



Mayor Johnson State of the City – Oct. 21, 2020
Talking points for: Mayor Van R. Johnson, II

Good evening. Thank you for joining me virtually tonight for the 2020 State of the City.

I'd like to begin by inviting Pastor Cam Huxford from Compassion Christian Church to lead us in a prayer.

We now have some special guests to recite the Pledge of Allegiance.

(Straight into pledge recording with council chambers flag video)

When I was sworn-in as the 67th Mayor of Savannah about 10 months ago, our city and our world were very different places.

We weren't talking about COVID-19, masks or unprecedented times.

Georgia's first confirmed COVID-19 cases were recorded in early March.

By April, we had more than 100 cases in Chatham County, and numbers really started climbing in June and July.

To date, Chatham County's had more than 9,100 confirmed COVID-19 cases and more than 180 people have died.

Let's honor them now with a moment of silence.

Despite this virus altering our day-to-day life, the City of Savannah has continued to make strides and make good on promises made during the inauguration.

Here's a look back at the year that was and is.

(Video)

Tonight, I'm joined by City Manager Pat Monahan, who will start with his annual report.

(Pat gives report)

Thank you, Mr. Monahan, for your leadership this year and over the last 18 months. It has been essential in preparing Savannah for our future success.

(Slide 1 – Title slide)

In January, I prepared Savannah's table for guests representing all aspects of our community. I said this table was going to

stand on legs of transparency, accountability, inclusion and trust. Your council and your city have used these qualities to guide our decisions and our work since.

If you're going to hold us accountable, you need to know what's going on, and we need to make sure public processes are accessible.

(Slide 2)

As promised, the city council moved quickly to reduce our meeting schedule from 26 to 24 meetings a year and to hold our second meeting each month in the evening. This gives working people and students a better opportunity to see their government at work.

Despite the pandemic moving us to virtual council meetings, we made sure you could still attend and interact. These meetings are streamed live on the City of Savannah Facebook, YouTube and SGTV Channel 8. Our Information Technology Department and City Clerk's Office found new ways to accept citizen feedback through email and let those wanting to share their comments in person join our meetings virtually.

(Slide 3)

City departments - like Planning and Urban Design, Parking Services, and Community Services - used digital surveys to

gather resident opinions about proposed projects – providing residents at large a seat at Savannah’s table.

(Slide 4)

I instituted three new opportunities each week for you to learn about what's happening in your city government - Tuesday news conferences, Friday night live videos on my Facebook page where you can interact directly with me and Saturday morning video updates on city operations.

You, our residents, have a seat at our city’s table. By interacting directly with us you can hold us accountable for the actions of your city government.

We strive to share as many updates as possible in English, Spanish and American Sign Language. Accessibility is key to making sure all groups at Savannah’s table have the same opportunity to participate. We will continue to get better and do better over the next year.

(Slide 5)

Our newly redesigned city website - savannahga.gov - allows you to find information quickly. It's easier to navigate, and the most commonly searched items, like contacting 311, your mayor and alderperson, and city news, are right on the home page – increasing both transparency and accountability.

Our sanitation and code enforcement teams are using new software to improve customer service.

The new sanitation route management program tracks truck locations and progress and improves reporting of damaged carts, uncollected items, downed tree limbs and special waste collections. Updated code enforcement software enhances the ability to report and track the enforcement status of violations city-wide.

An upgraded 311 system will provide a higher level of accountability for service requests or complaints. The new software works on a computer and smartphone app. You'll be able to track progress and receive confirmation when service is completed.

Being able to properly track the efficiency and completion of these services ensures equitable service delivery to all districts.

(Slide 6)

Project completion is probably the most tangible representation of accountability.

As of October 1, our infrastructure and development team has completed 17 capital projects, and another six are almost finished.

Some \$260 million worth of projects are in construction, including the Savannah Arena, public works complex, Gwinnett Street widening, Broughton and DeLesseps streetscapes, the Highlands Fire Station and three community centers.

They've resurfaced more than 16 lane miles of road and repaired 10,300 linear feet of sidewalk and more than 1,600 potholes.

Looking ahead, the public engagement process for Project DeRenne will start in the next couple of weeks. This \$90 million project, long overdue to get started, ranks as the highest transportation need in the city.

