as we sought to reform our Animal Care and Control Center in order to reduce our then shocking 80% euthanasia rate. Just last month, we learned that our resulting Columbus *Save A Pet* plan has won the prestigious Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government, *Bright Ideas* Award.

Thanks to the hard work of Special Enforcement Manager, Drale Short and her staff, many of the authors of those prior emails and posts are now our volunteers and partners in the *Save A Pet* program. And, though we can announce a 2016 euthanasia rate of just 20%, and a radically increased adoption rate, you will see only shoulders to the grindstone and no pats on the back for the strong civic leadership to it took to withstand that early barrage, strike the right balance and get the job done.

Mostly, etched in my mind is that day in November 2014, when major pillars of our community – two constitutional officers and two long serving elected municipal officials – chose to sue our city, our Columbus Council, the Mayor, City Manager and other public servants over budget amounts. A press conference of the lawyers for those litigants was held. They were loud and raucous in spitting disdain for our long held process – the budget process - the most sacred trust of a local government official. The press conference was reckless and irresponsible in its ignorance of the law, the facts and the process of which the legal filings took issue. As an experienced attorney, I knew the purpose of that spectacle was to jar the public trust, to undermine the faith of the citizens in their local government, and to quake the named officials into immediate and monetarily lucrative surrender.

The more bluster, the less substance.

I don't tell you this to reopen a now cleansed and healing wound of the community. I bring this up to ensure that we do not take for granted the importance of the battle fought and the victory won.

We need to commend the bravery of those Councilors, administrative appointees and lawyers who could have folded but who refused to allow our lawful and deliberate budget process to be so erroneously impugned. We need to commend the citizenry who at the ballot box handled in the ultimate political manner that which was initiated for political purpose. And, we must remember always, that we – the local government and the citizens - won in court on these budget issues before this past year's political season provided yet another cure.

Had we known on that November 2014 afternoon the utter failure of the lawsuits' objectives, we would have rejoiced in the streets, high-fived in victory, danced in vindicated jubilation. But, because the wheels of justice grind slowly, the march of time moves the goal posts and our memory of the origin of the discord grows foggy, we recall only that we *choose* to forget the drama and unpleasantness and, therefore, necessarily, forget the herculean efforts required to right this wrong and reaffirm our civic order.

So, as we reflect on where we have been, let us not forget our own history and our painful, costly battles and the important vindication of the effectiveness, the validity and the honorability of our local governing authority – our Columbus Consolidated Government.

Let us, also, consider anew why our government is here and its effect on our lives.

We sometimes take government for granted or dismiss it as troublesome or irrelevant, but government is important. It is us. It is our agreed upon collaboration to weather any storm of controversy moving ever toward solutions, toward progress, toward community betterment.

When school children ask me what the local government does, I tell them that we provide the framework that allows you to live your best most prosperous life. I tell them that it is our job to maintain the framework of the city so that you don't even notice it is there, so that you are able to do whatever you need to do for your family and your job because the basic resources and opportunities you need are at your fingertips.

That's right: The objective of government is to be so effective and efficient at promoting our General Welfare that it is invisible.

So, if you are in Public Service for recognition, you are surely in the wrong profession. Yet, we can and should on the occasion of events like this, take inventory of the good government provided and the choppy water we have well-navigated, and say to those that have had a hand in it: "Well done."

Celebration

Another effect of the ever-moving goalposts of civic progress is that we rarely have the luxury of celebrating where we are and all the activity around us. We get lost in the weeds of the day-to-day execution of our respective missions and we fail to notice the problems solved and the budding opportunities that are moving our city forward.

Community Renewal

For instance, despite the odds, and in the face of too many naysayers to count, our City Manager, staff and Council have stayed the course to revitalize blighted areas of our community. These areas were left behind by the growth North. They house good-hearted, salt of the earth neighbors who fight daily the frayed community and disintegrating families that breed crime, underperforming schools and an ill-equipped workforce.

This past year, Council approved funding to transform Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and the Winterfield Neighborhood at the intersection of Cusseta Road and Brown Avenue. Pockets of neighbors have long held the fort of community there and we owe it to them to bring the infrastructure and planning that will allow them to thrive. Because of this investment and planning, you will see MLK Boulevard remade into a beautifully landscaped neighborhood byway, with a 12-foot dedicated pedestrian and cycling trail. There will also be an outdoor learning center celebrating our own civil rights history.

So, too, in Winterfield, we have taken an area previously riddled by dubious establishments of unlawful activity and violence and are working hand-in-glove with the neighbors to rebuild the vibrancy that some still remember. Building neighborhood economic nodes and establishing pedestrian and cycling transportation grids is precisely the successful formula

used around the country to rekindle community and prosperity. We are making that happen in Columbus.

Crime is Down

Brace yourselves. I am about to collide reality and perception. Crime is down. Yes, crime is down and significantly so. Now, that does not mean that there is no crime, or that there are not incidents of horrific crime in Columbus. There are. But, far fewer crimes are happening now than in years past, and we need to appreciate that.

