

2019 State of the City Address
3/3/20
Mayor Harold Perrin

Mr. President Pro Tem, Madam Clerk, Ms. City Attorney, Members of the Council, Members of the Media, Distinguished Guests, and Citizens of Jonesboro.

Moving forward—progress—is the theme of this year’s state of the city.

I would like to recognize some people who are very important in the operations of city government.

- The Jonesboro City Council, who keeps working together to make Jonesboro stronger.
- The 27 volunteer city boards, commissions, authorities, and committees. They provide leadership, oversight, and vision for critical city functions.
- Our numerous local partners – A-State, CWL, non-profit organizations, service clubs, Judge Marvin Day and the Quorum Court, and many others.

It is vital that we are all heading in the same direction, and I commit the city’s cooperation and support to our many partners.

As your mayor of three terms, I have found that serving this year as president of the Arkansas Municipal League has allowed me to learn from the professionals at the AML, not to mention the experiences of my peers around the state.

Serving on the board of the National League of Cities has also provided me and my administration with insight and resources we otherwise would not have had.

Now, it’s my great honor to stand before you today and deliver my twelfth State of the City address.

I will discuss our purpose, our accomplishments, our challenges, and some solutions that we can work together on.

Over the past year, we continue to make progress in achieving our vision.

On behalf of the nearly 77,000 residents of the City of Jonesboro, I’m proud to say that the state of our city remains strong.

My vision, my passion, what I work for every day is for Jonesboro to be the city of dreams for:

- every child,
- every worker,
- every senior,
- every entrepreneur, and,

- every college graduate who wants to call our city home.

We have seen unprecedented growth. Jonesboro continues to grow in population by nearly 2%/year. I expect our population to push above 78,000 after this census and possibly as high as 80,000.

And, speaking of the census, we need to make sure everyone in Jonesboro is counted. It can impact thousands of dollars in state and federal funding for the city, county, and schools.

Our unemployment rate is near a historic low, and we have one of the lowest costs of living in the country.

Today, let's talk about what we will do together to continue this city's growth, fulfill our obligations to those who did so much for us, and our obligations to those who depend on our renewed commitment.

Let's ensure that opportunity and optimism reaches every resident of this city. This is our theme – moving forward.

When I first ran for this office, I focused on core services – streets, infrastructure, police and fire protection, and getting our financial house in order. Also, improving our quality of life, which leads to the growth of good-paying, future oriented jobs.

But we need to make sure that all the citizens of Jonesboro are being heard, and that we fully understand your priorities.

I would request that we will bring back our neighborhood listening sessions. That would involve the council members from each ward with me discussing recent projects in the area, and listening to citizens about their needs and priorities.

Together, we wrapped up a lot of wonderful accomplishments for Jonesboro in 2019. Here's a few:

- The Rotary Club of Jonesboro opened the beautiful Rotary Centennial Plaza in front of The Forum, which also saw a \$250,000 upgrade thanks to the commitment of the City and work of Buildings and Maintenance Director Ronnie Shaver and his staff.
- The Miracle League Park received the 2019 Therapeutic Program of the Year award from the Arkansas Recreation and Parks Association. Thanks to all who contributed funding to this wonderful facility that we're all proud of.
- The new Convention Center, that I will put up against any in America for a community our size.
- We also opened three new hotels – with more on the way.
- And, Veterans Village demolition is underway so we can provide housing to homeless veterans.

We believe in an efficient city government you can trust.

- A few months ago, Legislative Audit gave us a 100% clean audit report for the 8th consecutive year.
- A year ago, the 2019 budget projected a \$6.4 million deficit. I'm proud to say that due to frugal spending by our staff plus higher revenues, the 2019 ending surplus is nearly \$1 million, a difference of \$7.4 million.
- Late last year during the development of our 2020 budget, we had to be careful of our proposed spending for needed capital improvements.
- The good news of our surplus was made known after the budget was completed.
- Therefore, soon, we will present a list of priority projects to the City Council to consider adding to the budget.
- This will likely include additional funding for street overlays, sidewalks, Sky Cops, and other needed projects.
- However, the surplus and fund balance is not nearly enough to fund major capital improvements for public safety and quality of life.

At over 80 square miles, Jonesboro is the second largest city in Arkansas by land mass. This requires us to build infrastructure and provide numerous daily services – streets, transit, police and fire protection, parks, and sanitation – across a large area.

Here are a few results of these daily services for 2019:

- The Fire Department responded to 6,000 calls, an increase of 16%.
- There were 74,000 Police Officer dispatches and 2,500 arrests by the Street Crimes Unit. They seized \$1.1 million in drugs.
- We appreciate the important work of our valuable police officers and fire department personnel every day. It's a tough and dangerous job.
- We've installed 12 Sky Cops so far, along with license plate recognition software for our street cameras. We'll be raising funds for additional Sky Cops.
- Our 911 Center processed nearly a quarter million calls for emergency services.
- We issued building permits for:
 - 354 new single family homes,
 - 248 duplex and multi-family units, and
 - 44 commercial buildings,
 - Totaling \$172 million in construction.
- There were 9,400 participants in city-sponsored recreation programs, plus thousands from teams that play at city facilities.
- Also, there were numerous tournaments in many sports, bringing in thousands of visitors spending money in our hotels, restaurants, and stores.
- We obtained \$9.3 million in new grant funding.
- We completed \$526,000 in street construction on Bowling Lane to provide safer access to Nettleton Kindergarten School.

- Any many more which will be detailed in an upcoming annual report.

