

Lexington- Fayette Urban County Government Council Meeting

State of the City-County Address

Lexington, Kentucky January 28, 2025

The Council of the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government, Kentucky convened in regular session on January 28, 2025 at 12:07 p.m. Present were Mayor Gorton in the chair presiding, and the following members of the Council: Brown, Curtis, Ellinger, Elliott Baxter, Gray, Hale, LeGris, Lynch, Morton, Reynolds, Sevigny, Sheehan, Wu, Beasley, and Boone.

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The Mayor's State of the City-County Address was as follows:

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. Happy 250th anniversary to our community! Thank you to the Lexington Forum for again hosting my State of the City-County speech. I want to recognize Forum President Luke Morgan, and all of the members of the Forum for their outstanding service to Lexington. Congratulations to all of the Forum's award-winners!

Welcome to all public officials here today. Let's begin with an introduction of our Urban County Councilmembers, including five new members. Please hold your applause until I introduce all of our Councilmembers. Councilmembers, please stand as I say your name: Vice Mayor, Dan Wu, Councilmember-at-large James Brown, Councilmember-at-large Chuck Ellinger, First District Tyler Morton, Second District Shayla Lynch, Third District Hannah LeGris, Fourth District Emma Curtis, Fifth District Liz Sheehan, Sixth District Denise Gray, Seventh District Joseph Hale, Eighth District Amy Beasley, Ninth District Whitney Baxter, Tenth District Dave Sevigny, Eleventh District Jennifer Reynolds, and Twelfth District Hilary Boone. Let's give them all a round of applause!

There's another important group I want to recognize today – the team that helps me run our government: Sally Hamilton, my Chief Administrative Officer; Tyler Scott, my Chief of Staff; and my senior leadership team. I also honor the nearly 3,000 employees who work for our government. You all do a wonderful job serving Lexington!

And I am grateful that my husband, Charlie, is here today – he has been my sidekick for life!

Here we are, January 28, 2025, almost one month into our 250th year. It's still incredible to me that Lexington was formed one year *before* the signing of the Declaration of Independence. We've put 250Lex pins on the tables for each of you – wear them proudly! Check out 250lex.com to learn more about our anniversary celebration activities! Thank you to the members of the 250Lex Commission for everything you have done to make our 250th anniversary a success. Lisa Higgins-Hord, one of our 250Lex ambassadors, is here today.

Today, as we lead the 59th largest city in the country forward, we all stand on the shoulders of thousands of people who made their own contributions to this special place through 250 years of history. We have many reasons to be grateful to them, and we have a lot in common with them. While Lexington has seen enormous change since its founding, it's surprising how many things today remind us that we have not forgotten where we came from.

Like the intertwining of our history with agriculture – agriculture's roots run deep here. In 2025, agriculture remains an important part of our lives – it currently accounts for 1 in 12 jobs and adds \$2.3 billion to our economy each year. Horses have been a constant presence on our farms since the early 19th Century. Today, our identity is wrapped up in our horses – they set us apart from everyone else. Our booming tourism industry, which also creates thousands of jobs, is centered around them. In 2023, the economic impact of travel and tourism in Fayette County was a record \$1.6 billion.

Because agriculture has always been important here, we have long recognized the need to protect our farmland, some of the best in the world. Our 25-year-old Purchase of Development Rights program now protects almost 33,000 acres from development, including large and small far. Our Urban Service Boundary set in place in 1958, is the oldest growth boundary in the country. As Lexington grows, the importance of the Urban Service Boundary, and the need for smart land management, grows with it.

A belief in the importance of education is also deeply rooted in this community. We had our first public school in the late 1700s, just a few years after our founding – that was unusual in those days, when most formal education was private and costly.

The first university west of the Allegheny Mountains, Transylvania University, was founded in 1780. Located two blocks north of Main Street, and still in the neighborhood

today, Transylvania also established the first law school and the first medical school in the West. With the founding of the land-grant University of Kentucky in 1865, higher education was further established as a firm and continuing part of the foundation of our community. It is no surprise that today we have a very highly educated populace, compared to most cities. Because of our education system, including our public schools and Bluegrass Community and Technical College, our workforce is attractive to local employers, and to companies around the world looking for a new home, the brainpower of our universities often sparks technological innovation that becomes successful start-up businesses.

In the early part of the 19th Century, Lexington's focus on education was one reason we became known as the "Athens of the West." Today, the "Athens of the West" spirit continues to define our community through our continued appreciation of education, all forms of art, and that special sense of place that is pure Lexington. We are proud of the national and international acclaim achieved by our academics, creatives, local writers, visual artists, musicians, and the chefs who create our renowned local cuisine. That "Athens of the West" spirit is also present in our support of forward-thinking government.

Our vote to merge our local government, to do away with city and county divisions, to be nonpartisan, dates back to 1972. Today, we remain one of the few truly merged local governments in the country. Over the years, merged government has helped us use public resources wisely and efficiently: taking on costly challenges like protecting our environment with up-to-date sewers; developing a modern transportation system; protecting our neighborhoods; carving out our rightful identity as the Horse Capital of the World; becoming a leading economic engine for the entire state; keeping our cost of living low; engaging in smart planned growth; keeping downtown vibrant; and investing in quality of life.

