

Lexington- Fayette Urban County Government Council Meeting

State of the Merged Government Address

Lexington, Kentucky January 18, 2022

The Council of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, Kentucky convened in regular session on January 18, 2022 at 12:00 p.m. Present were Mayor Gorton in the chair presiding, and the following members of the Council: Moloney, Plomin, Reynolds, Sheehan, Worley, Baxter, Bledsoe, F. Brown, J. Brown, Ellinger, Kay, Kloiber, Lamb, LeGris, and McCurn.

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The Mayor gave her State of the Merged Government Address as follows:

Good afternoon. Thank you to the Lexington Forum for again hosting our State of the City-County Speech, and congratulations to the Forum honorees.

Welcome to our Councilmembers, here with us on Zoom. The Council has returned to zoom meetings because of the surge in COVID cases. I want to welcome each of them: Vice Mayor Steve Kay, Council member-at-Large Richard Moloney, Council member-at-Large Chuck Ellinger, First District Councilmember James Brown, Second District Josh McCurn, Third District Hannah LeGris, Fourth District Susan Lamb, Fifth District Liz Sheehan, Sixth District David Kloiber, Seventh District Preston Worley, Eighth District Fred Brown, Ninth District Whitney Baxter, Tenth District Amanda Mays Bledsoe, Eleventh District Jennifer Reynolds, and Twelfth District Councilmember Kathy Plomin.

As Council and all of you know, the pandemic has certainly taught us useful lessons in flexibility. We had plans to hold this speech in one of the brand new banquet rooms in Central Bank Center. We look forward to being there next year.

In looking back over the past year, and making this annual report to our community, I must first say that the pandemic had a significant impact on all of us again in 2021, and on the work of my administration.

My team, led by Chief of Staff Tyler Scott and Chief Administrative Officer Sally Hamilton, have really had their hands full over the past couple of years. This pandemic is most often compared to the Spanish Flu pandemic that ravaged our community and our country from 1918-1920. That puts Mayor James C. Rogers, Mayor from 1916-1919;

Mayor Thomas C. Bradley, Mayor from 1920-24; and me, in an exclusive club that no one really wants to be in. We three share the experience of leading this city through the unique and ever changing challenges of a deadly, large-scale global pandemic.

One of our strengths has been the partnerships we have formed throughout the City, a few of which are:

- With Dr. Eli Capilouto and the University of Kentucky, which has been outstanding in every way in its service to this community throughout the pandemic;
- With Dr. Kraig Humbaugh and our Health Department and entire healthcare community;
- With the public schools - our new Superintendent, Dr. Demetrus Liggins, who came to town at a really challenging time. We continue to offer our support and assistance;
- And with our business community, including many of the Forum members here today - thanks to you and your colleagues all over town, our economy has regained its strength and we are moving forward! Bob Quick, Tyrone Tyra and Commerce Lexington made an important contribution to our economic health through management of the locally funded small business stimulus program, which helped hundreds of small businesses survive the pandemic.

Our current-day pandemic continues to have an impact on everything we do, it takes up lots of our time, and saps our energy. There have been high points: we received national recognition for our Lex Do This vaccine campaign and our door-to-door canvassing efforts - thank you to Cornett and others - and there have certainly been low points: COVID is responsible for the deaths of 491 of our Lexington people.

Even though we've been riding a roller coaster of highs and lows, COVID-19 has NOT stopped our progress, and that's what's important.

My focus today and every day is moving Lexington forward, AND WE ARE.

Today I want to talk about some of the progress we have made over the past year; about some of the building blocks we have put in place to strengthen our great city.

Let's start with the most basic, the most fundamental building block for any city – public safety. Without strong, community-focused, professional public safety, a City cannot be a successful place to live, work or raise a family.

Many of you might be surprised to learn that overall violent crime is down in our City: 16% down between 2017 and 2021. Although we still have work to do especially concerning homicides - and I firmly believe that one homicide a year is one too many - in many ways we are headed in the right direction.

To strengthen our public safety building block we have supported our police through aggressive hiring and expansion of the force. This year we funded two recruit classes, and added six neighborhood resource officers, who make it their business to be well known in the neighborhood, and regularly available to address concerns with neighbors.

