

Mayor Jackson – State of the City – February 11, 2015

Good evening everybody, and thank you for joining us tonight.

Before I get accused of sticking my head in the sand, let me give you a spoiler: This speech will be about public safety.

I was as outraged as anyone when that couple from Florida lied about being targeted in an attack on Bay Street last week.

But that false claim should not distract all of us from the plain truth: We have a crime problem in Savannah.

We put together the video you just saw to remind everyone that there's a lot of GREAT things going on in Savannah, too.

Flooding is down, taxes are low, the economy is up. We have seen more commercial investment the past two years than at any point in our history. In many ways the State of the City has never been better.

But none of that matters when our young people are shooting each other in our streets.

For those who have suddenly awakened to this gun violence and are demanding answers, I say welcome to the conversation. You want quick solutions. I am sorry to tell you that you won't get an easy answer tonight, because easy answers won't fix this problem.

Generations of children have grown up watching the casual use of weapons in their neighborhood. Last month two teenagers were handling a loaded gun on the front steps of an apartment on West 54th Street. One of the boys slipped, and shot his friend dead. He was just 15.

These kids grow up watching their parents handle guns, their friends handle guns, and their brothers handle guns. It's no wonder that they grow up using guns to solve their problems and earn respect.

Changing this culture of violence will not be easy. Because as I mentioned, it's been around for much too long.

We had exactly as many shootings in 2014 as we did in 2009. Savannah had about half as many violent crimes last year as we did 20 years ago.

And that is nothing to brag about. Three shootings a week is nothing to brag about.

Still, I've heard some people who should know better claim that crime in Savannah is at an all-time high. These are people who were here when the Ricky Jivens gang terrorized our streets. Back then, 14,000 Part-1 crimes were committed in Savannah annually. Last year, we saw fewer than 8,000 crimes. Still too many.

I mention this not to minimize our crime problem today. I do it because if we are going to finally get serious about violent crime in Savannah, we must start getting real. And that means understanding how much crime -- and what kind of crime -- is happening in our community.

We don't have a crack cocaine war on our streets today like we did in the '90s. Ricky Jivens' soldiers are not gunning down family men for sport.

What we do have is persistent, generational crime occurring in the same neighborhoods – and same families – year after year. What we have are teenagers shooting each other over drugs, money or disrespect. It is the “I will get you before you get me” mentality.

While I mourned the death of all 32 of Savannah's homicide victims last year, I must acknowledge that the vast majority of these young men – and almost all of them are men – chose a lifestyle that put them in harm's way.

What keeps me up at night is the constant threat of gunfire their neighbors must endure. And the innocent children unlucky enough to live with these criminals.

The darkest day of my tenure came in November when 2-year-old Kiaja Smalls was gunned down while sleeping. The bullets that night were targeting someone else in the home, but as we all know bullets have no eyes.

So what do we do about this problem?

We start with Police.

Last year was among the most trying times in our police department's history. It was the year our City Manager called in outside investigators to look into allegations against our police, and ordered the investigators to leave no stone unturned.

The City Manager told the public that it was going to be a painful process, but one that was critical for the future health of our department. She pledged openness, accountability and transparency. And as we all witnessed, that is exactly what we got.

The easy thing to do would have been to keep these persistent problems swept beneath the rug. Instead, we took action.

Some in the media have raised questions about the pension of our former Police Chief. Let me be clear: We are governed by State law, and are obligated to follow State law.

Several other police officers who had no business wearing a badge left the force in 2014, and to them I say good riddance.

Unfortunately, we lost a number of good officers as well. Some left police work entirely. With all that went on, I can't say I blame them.

I credit Assistant Chief Tolbert and Terry Enoch with holding the force together during these difficult months. They were a rock, and I can't thank them enough for their public service.

Those officers who stuck with them despite all that happened deserve the gratitude of the entire community. If you do one thing this week, I want you to reach out to a police officer and thank him or her for their service. Pat them on the back.

And folks, we've got some really great officers. They place themselves in harm's way, work through the night to solve cases, and put in the extra hours to forge relationships with neighborhood associations. That is what Savannah is all about.

In the busy Central Precinct, Captain Adams is bringing our police officers closer to our residents by holding neighborhood toy drives during Christmas and introducing programs such as "Roll Call in the Streets" and "All Hands on Deck."

West Chatham Precinct Crime Prevention Officer Bryan Harrell has used his unique background as a former business owner to win the trust of shop owners, and convince senior citizens to report crimes. Pro-active officers like him are the reason we saw commercial burglaries drop 30 percent across the community last year.

They are police officers such as Chris Tucker and Nicholas Wissner, both former Army soldiers who now put their combat experience to good use on our SWAT team. In December, as they moved in on a volatile crime scene, they saved a shooting victim's life with a plastic bag and some duct tape.

They are leaders such as Lieutenant Racine Chaney, a 34-year veteran who continues to bust his tail every day as the head of our Violent Crimes Division. And Lieutenant Ramona Famble, who as leader of the Savannah Impact Program has had great success steering high-risk juvenile offenders away from a life of crime.

Officers such as these are the ones who have the true impact on violent crime in our community. Officers, can you stand up? Let's give them a hand. Let's recognize ALL officers in the room. These are the heroes on the front line.

As elected leaders, there are some things we can do to help our officers on the front line. Tonight, I offer a five-step plan to reduce violent crime in Savannah.

Step One was bringing in a new Police Chief. I consider November 10th – the day we made Jack Lumpkin our Chief -- to be Day One of the new Metro Police Department.