This is a major project that will transform the quality of life for so many of our residents. I'd be remiss not to recognize the past and present elected officials and civil servants who made this project possible.

(Slide 7)

We not only want to increase the opportunity to engage with the city, but also, we want to expand who is participating.

The opinions heard in the past have not always been representative of everyone in our city. We are actively working change that.

Inclusion of everyone living in our city - those who have been at our table for a long time and those who have never been invited before - has already been a hallmark of this administration.

(Slide 8)

Your city council has made homelessness and housing a priority.

The City of Savannah allocated \$3.3 million received in CARES Act funding to the United Way to ensure Savannahians didn't lose their homes because of lost income related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

So far, we've helped nearly 2,000 City of Savannah residents with past-due mortgage, rent and utility bills, and prevented at least 126 evictions. And we still have about \$1.5 million left to give.

I created Housing Savannah, a 37-member task force, to work with the city's housing services department to develop a comprehensive housing affordability plan for our city.

This plan will help bolster and guide the work housing services is already doing to provide safe, affordable housing for Savannahians.

This year, they've done \$37.8 million worth of home construction, purchasing and repairs. Ninety-three percent of that funding came from the private sector to make these 442 projects possible.

The city entered into partnerships with six homeless agencies to fund nine programs for \$2.7 million to lend a hand up, not a handout, to the homeless and circumstantially homeless in our city.

We increased city contributions to the Savannah Affordable Housing Fund from \$150,000 to \$500,000, and the fund received an additional \$100,000 from the private sector. Every \$1 contributed to SAHF has leveraged an average of \$8 in other housing investments.

(Slide 9)

The final phase of construction for Savannah Gardens started in September, which will add 85 new, mixed-income apartments to the development. The city funded \$1.5 million in public improvements and infrastructure, while Mercy Housing will be investing \$7.6 million.

The city's sale of land on Drayton Street will provide some 40 units of new workforce housing.

The city also transferred 10 properties, three for transitional housing for homeless families, in partnership with Family

Promise of Greater Savannah. Two properties will be historically renovated through partnership with Historic Savannah Foundation, and five units will become mixed-income housing.

Savannah is also one of only four communities in the state to win a 2020 Georgia Tech Georgia Smart Communities Challenge grant.

The \$50,000 grant will allow Savannah's Housing and Neighborhood Services and Information Technology departments to work with Georgia Tech researchers to develop and evaluate data-driven decision tools for housing, neighborhood and community planning initiatives.

(Slide 10)

We also want to foster community pride in our existing neighborhoods, so our sanitation department partnered with neighborhoods to host district-wide clean ups across the city.

The third district sponsored Rock the Block. The fifth district hosted the Fabulous Fifth Clean Up, and the first district organized Westside Fights Dirty.

Other district clean ups will follow in the coming months.

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We know that our neighborhoods are made up of individuals, and most people in our city need a job to maintain an appropriate quality of life.

Savannah's unemployment rate reached a low of 2.7 percent in December 2019 and began to climb steadily before reaching a peak of 15.3 in April during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows a rate of 6.4, and we believe that is in no small part thanks to efforts by the city to reopen Savannah's economy safely.

In May, the city worked with local business and tourism groups to develop a plan to open Savannah's economy and ensure health and safety in their places of business.

By taking the Savannah Safe Pledge, businesses in our community committed to help stop the spread of COVID-19, and hundreds of Savannah-area businesses responded in just the first few hours.

To further our commitment to Savannah's small business community, the city allocated \$2 million received in CARES Act funding to the Small Business Assistance Corporation to help small businesses in the City of Savannah recover losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

But our efforts didn't stop there. We understood that restaurants were extraordinarily affected by COVID-19.

(Slide 12)

So in response, as part of our Resilient Savannah plan, we expanded outdoor dining permitting to help restaurants expand capacity while safely social distancing. Our Office of Special Events, Film and Tourism issued permits for 44 parklet seating areas.

We understood that Savannah's tax dollars remaining local would be essential for saving Savannah's economy.

So, we introduced Savannah First, a new pilot program to boost our local economy in light of COVID-19.

We knew many businesses and individuals would have a difficult recovery ahead, and a new, aggressive plan would help the city spend dollars locally and employ local people when searching for proposals, bids and contractors.

