

Good evening.

Thank you, Shawnkul and LaShauntee, for that kind introduction and for representing the best of our City's future.

Thank you to Superintendent Mike Poore, Principal Burton, and the Little Rock School District for hosting us this evening.

To my distinguished colleagues - the Little Rock City Board of Directors - residents, and friends, thank you for being here today. It is great seeing you all in person on the beautiful campus of Little Rock Southwest High School. And thank you to those watching online, as well.

Last year, we had to host this event virtually, as we've been physically separated due to the COVID19 global pandemic.

It is important to take a moment to reflect on what we've endured and led through these past two years:

a historic flood.

a severe winter storm.

Civil and social unrest unlike anything we've seen in my lifetime.

High unemployment due to the economic downturn.

And we have navigated the **WORST** global pandemic in a century.

Friends,

**WE. HAVE. ENDURED.**

Despite all of this, the state of our city remains **STRONG**.

The resilience of Little Rock makes me proud of our residents **AND** honored to lead the public servants who serve each of you everyday. From

our 911 call takers, code enforcement officers, and firefighters to our sanitation crews, police officers, and IT professionals ... these city workers come to work everyday with **you** top of mind, striving to do the work necessary to improve quality of life by providing exceptional city services in an efficient and equitable manner.

And I am pleased to say your state's capital city is emerging from these trying years resilient and as committed as ever to

moving

our

city

**forward.**

We've led throughout this pandemic, from masks and support for small businesses to incentivizing vaccines using American Rescue Plan Act funds. Thanks to these vaccine incentives totaling almost 200,000 dollars, nearly three thousand residents received their vaccine or booster shot...

Because of this worthy investment and residents like you who have masked, distanced, and received your vaccine, we are finally back together,

**united and ready to GROW our city FORWARD.**

Our finances have remained resilient, outperforming sales tax projections the past two years.

And the results from the 2020 census released last year confirmed that we are now a city of over 202,000 residents.

New businesses continue to open in our city as we've had over 1300 new businesses start in our city just last year, and **nearly 70%** of them in our targeted wards 1, 2, 6, and 7.

In addition to our “grow your own” approach to increase jobs through small business and entrepreneurship, I have been committed to serving as our City’s Chief Growth Officer, working with the Little Rock Regional Chamber of Commerce and other partners to actively recruit large companies like Costco and Trex to Little Rock. These efforts are to ensure every resident, irrespective of neighborhood or education level, can make a respectable living in our city. And we continue to do just that...

As a result of our partnership with the Chamber, we closed out 2021 with a total of 4,324 new jobs created, \$134 million in new payroll and \$633 million in new capital investment for the Little Rock metro area.

**THAT** is growing forward!

We continue to invest in underserved areas, because we know a rising tide lifts all boats...meaning, when marginalized communities are elevated, it benefits us ALL with a safer, cleaner, more desirable city.

And we’ve been committed to ALL areas of Little Rock with an equity-driven approach for our policies and programs. That includes our targeted revitalization plan where we waive permitting fees for development south of 630 and east of 30. To date, we’ve waived over 1 MILLION DOLLARS in fees, with nearly 55% of our city’s development in 2021 happening in this targeted area!

This is equity at work!

Just last year, our Public Works team completed 34 million dollars in capital improvements throughout the city on various street, drainage, and bridge projects, including the Geyer Springs railroad overpass, which was completed in September,

the Little Rock Port improvement projects which improved access to job opportunities,

and the Kanis Road expansion, which is scheduled to be completed **this summer**.

And, please know - we are building on those successes as we GROW FORWARD in 2022!

*(pause)*

Little Rock is a city of opportunity — a beacon of light in the middle of the country and a place that provides hope for people, whether you are from here, like me,

**new** here starting your career like John Clavin and Elisabeth Bates who moved to the Heights from Los Angeles upon graduating from UCLA last year,

or here to retire like our friends Donald and Colene Loom in Chenal Valley...

Whatever it is that brings you to Little Rock, it is my job to help keep you here. And we are committed to doing **just that** by focusing on safety, jobs, quality of life, city services, and education as we propel our city forward into a brighter future.

First, we are growing forward in safety ... by addressing community violence **holistically** to not only address crime now, but to reduce it for generations to come.