Working with the Fraternal Order of Police, we negotiated a successful four-year collective bargaining contract – a goal many communities have been unable to accomplish.

And we support our police by providing the best equipment and appropriate work spaces. In the spring we will break ground on a new east sector roll call station ... all of our police now have body- worn cameras - we have involved mental health professionals and social workers to support our police response - and plans are underway to partner with the National Police Foundation and

Flock Safety on a pilot program that utilizes still photograph cameras in and near areas experiencing crime-related issues in hopes of collecting evidence related to crimes.

Youth violence prevention remains a key priority for our police, and I will talk more about that in a few minutes when I talk about One Lexington.

Our Corrections officers are also a vital part of our public safety operation. Thanks to a contractor and project manager provided by our Department of Information Technology, we have improved the overall safety of the Detention Center for officers and inmates through the installation of 600 new surveillance cameras. Since many inmates come into the jail because of substance use disorders, our Corrections Officers, partnering with the University of Kentucky and the Health Department, have started an innovative program to train these inmates in the use of life-saving Narcan. Through the

same partnership, officers are connecting inmates to treatment programs if they have served their time for crimes related to substance use disorder.

It is important that we take every opportunity to protect lives from opioids and other dangerous drugs. The Fire Department is another essential part of our public safety team. This past year Fire celebrated its 150th anniversary, and we swore in a new chief, Jason Wells, our 19th chief – what a record of sacrifice and service!

Our firefighters have been essential in the fight against COVID-19. They have assisted in 38 COVID vaccination clinics. One of the newest programs in the Fire Department, Community Paramedicine, continues to grow. The Community Paramedicine program enables firefighters to take a more comprehensive approach to the care of patients who have a high dependence on E-911 by offering a new level of care. Between 2020 and 2021 there was a 35% increase in the number of calls made to Community Paramedicine.

We support our Fire Department by providing the very best training and equipment. To give you an idea of the cost, this year we spent over \$2.9 million to replace a fire engine, buy a tower truck and an emergency care vehicle, purchase mobile data computers and cardiac monitors, and install solar panels on the roofs of two fire Stations.

We have taken a huge step forward in communication in public safety by bringing a new computer-aided dispatch system online. Fire, E-911, Police and Information Technology worked together to make this new system a reality. The system makes communication seamless from the E-9-1-1 operator who takes a resident's call, to the police officers and firefighters who respond to the emergency. It also improves the efficiency of collecting and inputting vital information.

Before I stop talking about public safety, I want to once again recognize the firefighters, police officers, Community Corrections officers, and Division of Emergency Management employees who immediately headed out to help our neighbors in Western Kentucky, where tornadoes took lives and destroyed towns in December. The assistance of our well-trained, experienced officers has made an important difference in tornado-ravaged areas. Thank you to each and every officer and firefighter who took on this difficult mission.

Our public safety personnel have many challenges, but none quite as urgent as the youth violence that has resulted in several homicides in recent months. Police recognize, and we all know, that to prevent youth violence we must act upstream - before violence becomes part of the picture - rather than waiting until downstream, when guns are often already involved, and police must make arrests.

Devine Carama, my Director of One Lexington, is doing the upstream work, with a lot of help from the community. One Lexington is a very important building block for our city. The members of the Forum really got it right earlier today when they gave Devine their “One to Watch” award. If you can keep up with him, he’s definitely “one to watch.” Through One Lexington, Devine and Larry Johnson, our Community Response Coordinator, are working to coordinate, leverage and mobilize City Government and community resources to enhance safety and quality of life in neighborhoods experiencing violent crime, and most importantly, to reach out to young people in those neighborhoods. They’re working with partners all over town, including non-profits, public safety agencies, and local residents. Devine and his volunteers mentor youth, mediate disputes, connect with gunshot victims and their families, make sure young people in high risk neighborhoods have safe passage home from school, partner with Galls and Central Bank to create the “Be the Change” scholarship, and engage African-American men to stand in solidarity against youth gun violence, and to become involved as volunteers. One Lexington also works with the criminal justice community on violence intervention strategies.