Savannah First is a year-long program and includes initiatives like local preference when soliciting bids and requests for proposals or RFPs, a contractor in training program, and the reintroduction of a local minority or women-owned business enterprise (M/WBE) certification.

We also focused on hiring locally for the Savannah Arena project. Job fairs hosted by AECOM Hunt this year focused on not only meeting the required percentage of disadvantaged

business participation but also prioritizing local companies and workers.

We've also focused on how we can create new, better-paying jobs by partnering with the private sector.

Your city council approved a major economic development project and a public-private partnership among the City of Savannah, the Savannah Economic Development Authority and Rockingham Farms to create good-paying jobs in the city. The project will initiate a funding source to infuse \$7 million annually into the city tax reserves over 20 years to help fund new Savannah initiatives.

More than that, the city is investing in creating qualified applicants for those jobs.

The city will be funding 100 scholarships for Savannah residents to Savannah Technical College for every 1 million square feet of warehouse distribution and e-commerce fulfillment centers built at Rockingham Farms. This should generate between 1,500 and 2,000 jobs with starting wages averaging \$32,000 annually.

Even if they're not looking to work on a specific project or site, the city is improving workforce readiness and providing employment assistance.

(Slide 13)

This year, the city helped 271 unemployed or underemployed adults and 254 youth receive soft skills and workforce training, and city-hosted job fairs helped 1,028 adults find employment.

We're also focused on inspiring and developing a new wave of entrepreneurs in our city.

Our Economic Development Department has hosted more than 50 business courses this year, most of them online due to COVID-19 restrictions.

These free classes are helping entrepreneurs and small business owners in our city boost their skills and knowledge with courses like business plan writing and credit building.

I've also partnered with our local labor community through my Working Savannah taskforce to make sure we can get as many Savannahians as possible connected to good jobs.

We've long-known that poverty is a problem in our community, and these initial steps have not solved the problem but have taken us in the right direction to improve the lives of thousands of Savannahians.

Just because someone is born into poverty in our community does not mean we have to let that cycle continue forever. We see you. You matter.

In total, Human Services helped provide city-funded community partnership programs that connected 31,254 residents to all kinds of needed services.

The best way to determine what services a specific group needs is by talking to people in those communities.

(Slide 14)

Our PROUD Savannah taskforce was instrumental in updating Savannah's nondiscrimination ordinance to better protect our LGBTQ+ citizens just weeks after its formation.

This group is also actively working with the city to increase Savannah's Human Rights Campaign Municipal Equality Index.

While it's not all about the grades on a report card, the grades tell us if we are doing what we need to do to make LGBTQ+ citizens realize they are welcomed and loved in our community.

Our nation has experienced a reckoning with well-documented, violent encounters between minorities and police officers – tugging at the hearts of everyone.

In response, I formed the Savannah CARES or citizen accountability and review of emergency services taskforce.

This group has already submitted a status report and interim recommendations to the Savannah Police Department and city manager for consideration.

The 12 recommendations are just part one of this committee's review of the police department's use of force policy, internal affairs reports and public input.

(Slide 15)

Prior to receiving these recommendations, the Savannah Police Department had already taken proactive steps to update its force policy.

In June of 2020, the department became aware of the “8 Can’t Wait” campaign. After reviewing the policy adoptions proposed by the campaign, the Savannah Police Department was found to be in compliance.

After combing through the use of force policy, the department decided to suspend the training and use of the bilateral neck restraint. Chokeholds and strangleholds were already prohibited by SPD policy.

The change aligned the department’s policies and procedures with 21st-century policing practices, community expectations and the department’s values.

In August, the department also graduated its first class of officers from a new course called EPIC or Ethical Policing is Courageous, a peer intervention program that teaches officers how to intervene to stop a wrongful action before it occurs.

EPIC educates, empowers, and supports the officers on the streets to play a meaningful role in policing one another. All future recruit classes will receive this training, and it will be extended to current members of the department as well.

A hallmark of our police department has been positive community relations. We want this to continue, and we want to set up our professional law enforcement officers for success with policies that are community and department driven.

(Slide 16)

We also need to understand that justice-involved individuals have not always had a seat at Savannah's table.

ARCS or Advocates for Restorative Communities in Savannah has helped sponsor a conference to assist justice-involved individuals navigate re-entry barriers and access community support.