To do so, we will propose raises for entry level police officers to remain competitive as we recruit top law enforcement officers to the Little Rock Police Department.

We are working to increase staffing in emergency communications to better serve our residents by promptly answering 911 calls and dispatching officers to emergency situations.

We will also continue our emphasis on 21st century **COMMUNITY** policing by assigning additional COP officers and work towards having MORE officers live in the communities they serve.

But we know we cannot rely solely on law enforcement to address crime.

This national surge in violence requires a comprehensive solution because we cannot arrest our way out of this problem. The county jail is full.

FULL.

We cannot continue to allow the lack of opportunities and resources in certain neighborhoods and then show surprise when kids,

**yes,**

12 and 13 year olds, are snatching purses and jacking cars.

This is why we launched our Office of Neighborhood Safety last year, to hone in on crime prevention through community programs so we can give our youth an alternative to a life of crime and violence.

Since then, I have also directed staff to implement a robust plan that spans multiple departments to assist in crime reduction. This plan includes securing or demolishing vacant properties, removing blight in high crime neighborhoods, and improving lighting in targeted areas to increase safety. We will also better utilize our parks facilities to provide safe outlets for fun like Midnight Basketball and other activities launching this summer. It was these types of activities, along with solid education and an engaged family, that kept me off the streets when I was growing up here in the 90s.

In addition, I will ask the City Board to commit additional American Rescue Plan funds towards community violence reduction efforts to continue the current programming for at least the next 2 years.

The acquaintance violence we are seeing conveys hopelessness in our young people, so it is incumbent upon us to promote HOPE – holistic outreach and prevention for EVERY neighborhood - so that the young man

in southwest Little Rock can imagine his life beyond the age of 25 and the young lady in the east end believes that she can achieve whatever she puts her mind to.

As a son of this city, I am heartbroken and deeply frustrated by the crime we are experiencing. This crime affects me personally - it's happening to people I know, in neighborhoods I frequent, and in large part, to individuals who look like me and are much younger than me...

But I am confident that these data-driven wrap around services, along with cutting edge policing, will move us towards a safer Little Rock by 2023.

Because crime is closely associated with poverty and socio-economic status, we will continue our emphasis on equitable economics to not only reduce crime but to increase economic mobility for ALL residents.

For the past three years, we've been connecting potential with opportunity to increase wealth in Little Rock through both entrepreneurship **and** employment.

We've received 145 applications for our first two classes of BUILD Academy, our very own small business incubator, and our second cohort will begin on April 7 at our newly renovated Willie Hinton Business and Innovation Center in the heart of the 12th street corridor. And Emprende - a new program to provide business workshops and training - will start later this week for our Spanish speaking business owners... because we believe ownership should be available to ALL.

And we won't stop there...

In 2019, I committed to increasing the city's minority spend to at least 25% by 2023. I'm pleased to announce we have increased our spending with diverse vendors from 13% to 23% since my first year in office.

We will continue educating our Little Rock small businesses on how to win city contracts as we further increase participation with diverse vendors and suppliers. This work is good for business, but it is also impactful and potentially life-changing for those business owners and their employees.

While we, the city, should lead by example in promoting diversity and equity, through how we spend our dollars, it takes all of us to truly make an impact.

That is why we officially formed our Office of Diversity Equity and Inclusion last year and launched Opportunity Little Rock - a citywide movement for equity, in partnership with UA-Little Rock and the Chamber, where local companies can join our efforts by promoting equity within their own operations. While we currently have 32 companies participating in Opportunity Little Rock, like Entegriy and Southwest Power Pool, we look forward to partnering with at least **50** by the end of this year so that minority businesses and diverse employees have endless opportunities to support themselves and their families.

In addition to providing support for our local businesses, we will continue recruiting companies to Little Rock, adding to our total of nearly 8000 jobs added since I took office in 2019. Indeed.com has even listed us as one of the top ten fastest growing cities for job openings! We are growing forward!

Since 1959, the Port of Little Rock has been an economic driver for our region's economy. This economic engine was turbocharged over the last few years as major investments from HMS Manufacturing, Trex and Amazon have nearly **doubled** the total employment there. As a city we must continue to invest in efforts to recruit businesses to add new jobs and industry to our community.

