

Good evening, everyone. I'm honored once again to stand here before this esteemed council and our constituents and provide a State of the City speech – my 11th as mayor. We require these to be given each year, and it's easy to understand why. We need this time to look back and then to look ahead, to reflect and to rededicate.

Over the past 12 months, I am proud to say, our city has racked up some impressive victories, and as good as this time has been, I am convinced the next 12 months will be better. We have the vision and commitment our city need to tackle both the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Before I get into specifics about our city, I want to take a moment to talk about an article I read recently. It was about how the American Dream has changed, and not for the better. These days, we seem to care much more about “me,” so to speak, than “we,” and it is to our detriment. The author made a compelling case that we need to return to our roots, where strong community bonds give us the foundation we need to meet our individual potential.

The article appeared in a publication targeted toward local government leaders, and not surprisingly, the author's proposed solutions began first and foremost with . . . local government leaders. People like those of you on the council and me.

I don't want to downplay our state and federal counterparts, because they obviously play major roles. But the “rubber meets the road” at the local level. We are elected to serve by our friends and neighbors, and our work is the one that has the most day-to-day impact on their lives. If we are to rebuild faith in our longstanding institutions, it has to start with the government closest to the people.

I am biased, of course, but I think our city offers a great example of what the author wishes to see. We have done an outstanding job of providing the services the people deserve and expect, all while maximizing every tax dollar.

As we look ahead to the 11-plus months left in 2024, it has become quite clear that the improvements we are making are transformative and will be felt for generations to come. It is nothing short of remarkable that we can juggle so many big projects at one time, and a lot of individuals and organizations deserve credit.

This Council has shown that big, bold ideas can become reality and that fear of criticism or imperfection doesn't need to hamstring progress. Our city employees, meanwhile, are turning those goals into reality. Beyond that, Judge Kay and the Fiscal Court have been eager to take the lead on some projects and collaborate on others, and they are always willing to have honest discussions about how we can work together to improve our community.

The long list of our cooperative partners continues with Superintendent Adkins and the School Board; Emily Downey and the Chamber of Commerce; the Tourism Commission, Emergency Management, Planning and Zoning, the City of Midway, the ASAP Board, KCTCS, and private industry. Add to that volunteer and charity groups and committed citizens, all of whom are all doing what it takes to make massive improvements in our community.

With all of this in mind, let's take a look back at 2023 and what we were able to accomplish. We had some major successes, and there are others that will pay dividends down the road.

At the top of the list is public safety, the first priority of any government. No individual or community can reach their full potential if they don't feel safe in their homes and neighborhoods.

To that end, we continued implementing the Flock Camera system that aids our law enforcement in its investigations and provides real-time results when we need to search for those with bad intentions or who may be in harms way.

Just as it is across all areas of government, our employees are our most important resource, and we have taken steps to reward police and fire personnel who achieve a high level of training and commitment to community.

We also received delivery of our new fire engine, which not only looks great but allows our firefighters to have reliable equipment when responding to emergencies. To lessen the threat of those emergencies, we gave our fire marshal more authority to make sure buildings in Versailles are safe and up to code.

Branching out, we continued our work to improve neighborhoods beyond traditional city services. This effort is a lot like the butterfly effect, where seemingly small improvements can ultimately have a major impact. The most direct way we help in this regard is through the neighborhood grant program, which rewards neighbors who collaborate on projects improving where they live.

One example that immediately comes to mind is the partnership we have had with our schools' extracurricular booster clubs. In this case, our support of them and the students they serve has led to a fresh coat of paint on some of our fire hydrants. It's a win-win situation for everyone involved.

We also passed ordinances last year that establish a way to maintain neighborhood common areas when HOAs or other collective agreements fail to live up to their responsibility. These changes preserve the livability of our neighborhoods and provide reasonable expectations for our residents.

Last year also saw completion of the High Street sidewalk, a long overdue and much anticipated project that improves safety for children walking to and from school, and it of course gives pedestrians more opportunity to move about the city.

We also continue to take seriously our obligation to provide clean, reliable water and sewer service to our customers. To that end, we have started moving ahead on a project to improve water pressure on the north side of the city, plus we are enacting an impact fee for water service that will guarantee costs for system improvements are borne by those who directly benefit rather than existing customers.

I want to take a moment to highlight the evolution of the Edgewood development. Eight years ago, as many of you recall, it began as a divisive rezone, but it has since turned into the foundation of Versailles' fiscal future. The City Council's willingness to negotiate an end to the litigation and come out the other end with a plan that was agreeable to all parties was a gamble that will pay dividends for decades.

The industrial part of the development has allowed the City of Versailles to bank one-time revenue to offset capital costs on other projects as well as count on a stream of revenue going forward with additional tourism benefits.

The agriculture component is allowing a private entity to move forward with a premiere Standardbred training operation that will provide a huge economic benefit as well as bring more outside dollars into the community.

The remaining acres, which are reserved for retail and professional office space, provide an opportunity to attract entities to fill unmet consumer needs and perhaps transform our health care services with a 21st century hospital building.

Moving from there to other landmark projects, we are working with the Fiscal Court and Parks & Rec Board to inject a once-in-a-generation capital infusion into our parks. This massive investment will bring Big Spring Park to the level that the community expects and deserves it to be. In addition, there will be an extra turf field for our youth activities, a replacement of the obsolete lights at baseball fields, a better Huntertown Community Interpretive Park and several upgrades at our neighborhood parks.

We will also begin working in earnest on work to improve water quality in the Glenn's Creek Watershed. This multi-faceted project will lead to safe water at Big Spring Park, improved recreation in the rural areas, and better quality for the water that is the foundation of our local bourbon industry. This partnership between the City of Versailles, Fiscal Court and University of Kentucky will greatly improve our environment throughout Woodford County.