You can't solve a problem if you don't talk about it. Racial equity has long been the elephant in the room in Savannah.

REAL Savannah or Racial Equity and Leadership is already meeting and gathering data as they work to identify, prioritize and tackle disparity issues in our city.

Dr. Otis Johnson, our 64th mayor and a noted social scientist, is leading this initiative. He is the right leader with the right tenacity to make sure meaningful change happens. Our city is indebted to him for his continued service.

(Slide 17)

We all know our faith community in Savannah is strong, but that power has never been actively harnessed by partnering with the city.

Savannah Faith's network of religious leaders created best practices and recommendations for houses of worship to provide services safely during COVID-19.

A group of faith leaders from that taskforce created another group called RISE to support students who are learning virtually. These Religious Institutions Supporting Education provide space, supervision, technology, meals or some combination of all of these for distance learners.

The city helped coordinate the distribution of more than 150 computers to these churches to help students.

We appreciate the Savannah College of Art and Design for partnering with us and providing this much-needed equipment.

(Slide 18)

With our efforts to include Savannah's Hispanic population, I've seen prejudice toward another group of people in our community.

This is not some fringe element. These are 7,000 of our friends, neighbors, teachers, nurses, police officers, and they deserve to feel respected and welcomed.

It's shameful for anyone to admonish them for using their native language – we can do better.

HOLA Savannah or Hispanic outreach leadership and advocacy is already working on connecting Savannah's Hispanic residents to needed services. They've also started coordinating English as a second language courses for those in our area who need them.

Regardless of where you're from, if you live in Savannah, mi casa es su casa.

(Slide 19)

Keeping our community safe is one of the main services you all likely expect.

That's why I joined Everytown for Gun Safety's Mayors Against Illegal Guns coalition on January 1, 2020 immediately after being sworn in.

This bipartisan group includes more than 1,000 current and former mayors from the smallest towns to the biggest cities in nearly every state.

As mayors, our problems may look different from town to town, but we are united in our duty to do everything we can to protect our residents from the threat of gun violence.

(Slide 20)

Public safety is always the focus of the Savannah Fire Department, one of only 98 ISO-1 ranked fire departments in America, but they're also prioritizing the health and safety of their own.

This year, the department developed a cancer reduction initiative and received a \$937,000 Assistance to Firefighters Grant from FEMA. It's the largest grant they've received to date.

Since 2001, this grant has helped firefighters and other first responders obtain critically needed equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, training and other resources necessary for

protecting the public and emergency personnel from fire and related hazards.

In addition, SFD developed an emergency medical response strategy to enhance their critical medical and traumatic event response, published a 2020 to 2024 strategic plan, and started using an aggressive new hiring strategy to increase the number of firefighter candidates.

(Slide 21)

The department also hired a new chief fire marshal this year, filling a three-year vacancy. She, and the department, have taken an active role in fire safety education, mostly virtually due to COVID-19.

A new virtual public safety education platform allows students and community groups to interact with firefighters and receive life-saving fire safety lessons digitally. The department also received a \$5,000 grant to enhance its virtual fire safety programming.

Overall, they've achieved a 17 percent decrease in structure fires since last year.

You can see their professionalism and effectiveness every Friday and Saturday night on the national television series Live Rescue.

We're proud to partner with A&E network to showcase the excellent men and women of Savannah Fire.

(Slide 22)

The Savannah Police Department is one of 135 departments accredited by the Georgia Law Enforcement Certification Program out of 740 police agencies in state.

SPD is one of 729 departments in the U.S. and just 45 agencies in Georgia accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, the gold standard in law enforcement.

SPD continues to work toward its goal of reimagining policing and finding ways to address quality of life issues without utilizing enforcement when it is not necessary.

The SPD Behavioral Health Unit is the newest addition to the department and consists of specially trained officers and medical staff who respond to police calls involving individuals in crisis or with substance abuse.

The unit consists of two non-uniformed SPD officers and a licensed clinician, who will ride in the car with the officers two days a week. The clinician will also be available by phone or telemedicine if she is not physically present.

The BHU will respond to calls involving opioids or substance abuse, mental health crises or suicide, and they will assist with calls regarding the homeless or disorderly conduct.