And folks, I have seen more integrity and leadership come from this one man than I have seen in my previous 14 years of public service. He is the right man for the job.

Chief, can you stand up? Let's give him a hand.

Step Two is fully staffing our department with law enforcement professionals.

We've got about 70 vacancies right now on a force of 605 officers. That's about the national average, but I don't care about national averages. I'm here to tell you that 70 vacancies is UNACCEPTABLE in Savannah. We need a stronger police presence on our streets. And we need to give our existing officers a break.

We need your help. Tell your neighbors to apply.

Filling these vacancies is not easy. We require clean records, credit checks, as well as psychological and physical evaluations. Police academy takes four months.

This City Council is supportive of the City Manager's plan to conduct a review of hiring procedures to ensure they are as streamlined and aggressive as possible.

We have reached out to local marketing professionals to help us develop a new recruitment campaign. We're targeting locals, as well as 3rd ID soldiers who are returning home from deployments. They make great police officers.

But it's not enough to recruit new officers. We must be BETTER at keeping the good ones. Chief Lumpkin is looking at everything from officer scheduling to our rank structure to leadership training as a way to increase retention.

We are currently conducting a salary and classification study to help us adjust our pay scale. When that is finalized this summer, I will be in favor of making adjustments to Police pay immediately rather than waiting on the new year. We have pay issues across the City organization that need to be addressed. But our needs in Police have reached a critical level.

Seven years ago this City Council made a decision to make our Police Officer starting pay the highest of any department in the Southeast. We need to explore doing that again.

Step Three in addressing violent crime is implementing new initiatives that target violent crime. We have signed a contract with policing expert David Kennedy to help us develop a violence reduction model that has shown great success in other communities.

His work did so well in driving down youth violence in Boston that it's referred to as The Boston Miracle.

We're calling it Operation Ceasefire in Savannah. The strategy is to focus on a few key neighborhoods with persistent violent crime. Then we bring together research, local data, law enforcement, nonprofits and residents to target group violence.

Group violence is just a fancy name for gangs. And yes, we have gangs in Savannah, folks. In Boston, David Kennedy helped foster new dynamics within gangs that reduced violence, and gave gang members an honorable exit from street life. I can't wait to see this program work in Savannah.

Step Four is focus on technology. Good technology allows for smarter deployment of patrol. This frees officers up to walk a beat, visit a business, talk to a neighbor.

In the past few months this City Council has approved new technology that detects and pinpoints gunshots across Savannah. We purchased body cameras and tasers for all of our officers to help protect both police and our citizens.

In December, we became one of only two police departments in the Southeast to receive a sophisticated machine that can analyze shell casings and make connections between crimes.

Today our patrol cars come equipped with powerful data terminals that allow our officers to remain within their beat nearly their entire shift.

Thanks to voters during the last SPLOST election, we now have funds to begin expanding our surveillance camera network, adding to the 160 cameras we now have in the field.

One of the greatest benefits of the combined City-County police department is the creation of a regional intelligence center. SARIC, as it's called, analyzes large volumes of data, identifies crime trends, and helps us deploy resources.

Shared intelligence is just one of the ways that Savannah-Chatham Metropolitan Police is improving public safety in our community.

Tonight I call on the County Commission to do what's right and save the merger.

The City has compromised on almost everything the County has asked for. But we simply cannot agree to their insistence that we handcuff our officers and prevent them from crossing the City-County line. Giving the Chief that flexibility is the VERY cornerstone of the police merger.

In fact, since the merger of City and County police, crime in the Unincorporated County has been cut in half. I have yet to hear a single law enforcement professional say that the County's proposal would increase public safety. It's a plan that only a politician would support.

This City Council calls on the County to join us in mediation. I want to remind our commissioners that Savannah IS part of Chatham County. We are all in this boat together, and we must try everything we can to right this ship before we allow it to sink.

Step 5 in addressing violent crime is the tough one. It's all of the things that have nothing to do with Police. It's about better education,

better jobs and better job training. It's about driving down that 25-percent poverty rate we've had for decades. It's about working with our parents to change that culture of violence in our community.

That is what is truly going to make Savannah safer. And that is going to take this entire community working together. We must stop asking what I, or Chief Lumpkin, or the Superintendent are going to do to change this culture. It will take all of us.

And I, for one, am ready for this violence to end. This Council is ready for the violence to end.

Because we want to spend more time talking about developing a municipal broad-band network to provide super-high-speed Internet access for our businesses and residents.

We want to talk about turning Savannah into the location of choice in the Southeast for high-tech startups.

We want to talk about how we can create more jobs, and what we can do to make Savannah the most business-friendly community in America.

We want to figure out how we can hold on to these talented SCAD, Savannah State and Armstrong students after they graduate, and how to stop our young black professionals from leaving for Atlanta.

As we witnessed in the video we all just saw, Savannah is doing so many great things. We are on every publication's Top 10 list.

But NONE of that matters when teenagers are killing each other in our streets. And NONE of that matters when the rest of us don't FEEL safe walking outside at night.

It's time for things to change in Savannah. It's time for the people living on the islands to stop fooling themselves that crime in the inner city is not their problem. And it's time for our inner city residents to stop pointing the finger, and start talking to Police.

Until every one of us IS safe and FEELS safe, it is ALL of our problem. And NOW is the time for ALL of us to work on change.

Let's make this the first step in our journey together, as one United Savannah. Thank you for joining us. And God Bless Savannah.