Accordingly, I'll be asking the Board to allocate at least 3 million dollars to recruit even more high wage jobs to Little Rock over the next two years.

Please keep an eye out for more exciting announcements about the Port at tomorrow's City Board meeting.

**As your mayor, if you are a Little Rock company looking to expand, or a company located anywhere across the country looking to move, we welcome you to our world-class city. I welcome the opportunity to visit with you to see how the City of Little Rock can support your efforts as we work together to grow FORWARD.**

From here in southwest Little Rock to the booming SOMA district downtown and far West, our city is ripe for new development.

These efforts are to ensure we make Little Rock a city where opportunity is not just an aspiration - but a **reality**... for ALL of us.

With our dual approach to economics by growing existing businesses while simultaneously recruiting jobs, we will keep growing our city forward.

We can only grow forward in 2022 by improving quality of life for residents in each community throughout our city... Because we are intentional about this work, we've committed 1 million dollars of our 5 Million dollar goal towards Targeted Community Development, and I will continue working with my colleagues on the City Board to identify and allocate additional dollars to uplift communities such as the 12<sup>th</sup> street corridor, John Barrow, and Roosevelt Road.

We've spent the past 3 years trying to recruit a grocery store in the 12th street corridor to address the food desert. Although we have not been successful, I am committed to doing more.

To start, I will be asking the City Board to commit funds towards a public private partnership to spur mixed use development including a grocery store and affordable housing, based on the community feedback we've received over the years. This partnership would also fund an expansion of a senior center facility at University Park.



Next, we will consider purchasing vacant property, like the schools being closed this year, to make sure those buildings are used in a way that's beneficial to their communities.

We have also challenged our Housing Department to develop at least 100 units within the next 3 years, including affordable single family housing and rental units, starting with fourteen homes in Ward 6. We look forward to working with local developers to increase infill throughout our city.

We must also do more to transition unsheltered residents out of homelessness. Last year, our City Board allocated 1.5 million dollars of American Rescue Plan funds towards a micro home village for this very purpose. With those funds on hand, we are committed to purchasing property and breaking ground on the village THIS YEAR.

Our 63 park facilities are a huge part of our city's quality of life. We are committed to improving these public spaces and increasing utilization to show why Little Rock is in fact a hidden gem and leading southern city. This year, we will complete the first phase of the Tri Creek greenway project and identify funding to connect the Southwest trail. We are also in the final stages of completing the Kanis Park basketball courts, just in time for summer.

I have also tasked city staff to identify dedicated funding to improve and develop portions of War Memorial and Hindman Parks to make them a destination for our city, state, and region.

Entertainment in our city is also a critical aspect of quality of life.

Last year, we announced LITfest, a return to the rock.

I am proud to announce tonight - we will host our inaugural festival in conjunction with our equity and economics summit THIS SUMMER! Please

stay tuned for more information about this incredible event in the coming weeks.

The beautiful culture of Little Rock is also expressed through its diverse food options. And small businesses, like our local restaurants, have been greatly impacted by the past 2 years. That is why I'm excited to announce our new program - EAT BIG IN LITTLE ROCK - an original LRTV program where we will highlight various eateries throughout the city over conversation and good food. This program is a partnership with one of our City's most popular food bloggers, the Mighty Rib, and will be launching this spring!

Quality of life is not only about parks and entertainment, but it's also about ensuring our residents have the means to lead prosperous lives. We are doing that through our equitable economics, but we must do more, starting with our own employees.

I will work with our City Board to ensure every full time employee at the City of Little Rock is paid a livable wage of AT LEAST fifteen dollars per hour by 2023, and we will invest in a comprehensive compensation study to address pay equity by 2024. Our office of diversity equity and inclusion will assist us in creating the Mayor's Pay Equity Pledge to guide us and other partner entities to take a look at how we are paying employees.

I have also asked our HR department to determine the feasibility of a staggered four day work week for certain city departments, which will in turn reduce energy use and gas emissions in our city, while improving retention and overall job satisfaction.

We at the City of Little Rock are growing forward as a top employer, by attracting and retaining diverse talent and ensuring a sense of belonging is experienced by all.