In 2008 and 2009, crime was at its height in Columbus. In those years we had some 15,500 Part-One crimes. In 2016, we suffered 10,571 Part-One Crimes.

- That is 5,000 fewer crimes and 5,000 fewer victims.
- That is a 33% decrease in overall crime since its height in 2009.
- That is a 34% decrease in property crime since its height in 2009. And,
- That is a 17% decrease in violent crime since its height in 2008.

Part-One crimes are defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and include the crimes of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and motor vehicle theft. Crime fluctuates from year to year, and 2016 was a significant reduction, thanks to the tremendous efforts of our law enforcement officials, our crime prevention partners and our neighborhood watch groups. But, know that Part-One Crimes have been down on average 2,500 crimes per year since 2011.

So, why is there a constant clamoring that crime is “out of control” in Columbus. Here are some thoughts:

- Crime shakes our basic sense of security and well being, which goes to the core of citizenry and it consumes our consciousness, so it will always be at the top of citizen concerns.
- Crime happens in clusters. There are very particular reasons for this, but suffice it to say that you do not notice when we go 60 or 110 days without a murder, but you do notice when there are three murders in ten days. The same concept is true for robberies and burglaries.
- Crime is politicized by those who wish to cast themselves as “law and order” community leaders and who believe that crime is only a manifestation of insufficient public safety funds or the proclaimed “weakness” of an elected leader who was not their choice.
- Crime is happening in places it used to not happen, like previously isolated, but now highly commercialized, suburban neighborhoods and that change adds to the perception of instability. And,

- Social media exposes us to more incidents of crime, while traditional media outlets report crime in a larger geographic area of multiple cities and the cumulative effect of crime in four or five cities creates a disparate impression of crime in Columbus.

Crime is serious. We fight it every day and will not let up. It will fluctuate, but the fact of the matter is that despite this annual vacillation, crime has been on a sustained decrease over a period of six years, and we need to celebrate that *fact* as we continue the battle against all crime.

Budget Issues

Similarly, there is much misinformation or confusion about the city's finances. It is difficult to grapple with the very real challenges we have, if everyone is chasing a myth. So, I would like to share some actual, but perhaps surprising, facts with you:

- The Columbus Consolidated Government was named one of the 2016 top fifty Best-Run Cities in America by Wallet-Hub.
- Our budget process and product received the Government Finance Officers Association, Distinguished Budget Presentation award for the 25th year in a row and our FY2016 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report received a clean independent audit.
- Our current budget is the first in 16 years where the General Fund was balanced with no reserve funds.
- Columbus has the lowest per capita expenditures of any comparable Georgia community. We provide good government to our citizens at roughly \$1,300 per person, while our peer cities, such as Augusta provide services at \$1,600 per person and Savannah provides services at \$2,400 per person.
- Our city's annual operating budget has shown a total *negative* 3.6% growth rate in the last six years. So, we are not wildly increasing expenditures as some have erroneously suggested. And, yet,
- We allot 40% of our budget to Public Safety and have the highest per capita expenditures for Public Safety of any comparable community in Georgia. And,
- We have provided an 8.5% pay increase to all our valued employees, and an 11.3% pay increase to our police officers, in the last six years.

There are urban myths and mad math out there that makes social media and the Ledger comments buzz with delighted delirium, but know that is what it is. We have challenges; they are largely systemic to our tax structure. Yet, as we go forward to work with the

system we have and the challenges we face, we simply must grasp fact and reality with both hands.

New Era Transportation Infrastructure

On another front, we are redefining transportation for a new era. The world is rethinking transportation capacity, and Columbus is right there with it.

We are building a network of 60 miles of extensive biking and pedestrian paths, not just for recreation, but also for transportation. The Dragonfly network, which includes 27 new miles of greenway trails, and MidTown's Minimum Grid Project, which will connect Lakebottom Park to the River, will both break ground this year.

This network doesn't just connect our neighborhoods, schools and amenities. It doesn't just make Columbus a destination for outdoor enthusiasts and other tourists. It gives our city a meaningful alternative transportation grid that relieves the need for a car for simple excursions, and relieves ever-increasing vehicle capacity and the costs associated with it. Additionally, it enhances our quality of life and makes us more competitive for economic development prospects and Millennial population.

The biggest game changer for Columbus, however, lies in our High Speed Passenger Rail Plan. We have completed a feasibility study that shows the economic viability of a High Speed Passenger Rail line from our Columbus Airport to the Atlanta Airport with one stop in Newnan. It will run up I-185 to I-85 along already owned right of way, and is projected to be profitable in the first year of operation with a 1.2 profitability ratio. That means its operation revenue is capable of paying any debt service from the construction.

Recently, the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) has put the Columbus line on its Georgia Rail Plan. And, the Federal Rail Administration (FRA) has granted Columbus the opportunity to collapse years of environmental review into a single tier environmental study, which will shave years and millions of dollars off the planning and design process of this major transportation opportunity.

