

State of the City address - 2014

Friends and neighbors, one year ago I stood on stage at the Tivoli and talked about where we had been as a community, where we were that day, and what the next chapters of the Chattanooga story should be.

The Chattanooga story, as I said at my Inauguration, is not one tale but a collection of individual narratives, each person seeking to write his or her own version.

I have woken up every day since then amazed by the tens of thousands of people contributing to the Chattanooga story in their own way. Their stories -- and the bumps in the road that slow their progress -- have reinforced to me why city government should be focused on making our streets safer; building up the next generation of Chattanoogaans; enhancing the quality of life in our neighborhoods; growing our middle class by creating jobs; and using every tax dollar to the full benefit of our citizens.

So today, I think it is important we recount our achievements from the last year and set the stage for the next chapter of the Chattanooga story going forward -- our story. When I took office, I said public safety would be my number one priority. Safety is the foundation for every great city. So, every day since last April, we have been doing the important work of building that foundation -- brick by brick.

I knew we needed a different approach to public safety -- new policies and a dramatic shift in the way we think about crime. We needed to make necessary investments in our Police Department -- large and small. So almost immediately we reversed a take home car policy that cost us much more in enthusiasm than it ever saved in gas. Whether it was a new academy or the first across the board pay raise for officers in years, I, along with our City Council, remain determined to ensure our commitment to public safety is matched by a commitment of resources.

But money alone is not the answer. It is important for everyone -- federal, state, and local -- to work closer together than ever. So we started a public safety coordinating committee, partnered with the US Attorney to create and fund a prosecutor who would only tackle crimes occurring within the city limits, and put all of these efforts under a new public safety coordinator.

We listened to people like David, who told us about problematic event halls, buildings that operated in a world without rules or accountability. Working with the Police Department and City Council, we put in changes to force these venues to live up to the standards of our community, strengthening neighborhoods as well as making our streets safer.

And, after months of planning, the Chattanooga Violence Reduction Initiative will alter the way we approach group violence in our community. Just last month, we called in 13 young men to tell them that things are different now. In a room off of Martin Luther King Boulevard, we stood together, as one community, sick of being ripped apart by violence -- people who had lost family members, law enforcement officials who were tired of

locking away the next generation of Chattanoogaans, and service providers eager to help. The message from each person was clear -- the violence is unacceptable, and it will stop.

We delivered a tough message: These young men now understand we will target those groups who engage in violence. But we also let them know our preference was to see them lifted up rather than locked up. Every person in the room walked away with a phone number he could call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to get the help he needs to change his life.

And, already, some of them have. In just one month, 34 people have called our 24 hour number to seek assistance and end their life of crime. As of today, 4 of those young men have a new job in our community.

Turning around the futures for these young men is an important chapter of the Chattanooga story. My favorite moment of the call in came after the speeches were over. We invited everyone to stay for dinner; amazingly, all 13 joined with police officers, judges, social workers and even a stray politician to share a slice of pizza. As we all stood around talking, I walked over to one guy -- let's say his name was Jim -- to hand him a coke and chat for a while. When we stopped talking, a police officer came up, shocked that I had spent so much time with him, and asked me, "Do you know who you just gave a coke to?"

I told the police officer I did. I was talking to Jim, and I am his Mayor too. Jim has a Chattanooga story, and he deserves a Mayor who will try to keep him safe, alive and out of prison.

After all, our stories are linked to Jim's. When he picks up a weapon, his story has an impact for everyone in the neighborhood. If Jim keeps up his end of the bargain and accepts the help we offer him, it changes the story for everyone in his family, for his neighbors, and for the kids at his school. On the other hand, those men at the call-in know that I will not tolerate the shootings. And if they don't hold up their end of the deal, we will leave no stone unturned in swiftly bringing them to justice.

Our focus on public safety has shown promising early results. At the end of last year, we saw a 40 percent reduction in our shootings, and similarly we have seen year over year declines in 2014.

But we can do better, and we will.

Our city is strongest when businesses in every neighborhood expand; when parents feel good letting their son or daughter walk down the street to study with a friend; when a property owner decides to fix up a house because the neighborhood is getting better. There is plenty more to do -- but we are doing it. We have built a strong foundation this year; and we will continue this important work over the next 12 months. Together, we will make our city safer.

