

State of the City, Versailles, KY

Remarks presented by Mayor Laura Dake

February 4, 2025

The mayor's annual tradition of reflecting on our city's accomplishments and outlining a vision for its future was something I always looked forward to when I was a council member. Since I've only been serving in the role of mayor for 10 weeks, I share these remarks with you – elected officials, city staff, and the public – with humility and strong sense of responsibility and care for this special community we call home.

Since my tenure as mayor has been so short, I'm going to spend most of this address looking forward rather than back. Still, it's important to acknowledge our accomplishments in 2024 and commend former mayor Brian Traugott for his leadership. Residents and visitors alike can enjoy the new Versailles Market & Entertainment District, which had its ribbon cutting last June and features a three-season pavilion, entertainment stage, and an ADA-compliant walkway down to a water feature. Work on Big Spring Park's makeover began last year, as well as other improvements at Falling Springs and in neighborhood parks.

By improving the look and feel of buildings downtown and neighborhood common areas with city-funded façade and neighborhood grants, we've helped instill a sense of pride and place in many areas of our city. The new state-of-the-art Woodford County High School opened just last month; the city's contribution included a new sidewalk along Chinoe, a turning lane from High Street and newly paved roads.

Versailles' department heads are second to none, and I am so impressed by their leadership. They have been an invaluable resource to me as I learn this job.

Public Works is always busy maintaining and improving the city's infrastructure, including putting in new sidewalks, overseeing road work, and keeping the water and wastewater treatment plants' services safe and dependable. Because the nature of their tasks is often unpredictable due to weather events and unexpected repairs, the public works staff's flexibility is commendable.

The city clerk's staff provides excellent, friendly service to residents, whether they are paying water or tax bills or requesting records, as well as shepherds the city's finances through the yearly audit.

Our police and fire departments are comprised of true professionals, highly trained and effective at their jobs, but also caring and empathetic to vulnerable members of our community.

Our city continues to thrive economically, thanks to the hard work and dedication of local businesses, entrepreneurs, and workforce. Woodford County's just-announced unemployment rate is the lowest in the state at 3.8%, which means that most people who want to work are.

I could go on, but you get the idea. There are many exciting things happening in Versailles and Woodford County, and I am confident we can continue this momentum in the years to come.

On to 2025...

2025 will be a year of consequential change for our city. Versailles' population increased 3.6% between 2020 and 2024. That's fewer than 400 people, which doesn't sound like a lot. Did you know, though, that there are 1,766 new housing units either in the planning stages or under construction? That means

our population is set to increase by more than 400 people a year – every year – until the build-out is complete. Rapid growth and new neighbors pose challenges to infrastructure and public safety but also an opportunity to show our best selves. How do we remain a kind, caring, small community that is friendly to newcomers and to all who call this place home, as well as visitors who want to experience what we have to offer? How do we balance growth with protection of our valuable, irreplaceable farmland and what makes Versailles unique?

I love analogies because they help me better process complex ideas by finding patterns and connections. Sigmund Freud was said to have written, “Analogies prove nothing, that is true, but they can make one feel more at home.” Exactly. The more I see connections between unrelated things, the better I remember, the clearer issues become, and the more comfortable I am. With all the changes coming to Versailles, the analogies that might first leap to mind are standing on the edge of a cliff or drinking from a firehose! Those aren’t particularly helpful, so I went with something else.

Some of you will remember the old game show where contestants chose one of three doors to open. Each door concealed a prize of varying value. This is my preferred analogy, though in mine, there are four doors and they’re all open, except one.

Door #1: Economic Development

This is the fun door – the one everyone hopes they choose, because behind it is the most desirable item and the one that gets the most ooh’s and ahh’s, like a shiny red convertible! Economic development is like that, but unlike a red convertible, it is a necessity for a healthy community. Over the past few years, we have seen a steady increase in new businesses and employment opportunities, each one bringing revenue that helps support city infrastructure and contributes to quality of life for all residents.

New or expanded businesses we look forward to welcoming in 2025-2026 include:

*On the **Edgewood** property:

- The TKC distillery and visitor center, the entrance road to which is in the planning stages
- Highbramble Park, a standardbred racehorse training center – the track should be completed in March and the barns by April and is expected to open for fair races in July with plans for worker dorm-style housing and a restaurant
- New, but as yet unannounced, retail and professional offices

*A **Family Entertainment Complex** in the old Kroger building, which will include “The Works” pizza restaurant and activities like a “GameDay” hangout spot, miniature golf, go-karts, a play area for kids, and much more. Roofers should be starting this week, with March 1st set as the construction kick-off date. The pizza restaurant and “GameDay” will open by fall 2025 with a final completion date projected by mid-2026.