The goal is to decriminalize substance abuse and mental health struggles while simultaneously reducing the number of individuals dealing with these issues entering the criminal justice system when other alternatives could address the underlying problem.

In addition, the Savannah Police Department officially introduced a revamped Community Service Officer Program in September.

Community Service Officers are non-sworn SPD staff members who can go to non-emergency calls and take reports. The CSOs allow patrol officers to take additional time performing proactive policing to combat crime in the city.

SPD also obtained a grant to add 15 additional police officers to the force.

The department expanded use of technology as a crime-fighting tool with the expansion of internet cameras, portable fingerprint scanners, a real-time crime center and automated license plate readers.

In August, the city council approved the department to purchase new E-citation software, allowing officers to write tickets electronically instead of manually.

This new technology will help with SPD's efficiency, allowing officers more opportunity to engage in proactive policing, and decrease the time officers and drivers are on the side of the road.

SPD's Planning and Technology Unit is working to get this software set up for patrol officers by the spring of 2021.

This year, violent crime is down one percent and property crime is down 26 percent.

Overall, part 1 crime has decreased 21 percent this year, and so far in 2020, there have been 133 gun arrests.

(Slide 23)

We can't talk about public safety without talking about public health. A healthier environment promotes a better quality of life for our residents, and Savannah is taking progressive steps to make this city safer for everyone.

In March, the city council unanimously passed the 100 percent Clean Renewable Energy resolution. It's focuses on racial and

social equity as we develop a just and regenerative plan for our energy transition.

The goals of this resolution are ambitious. We agree that all electricity consumed within the City of Savannah limits will be from clean renewable energy sources by 2035. This includes city operations and community-wide energy consumption.

All other energy forms consumed within incorporated City of Savannah will be from clean and renewable energy sources by 2050.

We will start by focusing on households with the highest energy burden first, meaning those households with the largest amount of household income spent on heating/cooling their homes. In Savannah, this is disproportionately African American households.

We have a lot of work to do. Some ideas we will try to implement are community-wide weatherization and energy efficiency programs, solar design and installation programs, improving efficiency in City facilities, building alternative transportation networks, including trails, sidewalks, and improved mass transit, and transitioning to electric vehicles.

These improvements can lead to countless opportunities to benefit the health and wellbeing of Savannahians.

We'll be providing cleaner air, water and soil. We'll be promoting active and healthy transportation and recreation.

We'll be creating and promoting a green economy, which creates new job opportunities, providing our community the opportunity to learn new, lucrative skills to improve wages and livelihood.

And we'll be reducing the impacts of climate change on our coastal community to become more economically, socially and environmentally resilient.

It will take policy change and partnership to achieve these goals, but our city and the people who live here will be better for it.

(Slide 24)

We were able to achieve all of this despite dealing with a global pandemic. The city's response to COVID-19 has been herculean to ensure we continued delivering essential services while keeping staff and the public safe.

On March 21, Savannah's local state of emergency order went into effect implementing strict measures intended to slow the

pace of the COVID-19 outbreak and expanding upon state's order.

We were the first city in Georgia to mandate masks on July 1, and local health officials credit this order with helping to keep the virus from spreading uncontrollably throughout the summer.

In July, the city partnered with the Coastal Health District to provide a county-wide COVID-19 testing site at the Savannah Civic Center.

Free walk-up and drive-thru testing is available without an appointment to expand access to COVID-19 testing in our city. The Savannah Police and Fire departments have been essential in coordinating the day-to-day operations at the site.

(Slide 25)

Additionally, the City of Savannah partnered with New York state and Governor Andrew Cuomo to establish two COVID-19 testing sites in virus hotspots.

Testing was held at Temple of Glory Community Church and Kingdom Life Christian Fellowship, both in highly impacted minority communities.

The sites provided up to 500 tests per day, thanks to expertise and resources from SOMOS Community Care and Northwell Health.

New York State also provided hundreds of thousands of supplies to Savannah, including test kits, surgical masks, face shields and hand sanitizer.

(Slide 26)

Our Marketing and Communications team created COVID-19 graphics, posters, photos, banners, web pages, videos, and news releases to quickly and effectively share essential information with businesses, the public and local media.