A stronger economy comes from more jobs at living wages throughout every neighborhood. I am happy to report that 2,047 jobs have been created in our city, and we are poised for even more growth. I am constantly looking for new ways City Hall can be a better partner to local businesses so we can grow our middle class.

An important part of Chattanooga's story has always been innovation and entrepreneurship.

In 2011 Aaron Welch had an idea. What if restaurants could manage operations with a mobile app and use text messaging to let waiting customers know their table was ready? He went to one of our 48 hour launches, built a prototype, validated the concept and attracted some local investors. With that investment, a team of talented local designers and developers were recruited, and a new hospitality software setup, QuickCue, was launched.

Less than two years later, Open Table, the industry leader in online reservations, acquired Quickcue for over 11 million dollars. Importantly for our city, they saw our local assets and our talent and decided to establish a new office here with the QuickCue team. Now Open Table, a firm known all over the world, has offices in San Francisco, London, Tokyo, Frankfurt, Germany -- and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

These jobs are important for Chattanooga. No one should have much question about what the future holds. As I visit businesses around our city, I see robots and computers doing work that used to be performed by humans. That trend is only increasing, and as a city we must be positioned to develop and sell the products used in a 21st century economy.

In our past, Chattanooga has experienced the dangers of letting time pass us by, of relying on industries that pollute our air and river. Today, we plant seeds in new fields. By growing companies that harness the power of Chattanooga's gigabit infrastructure and utilize the vast amount of data collected over our Smart Grid, we are staking out our place in an innovation driven economy.

That's why The Enterprise Center will now focus on building our economy for the jobs of today and tomorrow. I have charged the new, revamped organization with nurturing our budding entrepreneurial ecosystem and supporting our technology industry.

Today, I am happy to announce that job one for the Enterprise Center will be to establish an Innovation District in Chattanooga, pulling together advanced technology, entrepreneurs, existing industries, and higher education into one location. This will be a place where people from all walks of life want to live, work, and create new technology to drive Chattanooga's innovation economy. It will be a place where new companies are born, where talented young creatives develop new ideas, and where existing businesses want to expand.

Now, as Chattanooga takes its place at the front of the economic curve rather than at the end, our Innovation District will be a centerpiece of those efforts.

Innovation and creativity are vitally important sectors of our economy, but each job created in Chattanooga has the potential to change someone's story. My administration is committed to growing Chattanooga's economy by supporting every business -- whether it has 5 employees, or 500.

One way we will do that is through our Growing Small Businesses initiative. Traditionally, economic development incentives have focused solely on luring large industry to the city. Without turning away from the success we have had in bringing in companies like Volkswagen and Amazon, we can work harder to help small, local companies expand here.

The GSB aids real job growth by providing incentives to businesses of 100 employees or fewer who make a substantial workforce expansion. When a local construction company with 15 employees adds 5 good paying, middle class jobs, it strengthens our city. It changes the story for five Chattanooga residents, who expand our economy further by paying their rent; by buying toys at the local stores for their kids; by heading to the nearby restaurant for lunch. Our city can and will encourage these investments by small business.

We must also link the rising economic prosperity with a determination to strengthen neighborhoods.

The Harriet Tubman housing complex was boarded up in 2011. It sat empty for years, serving as blight in a neighborhood where one out of every five units is already vacant.

Last Thursday, I signed the paperwork to transfer that property into city hands so we can recruit new business and jobs there. I want to do so in a way that not only adds middle class jobs to Chattanooga but benefits the neighborhood around the site. Soon, we will clear the property and make it attractive for potential employers in Chattanooga. Over the course of the next few years, I look forward to East Chattanooga residents watching Tubman be reborn as a job site instead of blight, as a place of opportunity for all.

Safer streets and a stronger economy will benefit all Chattanoogaans. But the test of our strength as a community and our values as a city is how we work to meet the needs of those who too often are left out of a growing economy; in some cases, left out despite their own extraordinary courage and sacrifice to our country.