Just as public safety is essential to a strong community, so is a healthy economy – and our economy is rolling along. A look back 10 years, shows an economy that is growing steadily, and one that is resilient. COVID-19 provided the ultimate test of the strength of our economy, which is continuing to recover. Yes, we can celebrate that unemployment has fully recovered from 2020, when economic activity came to a standstill and unemployment rocketed to double digits. Our current unemployment rate is 2.4%.

However, we have ongoing concerns. We have businesses that cannot find enough employees. It is encouraging that we are still seeing considerable private investment in our town:

- Amazon opened a new facility in November that employs hundreds. Located on the north side of town, it's an infill project.
- In June we added another global headquarters operation to our local business community when Rubicon announced that it would move its global headquarters to Lexington. In December, Rubicon went public through a merger that created a \$1.7 billion company. Rubicon uses a software platform to link business and governments to a network of 8,000 hauling and recycling partners in 20 countries worldwide.
- And Baptist Health is building a new campus near Hamburg that will create an estimated 600 new jobs. The \$1 billion campus, announced in 2020 at the height of the pandemic, is now under construction. I was there a few weeks ago with Chris Roty the new Chief Operations Officer of Baptist Health Lexington, and Karen Hill who retired recently. Here's a bird's eye view of the construction... To ease traffic concerns, we are working with Congressman Andy Barr and the Kentucky General Assembly on an I-75 underpass. We must always keep our eye on the future and the need to continue to attract new companies and help local companies expand.

The City has completed an innovative master plan for the 200-acre Coldstream site for business development. This property will soon give us the highly visible, shovel-ready development property we need to continue to grow good paying jobs. Our economic development team, working with our partners at the University of Kentucky, Commerce Lexington, Euphrates, EHI and the Urban League, will continue working to bring job opportunities to all citizens of Lexington.

Strong local and state partnerships are working to attract some of those good jobs from ag-tech companies. One of our local partners, Dean Nancy Cox at the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, engaged a consultant to develop a comprehensive strategy, and we are working on implementing those recommendations. We are also partnering with Agriculture Commissioner Ryan Quarles and Alltech President and CEO Mark Lyons in this effort.

Lexington has great potential to be an ag-tech hub, and we have a strong team working on the project. One way we can make our community more attractive to ag-tech

is to make sure there is access to broadband in our rural area. Just like all businesses, businesses in rural areas need technology. Making broadband available in rural areas is a hurdle we have been trying to clear for years.

Our Department of Information Technology is taking a regional approach, involving 7 central Kentucky counties and their county judge-executives in putting together a broadband plan. Similar regional approaches are working in other parts of the country. The group plans to issue a Request for Proposals in February. We are setting up a Broadband Office in Lexington to manage this program. While the Bluegrass fields that surround our City are unparalleled in their beauty, they are also working farms that have a \$2.3 billion economic impact on our economy. Like all businesses, these farms need access to reliable broadband.

An expanding economy and new jobs often underscore the importance of job training to meet the needs of local businesses. The city's workforce grants are in their fifth year of funding. Over the past 4 years, we have trained over 875 residents and placed them in jobs. This year we expanded the program by creating Work-Lexington, Lexington's new workforce resource Center. It opened in the Charles Young Center in East End neighborhood in July. WORK-Lexington has brought together 10 workforce partners to offer job training and job placement.

Downtown has always been an important center of economic activity and building block for our city. Over the years we have worked hard and made investments to ensure our downtown stays lively and vibrant. This year was no exception. This spring, official grand opening ceremonies will be held for one of the largest public investments in our community's history.

Central Bank Center will provide new jobs and accommodate larger conventions that will increase economic activity downtown. Central Bank Center features over 200,000 square feet of contemporary meeting and function space. It is one of the most high-tech, user-friendly meeting and event spaces in the region. The winter and spring calendar is already busy with conventions, meetings and events. As part of this project, Rupp Arena has been reinvented and there are new amenities for fans. And we're at work reimagining the High Street parking lot. It will soon be an inviting, energized space. A year round entertainment destination. To the west of Central Bank Center is the new privately funded

Town Branch Park, which is expected to break ground this year. And running east past the new Convention Center is Town Branch Commons Trail. The trail is mostly complete on Vine Street and Midland, with only two blocks remaining for construction and paving next summer. Recirculating water fountains and other final details will be completed this year. Trees and native plants have already been added along Vine Street, and the remainder of the project will be planted this spring; the summer ahead along Town Branch should be green and gorgeous.

