

Good evening, everyone. Let me start by saying that I look forward to this day on the calendar every year, because it gives us the chance to both gauge what we have done and to mentally prepare for what we are about to do. Today is also a little extra special because it is my tenth time before you telling you that the state of the city is strong.

Overall, we can be proud of where we are at this moment. Former NFL football coach Bill Parcells had it right when he said “you are what your record says you are.”

There’s no doubt we have a winning record, but none of it would be possible without the energy and talent from elected leaders like you, our second-to-none public employees, our strong group of civic and business leaders, and the countless volunteers who always find ways to exceed expectations.

In past years, I have used this speech as a pivot point, with half of my remarks spent looking back and the other half looking at the agenda ahead. This time, however, the two are largely aligned.

Let me start with the two most important things that local governments have to get right: public works and public safety. There is no such thing as a thriving community if it has inferior infrastructure and its residents don’t feel safe.

On the public works front, we had a successful year in 2022, and 2023 is shaping up to be even better. This is the time when we will

finally overcome supply-chain challenges and see our new, modern water meters placed in the ground.

Every customer of Versailles Municipal Utilities will have a smart meter that will help protect them from unexpectedly high bills due to leaks, and the city will no longer have to physically read the meters in the field.

In a related matter, the City has received about \$1.6 million from the state allocation of ARPA funds to be used for clean drinking water, and we will use those to improve water service in the northcentral part of the city.

In the coming year, I expect us to discuss the addition of an impact fee on new water service, which would build on the belief that development should pay for development.

On the accounting side, our utility billing has been modernized, which has made it easier for customers to make payments. The fees on commercial customers have been updated as well to better reflect their costs for water and sewer services.

In the work to make our community more accessible and exercise-friendly, we have dramatically increased our investment in sidewalk repair and extension. Our biggest sidewalk projects right now are on High Street and Big Sink Pike.

Speaking of construction, I also am pleased to see us finally move ahead on building a new maintenance garage. Our public works

employees are based out of an old, poorly constructed building that has long outlived its usefulness. Replacing it will improve productivity and undoubtedly improve morale.

In the area of public safety, the police department recently hired a victim's advocate to fill in some gaps in the services law enforcement provides the community. This person is helping those in need navigate through one of the most difficult moments of their lives.

Our Flock license plate readers have not been active long, but have already led to arrests, recovery of stolen vehicles, and safe return of an endangered child. These tools will be invaluable for policing in Woodford County in the future.

We are also working with the county and Midway to upgrade the public-safety radio system so that we eliminate deadspots as much as possible and move away from our currently obsolete setup. This is a needed investment for obvious reasons and will make communication more reliable for those whose jobs are to protect us.

With first responders in mind, we are still exploring options for fire station improvements. I think it is vital that we make sure that the firefighters who spend one-third of their lives on shift have a reasonably comfortable and safe place to call home.

Our long-awaited new fire engine will be delivered this spring, providing a state-of-the art and reliable apparatus to better serve our citizens.

We are also working on a draft fire-inspection ordinance to provide one more tool in our toolbox to prevent death, injury, and property damage.

To switch gears, we're seeing solid progress when it comes to downtown improvements.

Many have taken advantage of façade grants, for example, and that has improved the appearance in key parts of downtown.

Our downtown banners continue to be used to promote our community, bring awareness to causes and, as they are now, highlighting our history.

Two building projects I am anxious to see complete are the hotel/micro distillery being planned for the old Community Trust Building and the Valozzi's Restaurant in the old police station. Together, these will be transformative and give residents and tourists more reasons to be downtown, especially after hours.

There are three other projects I want to briefly mention.

First, the downtown revitalization project should break ground this spring, meaning citizens will soon be able to enjoy entertainment and community gatherings much more frequently in an attractive space.

Big Spring Park, meanwhile, continues to be a priority of city and county government. We need a large investment there that can improve the look, safety, and functionality of that most critical piece of downtown.

While not technically downtown, the last project I want to mention is the Lexington Street corridor from the intersection of the U.S. 60 Bypass all the way to Main Street. It needs a massive streetscape improvement, and I am committed to moving forward with it in some capacity in the months ahead.

There are other quality-of-life improvements that I think should be a high priority and make living here even more enjoyable.