The need for continuing change and improvement drives us forward as we move into our next 250 years. We know we have much work to do to continue the tradition of accomplishment that has been part of our community since its founding. Driving accomplishments that serve people is the ongoing mission of your merged government.

Based on the 51-year-old charter of our government, the mayor must report back on its accomplishments each year. Here are a few of the things from 2024 of which I am most proud:

Let's start with public safety, Job 1 for our local government. All-around progress in Lexington is only possible if we are first a safe community. Our public safety divisions are rock stars, well trained, achieving the highest levels of accreditation available in their fields, and supported throughout our community. Recent years have brought safety improvements built on new technology, more services, improved recruiting and salaries, and investments in the best equipment. Here are a few examples of progress our public safety divisions made in 2024:

- Our Police Department continued its move toward use of more technology. Last year brought additional use of FLOCK license plate readers and more staffing to our two-year old Real Time Intelligence Center, where technology acts as a police force multiplier to improve efficiency and help police solve crimes faster. In part because of this technology, we have been able to cut the time it takes to recover stolen cars in half, recovering vehicles valued at \$4.5 million; increased the clearance rate for homicides; assisted with returning 27 missing persons to their families; and taken 113 firearms off the street. Working together, our Police and Fire Departments and E-911 officially launched the Community Crisis Co-Response Team. Community Crisis assists Public Safety with mental health-related calls.
- Chris Perrine, who has a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling, was hired to work alongside Public Safety, bringing a new level of care to our residents. In recent years, we have taken several significant steps forward to improve service to those who are mentally ill.
- We added a 13th emergency medical vehicle to our fleet in Fire, responding to a definite need in our growing community. 12 firefighters for the additional vehicle are now in training.
- In 2024 we also made dramatic improvements in staffing levels at our Detention Center. After staffing deficits that ran as high as 130 officers, we are now just 8 vacancies from being fully staffed. Today our Division of Community

Corrections leads the nation in the number of Nationally Certified Officers through the American Jail Association.

Congratulations on a job well done to Chief Weathers, Chief Wells, Chief Colvin, and E-911 Director Jonelle Patton. I also want to mention the fifth member of our Public Safety Team, Rob Larkin, who just finished his first year as director of Emergency Management. With the weather we've had, we're grateful to have Rob on board – he has extensive experience handling all kinds of emergencies as a former firefighter, as well as a former member of the Kentucky National Guard.

The work of One Lexington also makes our community safer. Now in their 4th year, our One Lexington team addresses youth and young adult gun violence using community-based strategies. Along with our Police Department and community partners, One Lexington has helped drive down the number of homicides and shootings: Last year saw a 10 percent decrease in homicides; and a 68 percent decrease in reported shooting victims among victims ages 10 to 29 years. With our One Lexington team today is Max Rios, who survived 9 gunshot wounds 2 years ago in a shooting that claimed the life of his best friend. Through his faith, relationship with our community partner, Nestor Gomez, and the ONE Lexington team - Devine Carama, Kenneth Payne and Larry Johnson, he has taken a new path in life. In 2024, ONE Lexington received a \$500,000 grant from Governor Beshear's "Everybody Counts" initiative. Part of that funding is being used to pay for scholarships and training for those affected by gun violence. Max is the very first recipient of our Skills Scholarship. He will begin dental assistant training this spring. Max, congratulations!

A safe community establishes a foundation that's capable of supporting a strong economy. Our economy is booming. Last October we set a record for the highest employment in Fayette County history to date – 174,328 people in our workforce. The Federal Reserve Bank recently confirmed our economic growth. Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, Fayette County has seen the highest rate of growth - 5.5% - of any metro area in the Cleveland Federal Reserve Bank District, which includes Cincinnati, Cleveland and Pittsburgh. While our cost of living remains relatively low, our median income is rising. Between 2020 and 2023, our median income increased by \$1,311 a year. Workforce development is a continuing priority. Yesterday, we opened the new

Davis Park Workforce Center. I welcome Johan Graham, President of AU Associates, developer of this project along with affordable housing in Davis Park.

Along with partners throughout the community, in workforce development we serve people looking for a first job or seeking a new career, while also meeting the workforce needs of our employers. Workforce training also includes inmates at the Lexington Detention Center - those who are near the end of their sentences. Our Second Chance Academy prepares them to find employment. 56 graduates of our Second Chance Academy now have full-time jobs since being released from jail.

New projects already underway will ensure that our economic growth continues.

We're working on two new business parks:

- Construction begins this year on Legacy Business Park on Georgetown Road near the interstates. The park is estimated to create nearly 1,700 jobs with an annual payroll of \$100 million.
- And we recently joined the City of Berea, and Madison and Scott County Fiscal Courts, to create Central Kentucky's first public regional business park.
 - The 300-acre industrial park will be located in Berea. After a 10% hosting fee for Berea, each County will receive 33% of the tax revenues created by the park.
 - Our regional partners are here today: Berea Mayor Bruce Fraley, Scott County Judge Executive Joe Pat Covington, and Madison County Judge Executive Reagan Taylor. Welcome to all of you and thank you! Our partnership is solid!