Also, we have learned that our rail line could remake the Columbus airport into a regional hub for low cost air carriers like Jet Blue and Norwegian Air, for instance, freeing up precious gates at Hartsfield for the larger carriers. This scenario is a common phenomenon in airport-to-airport high-speed rail lines around the world.

So, when we think of the possibility of Atlanta to Columbus high speed passenger rail, we need to stop thinking of it as a series of individual ticket sales and see it as an opportunity to greatly expand our regional air transportation system, as well as an opportunity to connect the entirety of resources of Atlanta (educational, medical, economic resources), with those in Columbus.

Creative Industries

We have witnessed dramatic leaps in Columbus' efforts to capitalize on Georgia's film industry and other creative industries.

- In 2016, Columbus hosted the first ever Way Down Film Festival, which showcased 40 short films. The two-day Festival welcomed national and international film industry participants.
- Columbus became the U.S. location for Fun Academy Motion Pictures, and its founder intends to bring Columbus its share of Georgia's \$7 billion film industry, potentially bringing 300-400 well-paying jobs and making Columbus a center for animation.
- Columbus is home to Black Art In America (BAIA), the leading online portal and social network focused on African-American Art. BAIA was founded by artist, Najee Dorsey, of Arkansas, who chooses to make Columbus his home.
- CSU began construction on the Bo Bartlett Center. Bo is a native son and renowned American Realist artist. Bo's choice to bring this phenomenal resource to Columbus thrusts us onto the international art scene.
- Since 2011, Columbus has hosted the Creative South international conference on branding and digital design. Creative South attracts 800 participants from 33 states and four countries, as well as top-tier industry talent, to Columbus for a three-day workshop and networking opportunity. And,
- Columbus is home to an innovative makerspace called ColumbusMakesIT, a nationally recognized collaborative that fosters local inventors in modern manufacturing, engineering and technical solutions.

Columbus is firmly apart of the new creative industries that the world is talking about. We need to maximize it, not just as an enhancement to our cultural spectrum or our quality of life, but also as the serious economic driver that it is.

Opportunities In Our Shortfalls

Columbus is no longer an off the grid sleepy mill-town. We are a sophisticated, capable and dynamic community. As community leaders we need to fully appreciate that fact, or risk minimizing or losing the opportunities all around us. We must continue to project the possibilities of the city we are destined to be, because if we don't others will urge that Columbus is only what it was and should be bound by the limitations and harnesses of the past.

Yes, I'm talking about our recent earnest, but failed, attempt to Thaw the Property Tax Freeze. That effort failed 60/40, as you know. There are no excuses, only observations:

- For the first time data was placed on the table which challenged the long held but erroneous perception that the Freeze is a benefit to all - indeed, it turns out that it is a benefit to few and a burden to most;
- The support to change the Freeze doubled from 20% in prior attempts to 40% in this Thaw effort;
- Polling showed us that most voters under the age of 55 believe the Freeze system is unfair, while only 19% of those under 55 thought it was fair.

The bottom line is that unless those under 55 years of age are radically converted (which is unlikely given their generational preferences that are contrary to the basic concepts of the Freeze), a disproportionate amount of the electorate will soon disfavor the Freeze as it is presently constructed. So, too, the Freeze and its effects are about to hit a brick wall of economic non-viability. We had the opportunity to phase out our Freeze system carefully and painlessly. We may have missed the opportunity of favorable timing, but we will have the chance to grab other opportunities for a better system in the future. We must keep our eyes open for those and not shy away from necessary conversations, because those opportunities we cannot lose.

Big, Bold, Audacious Ideas

You have just heard some of the big, bold, audacious successes of this community, and a recent shortfall – the Thaw attempt - in need of a big, bold, audacious solution. You also have heard of some of the big, bold, audacious ideas for our future. Ask yourself if you have such an idea and if you don't get one. Ask our leaders what theirs is. I am afraid you will find that too many of us have no big, bold, audacious ideas. We are too often playing short-game ball, just checking the boxes to get through this meeting or this crisis or this issue.

The Mayor cannot tote the load of vision alone; neither can the Chamber or the school superintendent or our philanthropic community. Gone is the luxury of letting a few pose the vision, strategy and funding of a transformative idea, while the rest of us turn only to critique or nip at their heels. All of us, elected leaders particularly, need to learn more about how to get to "yes." We need to get out of the weeds from time to time and either come up with our own big, bold, audacious ideas or join in facilitating the ideas of others.

We are remaking this city. It is happening organically through the ingenuity of our citizens and also through the coordinated design of our partners. This is the era of big, bold, audacious ideas and we will not get to the future due us by playing small game ball. As a retired General friend of mine is fond of saying: "We must be guided by the stars, not by our wake."

Yes, the State of our City is strong, and, yet, the stars are calling us to be bigger and better than perhaps some of us are ready to recognize or accept. That challenge – the challenge of bringing along, or if need be ignoring, the naysayers - is on us. Set your own civic ethos to “can do” and require the same of others with whom you work and speak. And, then, we will be able to say that the state of our Columbus Consolidated Government, our community, is stronger yet.