Norman has a Chattanooga story that illustrates this injustice. He grew up in East Lake Courts, attended Howard, and left in 1971 to serve our country in Vietnam. He flew C130s, regularly transporting 50,000 gallons for refueling and avoiding hostile fire in places like Da Nang, eventually becoming a buck Sergeant. He came home in 75, moving from job to job until his physical problems caught up with him. In 1999 he took disability.

Today, Norman lives in a parking garage in our downtown. He and 5 or 6 other guys stay there most every night. When I spoke to him, he worried not just for himself but for the others he spent time with, questioning how anyone could look for a job during the day when they slept outside at night.

Veteran homelessness is a problem around the country. But I look at the greatness of our city and know we can do better. Norman served all of us in Saigon; back home, we can come together on a common goal, just as we have with other challenges in our history, to help Norman change his story.

Today I set a new goal for Chattanooga. We will end chronic veteran homelessness by December, 2016. We can do it; it's important, and it's time to get started. Tomorrow, I will sign an executive order creating the Mayor's Task Force to End Chronic Veteran Homelessness. We will involve business, community, and government leaders -- and most importantly, we will ask for the help of Chattanoogaans who have served our country. The Task Force will develop a plan to track our efforts until the end of 2016, when there will no longer be veterans living on the streets -- or parking garages -- in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Our values demand we do more than just make our streets safer, our economy stronger, and create new hope for those who need it most. We must all commit ourselves to the future of young people in our city.

A few weeks ago, I had one of my monthly Burgers with Berke, where I go to a different part of the city and hear what's on Chattanoogaans' minds. This day I went to Orchard Knob Middle School and sat down with 7 girls in Miss Lewis's honors class. I asked them what they would do if they were Mayor. One of them immediately piped up that she would put Koolaid in all the water fountains. So, there is an online poll up right now to determine if City residents prefer "triple awesome grape" or "oh yeah orange pineapple."

Ok, not really. We had a good laugh around the lunch table.

But then I pressed them to really tell me the truth -- I asked them what they wanted Chattanoogaans to know about them. One of the girls responded, "I don't think people think we're smart."

It was heartbreaking. These young women are bright, talented and capable. And at least for that day, at that moment, I told them I had no question about their intelligence and their ability to be tomorrow's leaders. Regardless of what zip code they live in, all of our children have enormous potential. We will be successful only when each of them flourishes.

That's why we've made youth development a central part of what city government does. A year ago, when I took office, I raised my hand and said I share responsibility for our kids. One year later, we have more than two thousand kids enrolled in our reading initiative. Though many have just gotten started, 437 students have made a year's worth of growth in just 6 months. On September 31, we had 31 students reading on grade level. Now we have 341.

A couple of months ago I wanted to see firsthand the progress kids were making. It's one of my favorite parts of being Mayor, talking with kids who are excited and energetic about the future. At the Westside YFD center, I sat with Dedrick, a third grader at Brown Elementary, who unscrambled letters and turned them into words as I watched. But it wasn't just that he was learning; more importantly, Dedrick told me he was having fun. By doing more than giving him training -- by encouraging him to enjoy it -- our Department of Youth and Family Development is turning Dedrick into a lifelong reader.

But we know that empowering young people means much more than just academic success. All of us need that person in our life who can point us in the right direction, who helps us realize what story we want to write. For me, like so many of you, it was my parents. But we know too many young people in our community are struggling because they don't have that special mentor to turn to.

So we have begun working with 50 young men and women to help instill in them the traits they need to be successful -- determination, optimism, and perseverance. Just a few days ago, one of the young men thanked me for the opportunity CAP was providing; I told him I knew he had a bright future, and I would get all the thanks I needed when he told me how great he was doing in ten years.

Our next stage in youth development will be putting kids on the right track from day one. As a parent, I know how much my wife and I struggle to make the best choices for our daughters. Many people don't have positive role models as parents or anyone to turn to when things go wrong.

That's why the City will start a baby college to tutor expectant parents about how to keep their newborn healthy and happy. Those first months and years of life are critical; yet many mothers and fathers lack the skills and knowledge to provide a child what he or she needs, even though they are doing their best. Should I talk to my unborn child?

Why should I read to my infant every night? How do I take care of a daughter with asthma? By teaching the answers to questions like these, our baby college will invest in our parents and newborns in a way that will provide dividends to our city for decades to come.