We have a grant program underway that is designed to encourage agtech and food-based businesses to locate in Lexington and Kentucky. We are working to become the international hub of agtech businesses. This past year, Bluegrass Agtech Development Corp. issued its first seven challenge grants to agtech businesses.

We also have some exciting economic development news downtown: Construction will begin this year on the 17-acre High Street Lot, across from Central Bank Center. A mix of residential, retail, and multiple parking garages is planned. Take a peek. The High Street project is the work of Dallas-based Lincoln Property Company, and local developer Dudley Webb, who is with us today. Dudley is joined by Karen Hill, Board Chair of the Lexington Center Corporation, which includes Central Bank Center.

As we grow, it's important for all of us to work toward a goal of making our growth more sustainable. We are gradually improving sustainability in our public buildings, for example adding solar panels to fire stations, and building sustainability into new structures, such as our new Senior and Therapeutic Recreation Center, now under construction, and the new Police Roll Call in Veterans Park. And we are studying the possibility of putting a solar farm on our Haley Pike Landfill.

Like having a good job, in a successful community we believe everyone should have a roof over their head – housing that is safe, well maintained and affordable. Affordable housing is an urgent priority. We need more of it. Working with public and private partners, we are tackling the problem head on. Through our Office of Affordable Housing, we have stretched government dollars by leveraging \$9 of private funding for every \$1 of public investment. In our current budget, we have dedicated \$4.7 million to affordable housing, more than doubling the previous budget. In 2024 alone, 577 additional affordable living spaces opened in Lexington, benefiting hundreds of families. We've still got work to do, but we are making steady progress.

Affordable and workforce housing is also one goal of a new Urban Growth Master Plan that will guide future development throughout the Urban Services Area, including the recent expansion areas highlighted in yellow.

A couple of weeks ago, we got some exciting news. We received a \$2 million federal grant in partnership with Bluegrass Care Navigators. This funding will enable us to offer safe and functional home modifications for seniors in our community. These modifications aim to improve daily living and functional ability.

And just last week we learned that the federal grant funding we receive to operate programs related to homelessness will increase by 8.8% next year. These are highly

competitive grants, and we received over 99% of the funds we requested - a tribute to the quality of our programs.

We have accelerated the construction of affordable housing projects through the American Rescue Plan Act funds. Our ARPA program was overseen by Chief Administrative Officer Hamilton. In 2021, Lexington received \$121 million in one-time ARPA funding. The funding has had an enormous impact on our community. Lexington has received high marks nationally for the equitable way it used the funding, and the efficiency of its program. We met the program's tight deadlines. Our appropriations included \$17.8 million for affordable housing; \$31 million for Parks; \$10 million for programs related to homelessness; \$6.7 million went to non-profits; \$5.7 million went to economic and workforce development; and \$4.6 million went to community support through housing assistance, community violence intervention and mental health support. There are 95 ARPA projects scattered throughout our community.

In December, we launched our new website with the goal of making information about government services and projects available to all. We streamlined the search and menu features and reformatted each page to better organize content and highlight key topics. The translation feature allows for viewing in over 100 languages. Check it out at lexingtonky.gov.

In Environmental Quality and Public Works we have upgraded our recycling equipment; built a new salt barn – that has really come in handy this winter; we're installing \$1 million in ADA sidewalk ramps; and awarded almost \$885,000 in grants to enhance and grow our tree canopy. We have also installed several shared use paths; built sidewalks on a part of Wilson Downing with more to come; installed a traffic signal at Polo Club where a new middle school has been built; and completed \$37 million in sewer projects.

I want to close today by talking about an important contribution to quality of life made recently by a group of our residents. The "Yes for Parks" group initiated and campaigned for a referendum to establish a new tax designed to generate about \$8 million a year in dedicated funding for parks capital projects. This decision was made by the public, when 61 percent of the voters approved the referendum. Congratulations to "Yes

for Parks”, represented today by Griffin VanMeter, Victoria Meyer, and David Lowe. Parks are very important to our people. In recent years, we have been able to make some key investments that are funding major projects, and many smaller improvements in our parks.

- The initial phase of Cardinal Run North, the first large regional park we have opened in over 25 years, will open this year, as will Kelley’s Landing, which offers public access to the Kentucky River for those who enjoy kayaks and canoes.
- A new pool in Douglass Park will open this year.
- Parks visitors will find improved playgrounds, walking and biking trails, upgraded sports courts, and more, in parks all over town.

When a future mayor is standing here in the year 2275, celebrating Lexington’s 500th anniversary, he or she will also talk about standing on the shoulders of the people who came before, including many of you in this room today.

That future Mayor will talk about the history of accomplishment and strength in this community. And he or she will talk about the extraordinary people who live here. That’s never going to change. For 250 years, Lexington’s people have always been her secret strength. Congratulations to all of you and thank you for all that you do for our community.

Thank you.

Deputy Clerk of the Urban County Council