*The opening of the **Versailles Market & Entertainment District** along with major private investment in our downtown has revitalized this area, making it a vibrant destination for residents and visitors alike. I am excited to have Amanda Wainscott join the city as its new Communication and Events Coordinator. She has grown the city’s social media presence significantly and is exploring ideas for events, including a signature Versailles event, and is meeting with other organizations like the library and theatre to see if

they are interested in programming opportunities at the District. We are again working to bring the Farmers Market back downtown, at least part of the time.

*In addition to the beautifully renovated Woodford Hotel, another hotel will open downtown in May. **The Aldenberg**, in the old Community Trust Bank location, is a boutique hotel with plans to open a steakhouse, rooftop bar and small distillery.

*Finally, **NSG Pilkington** is expanding with an investment of \$31.8 million and adding 30 jobs.

By fostering a supportive environment for businesses of all sizes, we are ensuring a diverse and robust economy.

Door #2: Infrastructure and Public Safety & Health

In my game show analogy, one door usually contained a nice prize that was also functional, like a washer/dryer or living room furniture. Nothing particularly flashy and certainly not the topic of conversation. They are items that keep people safe, healthy, and comfortable and add to quality of life. No one is surprised to walk into a house to find furniture and a w/d. It's expected.

This is how I imagine the city's infrastructure and public safety and health efforts. It's the heavy lift of every community, the hard work that's done behind the scenes that makes everything we do run more smoothly. Most of us don't even notice unless and until something breaks.

We have made significant strides in improving our city's infrastructure over the past few years. Looking ahead, initiatives include:

- Sending street department employees for road certifications with classes offered by the UK Transportation Center
- Hiring an in-house mechanic / equipment repair technician to reduce costs
- Upgrading the street sign program, including locating all signs with GPS
- Completing the AMI (or smart) meter changeouts
- Completing the Lead Service Line inventory
- Adding another snowplow, a salt spreader, a box truck for the chipper and a vacuum truck
- Continuing to replace aging water lines
- Continuing the momentum on sidewalk and multi-use path repairs and additions
- Modernizing billing within the Utilities Department
- Overseeing water and waste improvements in the Edgewood industrial area as well as the construction of new roads
- Digitizing city records
- Installing a large generator for raw water intake at the water plant
- Supporting the efforts of our new code enforcement officer, JJ Martin
- Finding ways to pay for improvements to the Lexington Road streetscape
- Anticipating that a growing city will necessitate more staff. Plans are moving forward to increase office space in the public works department at city hall, as well as other improvements to preserve this historic building.

In addition, I will be forming a Walkability Committee that will include residents. I envision the committee will work with public works to offer suggestions to improve connectivity, accessibility and safety for

people who walk, bike, and roll. The physical and mental health benefits of getting outside are well-documented, and when people feel safe, they are more likely to do so.

I am also interested in equity and making sure that all city neighborhoods benefit from our efforts. This is why I'm proud that our late 2023 Walk Audit led to the submission and subsequent award of a TAP grant. The funds will replace the sidewalk and stormwater infrastructure the entire length of Wilson Avenue. In addition, we'll be listening to residents on MLK Jr. Blvd to see what improvements they might want to see.

Turning to public safety, I am thrilled that the transition from Mike Murray to Rob Young as police chief has been so seamless. Chief Young demands utmost professionalism from his officers, and we should be thankful for a well-run department. One of the things I'm proudest of is our attention to mental health and substance use services, so we are addressing the underlying issues that might otherwise lead to an arrest.

Chief Young is busy reviewing applications and has already hired a couple of experienced officers. It is critical that as the county grows, our police department can manage the additional impact of more residents, more students, more business travelers, and more visitors. One hire he is looking to make is a part-time detective to open up cold cases. There aren't many, but it is so important for families to learn what might have happened to their loved one and bring perpetrators to justice.

Substantial capital expenditures in the VPD have been made over the past years, so the big request this year is for lockers. Between learning a busy new job, hiring and training officers and overseeing the completion of the radio encryption project, I'm sure Chief Young is relieved it's just lockers. From a budget standpoint, I am, too.

The Versailles Fire Department is looking forward to an exciting year. The first class of the new Fire Safety Program will begin in August at the old high school and will be open to students from 9th-12th grade. This is a great program for students who want to explore an active career and for the fire department to create a recruiting pipeline for those students once they graduate.

Just like the police department, the fire department is also gearing up for growth. A newly renovated Station 1 on Locust Street is close to completion, with more office space, better sleeping quarters, and a baby box. The department is interested in building onto or adding a structure at Station 3 on Hunteartown Road so there is more capacity to train. A capital outlay on the list for the department is a ladder truck. I'm told there's a four-year delivery time for these, so we'll be looking now at how we might fund that. Again, with the growth in residences, commercial properties, and industrial developments comes a higher risk of fires and the need for additional equipment and personnel.

Door #3: Our Challenges!

In this game show, there was always a door that concealed a less-than-desirable prize, often a farm animal like a goat or mule. This is an analogy for our challenges. If you were asked to take a mule home, it would be with some difficulty!