And we must also get back to the basics. I've challenged our staff that good cannot be good enough. We must be exceptional.

From our streets and sidewalks to our solid waste services and sustainability, we are taking an equity driven approach to ensure every resident and every neighborhood receives the quality service he or she deserves and expects. We have already started some of this work with new sidewalks in neighborhoods across our city, like those on Chicot Road and Martin Luther King Avenue, along with streetscape projects like the beautiful work we've done in the historic Wright Avenue neighborhood.

To do the basics well, we must have adequate staffing throughout city government. So later this year, I will be asking the city board to approve sign on bonuses for hard to fill positions in departments that remain understaffed, like CDL drivers and 911 call takers, to ensure we are appropriately recruiting the necessary employees to adequately provide city services in an efficient manner.

Our team will also be conducting site visits and targeting neighborhoods with the greatest need, using our day laborers and Bridge 2 work crews. As we grow forward, TOGETHER, it is my goal that no neighborhood is left behind.

As we target areas in our city with greatest need, I will appoint the Capitol Avenue Revitalization committee to develop a plan for a crucial area of downtown Little Rock. We must do our part to maintain the vibrancy of our city's heartbeat by working with various stakeholders to ensure the success of some of Little Rock's high rise buildings.

Being a good steward of our planet is also a key component of getting back to the basics. Extreme weather events, like the March snowstorm a few weeks ago, show how important our sustainability efforts are to our city and to our planet.

Sustainability remains a priority for this administration, and today, we double down on that commitment by asking our Sustainability Office to

create an action plan for City operations to use 100% clean energy by 2030.

In the meantime, we will continue doing our part by increasing recycling citywide and in city-owned buildings by at least 10% in 2023.

This is how we grow forward as an energy efficient City leaving a legacy of good stewardship for future generations of Little Rock residents.

Over the past three years, we've been devoted to education in our city, recognizing that a city must invest in its most precious assets - our youth. I am proud of the work we've accomplished through our City's first Chief Education Officer, including our early literacy initiatives and launching the community schools partnership with the Little Rock School District. Through our community schools initiative, students and families at Watson, Chicot, Stephens, and Washington have wrap around services and resources such as health and vision clinics, social workers, banks, garden programs, and food pantries right on campus, which serves as a hub for those neighborhoods.

Community schools only happen through the power of partnerships.

And, thanks to a partnership with the Arkansas Department of Human Services' Division of Children & Family Services, I am happy to announce that we will be expanding our community school model to two additional schools – **Mabelvale Elementary and Middle School** – in the upcoming school year. Like our current community schools, these schools will offer services that will strengthen families and communities, prevent child maltreatment, and transform the academic and social lives of students and the neighborhoods around them.

This year, we will also grow forward in our work towards digital equity, because we recognize that access to broadband and wifi is necessary for communities to participate fully in social, democratic, and economic opportunities.

And I'm proud to announce that ALL of these education efforts, from cradle to career, will continue under the direction of our new Chief Education Officer - Jennifer Glasgow, Assistant Director of Excel by Eight and President of the Little Rock Public Education Foundation. I am excited for education to GROW FORWARD in our city, building on the strong foundation we have laid the past three years.

(pause)

Friends, we cannot grow forward alone. It takes all of us, putting aside our differences, and doing the collective work to improve our city - me included. To my colleagues - I ask you - please join me in a new commitment to civility in how we govern at the City of Little Rock. Let's be a positive example of civil discourse for our residents. I ask that we schedule the Board retreat, recommended by the form of government study group two years ago, to find common ground and build rapport to better serve our residents.

As we see around the globe, particularly with the War on Ukraine and the Syrian Civil War, we cannot take our democracy for granted. Our city government needs to work well together **AND** for its people.

(pause)

Little Rock, together we have...

Experienced historic jobs growth.  
Overcome disasters.  
Improved quality of life FOR ALL.  
Invested in education.  
Sacrificed for each other's safety.

And we are continuing this work we started three years ago to serve ALL of Little Rock.

While we've come a long way, there's much more work to do.

So I ask you -

Join me...

Join **US**...

as we continue GROWING FORWARD in 2022.

God bless you and God bless the City of Little Rock.

I appreciate you.