Beginning this spring, we're planning to install mobile art carts along the trail to provide opportunities for local artists to sell their original art work, or offer arts performances. Arts organizations will provide interactive arts demonstrations and performances.

We're looking forward to a ribbon-cutting for the trail later this year. The trail also runs past Charles Young Park, where renovations over the past year have included a new accessible playground for all ages.

Later this year we will begin construction on Splash! a nature-inspired splash pad celebrating the story of the park's namesake, Colonel Charles Young. Splash! has been made possible by many donors and the leadership of Blue Grass Community Foundation. Construction will start this spring with completion in 2023.

Our downtown is home to new restaurants; a new hotel, "The Manchester," is under construction; we have refreshed rainbow crosswalks; and more people living downtown are keeping it lively.

One of our most important building blocks is all about the basics of maintaining our city:

- Like Streets and Roads, which this year has filled over 5,000 potholes and resurfaced almost 34 miles of roadways, at a cost of \$190,000 per mile on a two-way road. And just recently the Division battled one of the biggest snowfalls in our history.
- Or like our Waste Management employees, who average 91,400 pick-ups a week, emptying our garbage, recycling and yard waste.
- Like their counterparts in Public Safety, 5 of our Waste Management employees recently headed out to Western Kentucky to help our neighbors.

They took two knuckle boom trucks and helped clean up the storm debris that is overwhelming many cities. One of those employees sent me a note when he returned. He wrote, quote, “I was humbled to my core. I was taught the true meaning of being blessed. Myself and the others who went down from Solid Waste are ready to go back.” End quote.

Our employees are just the best. These folks do the hard work of government every day - pandemic or no pandemic.

While I’m talking about the basics, let’s talk about improvements we are making all over town, important building blocks for our City.

- We are finishing up the widening of Clays Mill Road. Last summer, the work was completed past the block that is home to three schools – and we are improving school cross walks to make them safer. The Clays Mill project continues to make steady progress, working toward completion at Harrodsburg Road this winter.
- With Clays Mill wrapping up, design work will start on Liberty Road this summer. We plan to improve pedestrian and bike access, accommodate turning vehicles, and preserve historic features.
- We are building trails everywhere, with more to come – we currently have about \$53 million in trail projects in some phase of development. We recently opened a new section of Citation Trail, a new section of Town Branch Trail, and the Brighton Rail Trail Bridge over Man-O-War, connecting Liberty Trail and Brighton Rail Trail.
- We put in new sidewalks on Old Todds Road to make it safer for pedestrians.
- We added 29 traffic cameras that allow us to monitor traffic and actively adjust signals in response to traffic congestion.
- We worked with neighbors to improve neighborhood safety, installing speed tables in St. Martin’s Village, Woodward Heights, Southern Heights, Mentelle Park and on East Tiverton and Habersham Drive area. We also installed 13 speed feedback signs.

We are always working to improve our parks, a building block that is important to all of our citizens. Work will soon be underway on capital improvement projects in parks all over town, including basketball or pickleball courts at Mary Todd, Berry Hill, Dogwood, Wolf Run, River Hill, Kirklevington, and Gardenside. We are redesigning Phoenix Park, redoing the restrooms at Woodland, and paving parking areas at Shillito and Southland.

In addition, design is underway on a new park: Davis Park, located along Oliver Lewis Way. Construction will begin later this year.

This year, Parks installed a new futsal court at Martin Luther King Park, responding to a survey of Winburn neighbors. Futsal is a hard court version of soccer that is increasing in popularity, and this new court has certainly been in demand. In providing new facilities and programs, it's always helpful if we can directly involve neighbors, and engage young people where they are. Over the past year Parks brought back the Thriller parade and the Woodland Art Fair, the Pam Miller Downtown Arts Center re-opened, and golf, which has thrived during the pandemic, hosted a Boys PGA event.

We are excited that Lexington is now the host of the Veterans Hall of Fame, and we're working on placing a monument to our inductees in one of our parks!