One challenge that gets plenty of attention is housing affordability. This is why I'm pleased that we are exploring manufactured housing, with a pilot project on High Street that is about ready to open to the public. It's not the only solution, but it is a less expensive way to build housing than site built. My goal

as we consider affordable options for housing will be to use land that is already in the Urban Services Boundary, so we don't sprawl more than we already have.

Another issue impacting housing affordability is high rental costs. We must support efforts to bring affordable rentals to Versailles for older residents and for families. I have said many times that I don't want to see Versailles become like a big, gated community – we need a diverse mix of people here to keep us interesting!

With more housing comes traffic, another challenge we will be contending with. The city commissioned a traffic study of the area at Troy Pike, Dry Ridge, and Falling Springs Boulevard for recommendations on what to do at that intersection, as well as the intersection on Tyrone at the entrance to the county park. We are discussing options with District 7 staff of the KY Transportation Cabinet about getting projects – including roundabouts and R-cuts – into the road plan. These projects take years to work their way through the funding process, so it's not likely anything will happen soon. In the meantime, we will look at quicker, easier, less expensive ways to move traffic safely and efficiently.

As we look toward the future, it is essential that we prioritize environmental sustainability. While Woodford County has not experienced the devastating effects of flooding, drought, tornados, and fires that other communities across the US have, we have seen ice and windstorms that have caused considerable damage. Safety and well-being of our residents is a top priority and emergency management works diligently to enhance public safety measures.

But the larger question remains: How do we prepare for a changing climate and build resilience in our infrastructure, our systems, and our people? Some ideas: There is a large storm shelter in the design phase that, once constructed, will hold hundreds of people in the event of a tornado. The city is about to get four EV chargers at three locations (for a total of 12 chargers) at almost no cost. Another idea we're working on is putting smart meters at city hall that will be programmed to reduce the temperature after hours.

So, we can get the best ideas possible, I plan to form a Sustainability Committee, with community involvement, to look at ways we can promote conservation and reduce waste. This is not only beneficial to our environment, but saves taxpayer dollars as well.

Door #4: ???

This door will remain closed because what is behind it is yet unknown. While the future always has an air of mystery, there is a predictability to much of life. To be frank, I am concerned about how actions in Washington may impact our city in the coming years. As an example, just since the January 20th inauguration, federal grant monies were frozen. While this action was rescinded about a day later, it isn't clear if it will remain that way.

The city currently receives federal funding for infrastructure and public safety projects from the following agencies: Homeland Security, the Dept of Transportation, FEMA, and the Treasury Department. A grant I mentioned earlier that you will be voting on tonight would place a large generator at the river for raw water intake if power was disrupted. This grant comes from FEMA; funding uncertainty for important projects like this is real.

Other administration orders may include mass deportations of undocumented immigrants, mass resignations or firings of federal workers, and stiff tariffs on Canadian, Mexican, and Chinese goods,

which will result in higher prices for US consumers. Subsequent trade wars, if they come, will mean higher prices for products the US exports, including Kentucky bourbon, with possible job losses as companies cut costs. The tariffs were set to go into effect today but have been paused for Mexico and Canada, but it isn't clear if these pauses will last or what damage has already been done.

We cannot know how these measures, if instituted, will affect our local economy. Will businesses cut back on hiring or expansion or close altogether? How will the agricultural and construction sectors fare? How will the stock market respond? How will families cope with even higher prices for essential items? If families cut spending on entertainment and restaurants, will these businesses suffer? I don't want to end my remarks on a down note, but we must be prepared for some uncertainty in 2025.

Still, there is abundant goodness, even during these times of confusion, and I remain hopeful that, just like during the Covid pandemic, we stick together, take care of our neighbors, and dig a little deeper to help others who are struggling. The city will do its part by supporting the Woodford Foundation's mission to help families and older people and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), which serves abused and neglected local children.

Our city has made remarkable progress. However, we must also acknowledge the challenges that remain and continue to work together to address them. Our shared commitment to innovation, sustainability, transparency, and inclusivity will help us build a brighter future for all residents.

I want to turn my attention to the council for a moment. I appreciate your kindness as I've stepped into this new role and look forward to collaborating with you to make Versailles an even stronger city. I am always open to hearing your ideas for new initiatives as well as solutions when we need to address challenges. You each bring a variety of important gifts to the table, but the one we share is that we all love this community.

I want to end with a benediction attributed to St. Francis. It mentions God, but I don't think it is overly religious if that's not your thing. Benediction translates as something like "well wishing," a blessing that reminds us of our shared humanity.

Benediction of St. Francis

*May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.*

*May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.*

*May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and to turn their pain to joy.*

*And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in this world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done,
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.*

We each have two hands and 24 hours in a day, so it's rare that one person can accomplish great things alone. But if we take that first step and work together – and I mean everybody in this community

who is able – we can move mountains. Let's look ahead with optimism, determination, and spirit, knowing that Versailles' best days are still ahead!