The neighborhood grant program started last year, for example, has led to some small yet impactful improvements in the spaces where people live and interact with their neighbors.

The basketball courts at Apollo Park have been brought back online and work is being planned to improve the skate park there. The purchase of the old Kroger building and subsequent lease with a private outfit to operate a fun center is also imminent.

To improve communication from constituents, we should explore the possibility of creating an app that would make it easier to report potholes, missed trash pickups, and other things where people may not know who the best contact person is.

One of the major drivers behind everything I have mentioned so far is our economic development. We're fortunate that our business community is strong and growing.

I believe the City Council's decision to purchase the Edgewood Industrial Park is the right direction for us to take, and that it will make

it easier to recruit employers fitting our standards. There is no doubt that the opportunities with this property are endless.

We cannot talk about growing our business community without also addressing workforce challenges. Versailles is far from alone when it comes to struggles with filling jobs and having enough affordable housing.

To improve those trends, we are collaborating with the other governments, the Chamber of Commerce and multiple other organizations to determine if we can become a Recovery Ready Community, which would complement our Work Ready Community status. That could help alleviate some workforce issues and give people who deserve it a second chance, but we will need to do even more over the long term.

I don't know what the solutions are to these large challenges, but we must continue to have open and honest discussions about them and realize that individual success depends a lot on the collective decisions we make.

As I alluded to at the start, I believe 2023 is going to be even better than 2022. The people are in place, the momentum is there, and there is no shortage of opportunities.

That doesn't mean, however, that we might not have an occasional stumble or fall short of our high expectations. Sometimes unexpected things happen beyond our control, and sometimes people just make

mistakes. It is during these times when we must remember where we are. We live and work in the absolute greatest city in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

We didn't earn that title lightly, either. It took a lot of hard work, vision, and dedication. The attitude behind this is the fuel that will take us where we want to go.

May we never forget, though, that attitude, like a lasting friendship or marriage, takes work. We can't take it for granted or coast on past accomplishments.

It can be easy to develop a bad attitude, one where the worst is assumed and we no longer can see the good around us or within us.

So let us pledge to remain optimistic and to see problems as opportunities and not obstacles. Let us never forget that we are on the same team, and the record we compile reflects on us all.

I believe this attitude is what separates local government most from our state and federal counterparts. We know one another ... live, learn, work and worship alongside one another. We see the products of our decisions, and hear from our constituents, in ways that just are not possible at higher levels of government.

For those who have heard my State of the City speeches before, you know I cannot end one without referencing a Paul Prather article.

This year, I want to highlight what he wrote last July. His theme was comparing today's bad times with those faced by earlier

generations. He made four observations that I think apply well here tonight.

First, he said, the worst-case scenario seldom happens despite our worst fears and predictions that it will.

Second, he pointed out that everything is cyclical and that “the good times don’t last, but the bad times don’t last, either.”

Third, he reminded us that “crises don’t forge character as much as they reveal it.” It is easy to be your best self when everything is running smoothly, but we must also not overlook who we are when things are difficult.

Paul wrote that “today might be your chance to decide to not be overcome by evil, as St. Paul said, but to overcome evil with goodness. Let the best that’s in you rise to the forefront.”

His fourth and final observation is, to me, the most powerful, because it takes on the hatred and wanton destruction of our social institutions from extremists on both sides and compares it to a simple virtue that we are quickly losing sight of: faith.

His article closed by saying that “whatever its faults, faith is a bulwark. A young Jewish woman I knew long ago told me nihilism is the easy way out – it’s faith that takes guts. Amen.

“Faith is worth the effort. In difficult periods, it helps us find meaning amid chaos. It tells us life consists of more than the Dow Jones Industrial Average or the latest political poll or the tirades of Vladimir

Putin. It comforts us. It assures us that someone greater is still in charge, despite the dark circumstances. It tells us that if the worst does actually happen this time, we still have a future and eons of better times to come.”

With that, ladies and gentlemen, let me end by saying that our best times are still ahead. We can overcome any physical, economic, or logistical challenges that seem to block our progress, but we cannot and should not give way to negative, defeatist attitudes. There is a lot to be optimistic about, both in our own lives and in this community we call home.

Thank you.