A group of 70 residents contributed to the Commission for Racial Justice and Equality building block. In late 2020 the group made 54 recommendations on ways to disrupt and dismantle systemic racism in our community and we've been working on them ever since. This year, we have taken some major steps forward. As part of our contract negotiations with the Fraternal Order of Police we have put two civilians on the Disciplinary Review Board. This was a significant change to the agreement, and was a move supported by our police. We also strengthened accountability in police disciplinary issues. The disciplinary article of the prior collective bargaining agreement prohibited the City from considering discipline older than 5 years when making decisions on current misconduct. The new agreement eliminates that prohibition. The City can now consider all prior discipline when making disciplinary decisions.

We also launched a disparity study to assess whether disadvantaged, minority- and woman-owned businesses face any barriers to working with the City. We hope this study will help pave the way for more inclusion in business.

In the next few weeks I am preparing to name a permanent Racial Justice and Equality Commission. And to keep all of this moving forward and speed our progress in implementing the recommendations, we hired Tiffany Brown in October as our Equity and Implementation Officer. Tiffany has considerable experience in problem solving and implementing reforms in Cincinnati through the Center for Social Justice at the Urban League

One of the recommendations from the Commission was to create a Department of Housing, which I did in this year's budget. Last week, Council voted to confirm Charlie Lanter as our first Commissioner of Housing Advocacy and Community Development. This important new office brings together critical pieces of our government's housing infrastructure, including the Office of Affordable Housing, and the Office of Homelessness Prevention and Intervention. Housing, for those who are homeless, for those who need rent assistance, for those looking for affordable housing, has been a key focus for several years: Since March 2020, the City has allocated over \$58 million in federal, state and local dollars to homelessness and affordable housing.

Our Housing Stabilization Program, designed to help those who could not pay their rent because of fallout from the pandemic, started small in September 2020 with local funds, and grew exponentially in 2021 with the addition of \$29 million in federal funding for rent and utility assistance. So far we have spent more than \$17.5 million and provided assistance to over 2,800 Lexington households that needed help with rent and utilities. Recently Lexington was recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development as a model program for rental assistance. We greatly appreciate Community Action Council, our partners in this work.

We have also made unprecedented investments in Affordable Housing. The FY22 budget included a record \$3 million appropriation for the Affordable Housing Fund. And recently I recommended and Council approved \$10 million from the American Rescue Plan Act to further expand this work. In addition to housing and rent assistance, the government has a number of other activities that are designed to help people who need help. These programs are essential building blocks in our city. Despite the pandemic, our outreach continued to senior citizens, young people, domestic violence victims, and

people with substance use disorders, among others. We value the partner agencies that help us in this work.

Protecting our environment is another important building block for our city. This year brought a significant milestone in our work to rebuild our sanitary sewers. The city entered into a consent decree in 2008, pledging to bring local streams into compliance with the federal Clean Water Act. The City also pledged under the Consent Decree to make stormwater improvements to stop flooding in several areas. This year we completed the stormwater work, a big step forward. In other Consent Decree news, despite market forces and supply chain disruptions brought on by the pandemic, the cost of the construction remains over \$100 million below original projections. We continue to monitor market forces as we keep the emphasis on saving dollars as we improve our sewers to protect our environment.

In another part of our clean water program, Governor Beshear awarded us \$11.8 million to replace the chlorine gas process to disinfect treated wastewater at our wastewater treatment plants. The plants will soon start using an ultraviolet system to disinfect the water, eliminating toxic chlorine gas exposure risks for employees and the community.

Recycling is another important part of our work to improve and protect our environment. There's exciting news here: In March we will resume paper recycling from home carts. It has been a long journey, complicated by the pandemic, to restore this service. Now, we're moving forward!

COVID-19 has left its mark on our city, but it has not touched us at our core. We're too strong. The bonds between people and partnerships within our community run deep. I read a wonderful quote recently from the first policy speech of the new Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio given on Oct 8, 2021. He said, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Our people are the building blocks of our city's strength; we go forward together, and we will go far!

The Council adjourned at 12:48 p.m.

Deputy Clerk of the Urban County Council