One project that is set to become our latest crown jewel in 2024 is the ongoing transformation of our downtown. We will see events begin to take place, and I have no doubt that the Farmers Market Pavilion, concert stage, walkway and signage will be something that the community can be proud of for years to come. Our goal is to have free programming that will be of interest to everyone who lives, works or visits here.

Less exciting but very important are two ongoing FEMA projects. The first of those are generators at our water treatment plant and the water intake pump, which will provide stability to our water service even during extended periods without power. We are also progressing on the storm shelter on Clifton Road, which will be a large facility capable of housing up to 2,000 people during a terrible storm.

In another area vital to public safety, this year will see massive improvements to our fire station, making it a more comfortable and safe space for our firefighters to work from. The expansion will make it more productive and allow for additional meeting space. We will also soon be

cutting the ribbon on our new maintenance garage, which will provide a much better environment for our public works employees and equipment.

This year should also be when we see tangible progress on the Family Fun Center in the old Kroger, because those behind it have formally leased the building and are finalizing their plans.

Looking beyond 2024, we have begun review of a possible tax-increment financing project to construct a modestly sized parking garage downtown. There are few options when it comes to location, but if the price is manageable and the timing is right, we may be able to get this underway sooner rather than later.

Another project on the horizon is revamping the Lexington Street corridor into downtown Versailles. In partnership with the Transportation Cabinet's District 7 officials, we have a concept plan and a better understanding of what can – and should – be done in that important stretch of highway. We must make this a much safer corridor for pedestrians and motorists alike, as well as improve access to businesses and elevate curb appeal.

Finally, with a new, permanent president at KCTCS, hopefully we can renew discussions about developing an innovative space in the vacant part of its headquarters. This partnership with the county, school district, and BCTCS would fill a huge gap in our workforce development strategy. At the same time, it also would provide a place for hobbyists to practice their work, provide high school and college instruction and, most importantly, inspire our youth by fostering their creativity and giving them a glimpse of what their future could hold.

A few other non-capital items need to be vigorously addressed this year. First, the Planning Commission has begun an update of the Comprehensive Plan, something this body needs to remain involved in to make sure that priority projects and policies are reflected in whatever is decided.

I believe it is imperative that a detailed trail and sidewalk plan for the city is included. Another item that needs to be tackled is the work of the recently created Housing Affordability and Attainability Task Force.

Starting next January, the Commonwealth of Kentucky will walk straight into the 21st century with the legalization of medical cannabis. Local governments have options about how to welcome this new industry, if at all. I propose that we work with the Fiscal Court and City of Midway to devise uniform regulations that would allow a medical marijuana dispensary in our community with reasonable and thoughtful rules concerning their operations. This law contains significant guardrails, so I think we can accomplish this in a way that responsibly helps those whose illnesses and conditions are included.

In a related matter, we need to continue building on our designation as a Recovery Ready Community. This difficult area requires creative thinking as well as some trial and error. We should work with the county to maximize our opioid abatement dollars to provide our youth with after-school alternatives. Good work has already been done in laying the groundwork for this, and I'm excited to do our part to make it a reality.

We also need to partner with recovery providers to make sure that accredited recovery centers are welcomed in our community. At the same time, those who bilk Medicaid and other insurers without providing the services they promise must be shown their way to the county line. This much-needed industry is ripe with abuse, and we need to make sure those who need recovery treatment get it from honest brokers.

The Woodford County Foundation, which is getting financial assistance from the city, continues to help families with children in our schools. Their actions are changing lives for the better and filling gaps – large and small – that couldn't be served by the great Family Resource Centers in our schools. We must continue supporting that entity and helping it to identify unmet needs.

I want to end this long list by highlighting the work expected of our new Special Projects Coordinator, who is ready to continue the great success we've had recently with our community events and decorations. This work includes boosting our presence on social media and looking for other ways to raise the city's profile. This has needed to be a full-time role for a few years and I'm pleased we have taken this step.

I've just outlined plans for a year that will do our part in strengthening our societal bonds and promoting a sense of community. We are blessed to live in Versailles and should never lose sight of that or take it for granted. My vision is a road map that I believe continues to move this community forward. It is by no means the only path to take, and I look forward to continued discussions and collaboration among this body and our outside partners.

As many of you know, I always incorporate a little Paul Prather into these remarks, and this year is no different. When his weekly articles touch me in a particular way, I always flag them to look at again when the time for this speech arrives.

While I am obviously extremely optimistic about the future of Versailles, I also remain optimistic about our nation. I don't mean to downplay the challenges we face in solving problems that have lingered for too long. And I know the partisan divide shows little signs of closing.

Even so, this nation's foundation remains solid, and it can't be cracked by the two extremes who are constantly screaming. That brings me back to a Paul Prather column from September of 2023.

The title of the article was "In an Anxious Age, Here are Common-Sense Ways to De-Stress." I will end with the last few lines of this column, which is the best prescription for getting our country back to normal and replicating the successes we've had here all around the country.

Paul writes, "A lot of our current anxiety is the result of assuming the worst about people, especially those who are in some noticeable way unlike us. We've got a whole ecosystem of rabble-rousing politicians, social-media demagogues and maladjusted soreheads who thrive on playing us against each other, on magnifying our differences by picking cherries. Relax. Don't get sucked into the rage and fear. Mainly, folks – even those who disagree with you – are OK.

They're not out to get you. They're not taking over the world. Heck they're trying to get through the week. Just like you. Give them a smile. Odds are they'll smile back."

Again, thank you all for your role in building the best community in the nation. 2024 is going to be a great year!