With progress comes traffic congestion. So, I have been diligent in working with ARDOT over the past 10 years. We are very fortunate to have our own Alec Farmer as a Highway Commissioner.

We have over \$80 million in STIP construction projects underway or to be started in 2020. These include:

- The 3 railroad overpasses that will prevent you from being blocked by trains in our city. The Airport Road overpass will be let in November.
- The Hwy. 18 overpass will be completed in less than two years. We also anticipate the Watts Street overpass to open by the end of the year.
- Widening of the intersection at Southwest Drive/Main Street and Highland Avenue.
- Improvements at Hwy. 49 and Parker Road, which will be out for bid by August.
- The Harrisburg Road/Forest Hill Road widening is going to be bid this year.
- The intersection of Caraway Road and Highland will be widened this year.
- I-555 rehab from Loves Truck Stop to Southwest Drive.
- And, the I-555 and Red Wolf cloverleaf interchange.

But, a very important issue is coming up to voters in November. Issue 1 is not a new tax, but an extension of an existing state sales tax that will make streets safer for families, and create thousands of jobs in the state.

If Issue 1 doesn't pass, it will mean a 30% reduction in local road improvement budgets, including \$1.6 million to Jonesboro and \$1 million to the County.

What are projects could we see in Jonesboro if the sales tax is extended? Here are some:

- Extend the planned widening of Highway 351 from Johnson all the way to Macedonia Road, just north of Sage Meadows.
- Extend the planned widening of Highway 1 from Parker Road all the way to Caraway Road.
- Widen Highway 91 near Westside School from the Highway 63 by-pass to County Road 132.
- And, begin a study of a southern route to connect Highway 49 to Highway 1 in the Valley View area. This would reduce truck traffic on Lawson Road which has over 200 trucks a day.

Now, let's take a moment to celebrate some of our other accomplishments:

- Two months ago, a national business publication ranked Jonesboro No. 5 in the nation among places to work in manufacturing, and No. 6 in the nation among cities for working parents.

- We were named a Volunteer City of the Year in Arkansas for the second time in three years.
- In October, Risever held the grand opening of their new \$20 million steel fabrication facility that will employ over 120.
- In August, Delta Peanut started construction of their \$70 million warehousing and shelling facility which will employ 130.
- And, in April, Ritter Communications had a groundbreaking for their \$8 million state-of-the-art cloud and data storage facility.

The world continues to evolve into a knowledge economy, and Jonesboro has to adapt in order to continue its prosperity. We know that attracting, developing, and retaining skilled and educated talent must be our number one economic development priority to prosper in the knowledge economy. In order to compete for this young talent, studies indicate a key factor is to have a high quality of place, which includes:

- a dense urban environment that has walkable and bikeable areas,
- outdoor recreation,
- affordable housing,
- art and entertainment options,
- continuing education, and
- cool public spaces.

And make no mistake, we are in a fierce competition for this talent with Little Rock, Memphis, Fayetteville, and other areas. Studies also show that about 75% of young talent first choose WHERE they want to live, and the quality of life is a major factor. So, let's work together on long-term solutions to improving the quality of place.

Our growth dictates that we will need two new fire stations to maintain our class 1 ISO rating. We also desperately need several new police officers and better facilities and equipment. These are a considerable cost that can't be funded from the current budget.

Another key challenge for us is homelessness. We all know Jonesboro has sought for years to agree on ways to care for our homeless. I'm far from satisfied that we have reached our goals. The creation of the Jonesboro Homelessness Committee is a key step. The Committee will develop strategies on increasing the housing and services we need, and I look forward to their recommendations.

We also need to work on ways to beautify our city and promote redevelopment. We are developing a new initiative called "Keep Jonesboro Beautiful", including the creation of a new commission to spearhead these efforts.

The commission will focus on a city beautification program to enhance quality of life, spur economic development, and enhance community pride. This is even more important since we're attracting more conferences and visitors due to the new convention center. The

commission will seek to expand our neighborhood “Spring Cleanup” of large items including the cleanup of the city’s entrances. The commission will also implement the litter clean-up and prevention strategies of Keep America Beautiful.

On April 1st, the new boarding ordinance will be implemented. This will also involve more aggressive and concentrated level of code enforcement and condemnation in targeted areas.

Finally, I plan to seek Council approval for additional funding for the Land Bank to step up their demolition and redevelopment of blighted property.

This is a great time to be in Jonesboro. 2020 is a year to think about what more we can do. We have an ambitious agenda ahead of us. Let’s work together to get it done, as we always have, as one Jonesboro. But we have a lot of work left to do. There’s a lot of unfinished business and challenges for the city and for the community as a whole. And, I want to see this through.

This is a moment when those things that define us as a community —our work ethic, our innovation, our compassion, our determination, and yes, our attitude — have never been more needed. This is a moment that must be seized through hard work and bold decisions, with an eye on the future as we lay the foundation for lasting and more equitable prosperity for decades to come.

I want to leave you with this: I cannot do this alone, any of this. I need the help of our citizens to make this happen. So we are at a crossroad – do we rest on our recent successes, or, do we work toward transition to the knowledge economy with higher incomes for all? I strongly choose the latter. Regardless of whatever happens elsewhere, together, we will show everyone what Jonesboro is made of.

That’s who we are.

- We believe - in our young people.
- We believe - in our working people.
- We believe - in our elders.
- We believe - in our veterans and first responders.
- We believe - in forgiveness and second chances.
- We believe - in each other.
- We believe we’re moving forward, and that we are only - just - beginning.

I want to thank you for your time, and may God continue to bless Jonesboro, and thank you for the honor of being your Mayor.