(Slide 27)

Our purchasing department acquired and distributed 45,000 face masks. The city's COVID resource team handed out thousands of masks while providing gentle reminders about the need for face coverings and social distancing.

Our risk management team is responsible for coordinating our city staff COVID-19 testing program, which has tested more than 1,000 employees, providing temperature checking stations in city buildings, and sanitizing facilities.

Our Information Technology Department rapidly found ways to implement new technology to allow 70 percent of city staff to work remotely.

They also manage, moderate and support zoom meetings for city council, community and special interest groups.

(Slide 28)

During the pandemic, our Human Services department distributed more than 5,100 senior meals, almost 1,160 senior care packages and 36,000 youth meals.

Additionally, when Emmaus House soup kitchen closed because of COVID-19, the City of Savannah stepped up to fund 400 daily meals that the Salvation Army distributed to homeless camps.

Municipal Archives enhanced online educational resources for students, including *Archives Alive!* programs to introduce students in 1st-12th grades to the archives and primary records, youth scavenger hunts, activity sheets and coloring pages.

They transitioned the in-person *Hungry for History* series online and increased the audience from 281 in 2019 to more than 1,700 this year.

(Slide 29)

Savannah Fire maintained all emergency services without disruption by implementing a new public contact procedure and adjusted their approach to medical calls to ensure safe interaction between patients and firefighters.

They implemented daily screenings to limit firefighter exposure to the virus and a rotational disinfection schedule of stations and apparatuses.

Savannah Fire Department also helped the city obtain, disseminate, and track all COVID-19 related logistics for reimbursement through the CARES Act.

(Slide 30)

In March, the Savannah Police Department implemented the remote report center or RRC to effectively decrease police contact with citizens while still offering personable service.

The RRC is comprised of officers who can intercept calls for service and take non-emergency reports over the phone or through video conferencing.

More than 3000 calls for service have filtered through the center since its inception.

(Slide 31)

Despite the pandemic, the city followed a conservative course with its finances and avoided any furloughs or layoffs. The city remains financially strong, maintaining a AA+ Bond Rating, the strongest in Savannah's history. Our required comprehensive annual financial report found no material weakness after audit.

Savannah partnered with the Georgia Municipal Association on a new audit program for telecommunication companies, helping the city recover \$230,000 in new fees to date.

The city council approved the Guaranteed Maximum Price on the Savannah Arena. Known as the GMP, this contract obligates construction of the single largest project in the city's history to stay within its \$165 million budget. The arena is scheduled to open in early 2022, and this timeline remains on track despite the pandemic.

And the city adopted the rollback millage rate for the second consecutive year, a feat not accomplished in 12 years.

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Despite these accomplishments, we still face some challenges.

The city council continues to search for Savannah's next permanent city manager.

While the council narrowed a nationwide pool of applicants to a top three, we could not reach consensus on a single candidate.

This decision is the most important one we will make for the future of this organization and this city. We need to make the right choice, not just a choice to be finished with the process.

Pat Monahan has provided a steady hand and led this organization with integrity for the last 18 months. We are grateful for his leadership and will miss him when he retires at the beginning of next month.

The council has selected Michael Brown to serve as the interim city manager while we search for a long-term leader.

We're thankful Mr. Brown is willing to help guide our organization during this time.

While we have been fiscally responsible throughout the pandemic, we are still facing budgetary constraints and revenue shortfall due to COVID-19.

Departments were asked to reduce their budgets for the current fiscal year by one to three percent.

The city manager and budget team have been working diligently to ensure we can continue to provide quality services while saving money where we can.

We're trying to find solutions for workspace for city staff, so we can move them out of rented buildings.

Drainage, roadway capacity and other infrastructure challenges continuously need improvement.

As arena construction moves ahead, we need to inspire the development of the overall canal district to support the arena and ensure these projects bring a needed economic boost to the westside.

As the City Council works to tackle homelessness, we're still working through difficulties related to our transitional services at Dundee Village.

The project has been delayed because we need to connect certain facilities to water and sewer, and we ran into some site and surveying issues that are being addressed.

And of course, we are continuing to find our way through the COVID-19 world.

(Slide 33)

It's been a busy and extraordinary year. None of us expected the challenges we faced, but I hope you see your city has risen to the occasion.

We've come a long way, but we still have further to go. When everyone is at the table, our trajectory is limitless.