All of this -- safer streets, smarter students, stronger neighborhoods and a growing economy -- is about making the lives of our residents better. So is making sure that those citizens have a government that fights for them, that is as efficient and effective as possible.

That's why one of my first acts was to change how city hall works so it would be more responsive to the needs of Chattanoogaans. Within a week of taking office, with the support of a united City Council, we restructured City Hall to match community priorities. This change eliminated 4 departments and placed the core functions into 3 new ones, saving taxpayer dollars in the process.

A year later, we can see the fruits of that labor ripening. Departments are more attentive than ever to the lives of those we serve, whether it is providing transportation options, partnering with the private sector to build affordable housing, making sure our brush is picked up and our water clean, or finding productive after school activities for kids.

Government is more streamlined than ever before, and it's evident in the way we work. It is now easier for small local companies to do business with City Hall. That's important because we not only get the services we need; when we hire locally, we build our economy.

That also goes for supporting minority and women owned businesses. Because we are looking for the best value for our constituents, our diverse business engagement is up from 1% to 7.2% and growing.

A more effective city government also means you have to be willing to make tough choices. Our move to budgeting for outcomes shows we are willing to examine every inch of our services to deliver the best product to the taxpayer. Over the last year, we put together a budget with no new taxes, and our attention to efficiency meant we added 6 point 8 million dollars to our rainy day fund. The S&P ratings agency upgraded us to a triple A bond rating, which will save taxpayers by lowering the cost of our debt. But sometimes tough choices mean starting difficult conversation within city government.

In April 2013, our Police and Fire Pension Fund was 150 million dollars in the red. Over the course of the next several decades, the cost to taxpayers was set to rise without an end in sight. And despite the money going into the fund, I could not look our police officers and firefighters in the eye and tell them their benefits would be there when they retired.

So we put together a task force charged with solving a puzzle most cities had left in stray pieces. There's no question it was difficult; and all of us – including me – would rather not have been faced with the problem. But we fixed the pension fund in a way that puts it on the right track while saving the city 227 million dollars in the process.

This couldn't have happened without outstanding employees. Toby Hewitt, Sean O'Brien, Tim Tomisek, Jack Thompson, as well as the members of the pension board and a unanimous City Council – I have every bit of respect for their willingness to put facts ahead of rumors, to make the right call in the long run. I applaud them and their service to the city.

But they certainly aren't alone. Every day I work alongside some of the most talented people anyone could ever ask to serve Chattanooga. Throughout government, I have witnessed countless acts of dedication from city employees over the last year.

There may be no greater example of that than our response to the electrical fire at Patten Towers. Less than 6 weeks after being sworn in, a transformer in the basement erupted in flames, leaving 241 of our most vulnerable residents homeless and teaching me a big lesson about my new job.

24 hours a day for 10 days, our employees were there, serving the Patten Tower residents' needs -- many of whom had some degree of mental or physical disability, but all of whom just wanted to go home. It wasn't just the staff at the center who answered the call; across departments, everyone pitched in. It was an example of government at its finest.

But soon after the fire it became obvious to me that the owners of the building weren't pulling their weight. They didn't want the expense of sheltering their residents during the repair. They also didn't want the cost of replacing the emergency lights in the building. Or fixing the exit signs that didn't work. Or cleaning the hallways that were filthy.

While all of us in Chattanooga were working, the owners were nowhere to be found.

I remember walking through the Brainerd YFD Center, talking to residents, listening to their problems. Quickly I became furious that the owners were planning to leave the residents sleeping on cots in the shelter until they could move them back to a building that was unsafe and in desperate need of repair.

I made it clear to the owners – on multiple occasions and in the strongest possible terms – that their plans were unacceptable. I let them know that every Chattanooga will be treated respectfully -- and that even though the residents of Patten Towers may not be able to stand up for themselves, I was going to fight for them.

I assured them the building would not reopen until they showed they were committed to improving the conditions at Patten Towers. Eventually, the owners changed their tune. They put the residents temporarily in hotels; agreed to a social service plan; and

upgraded the building. Certainly, conditions there still are not where we would like them to be, but it is a great improvement from where it's been.

Government could not have done it alone. The Salvation Army and Red Cross showed tremendous community spirit in the aftermath of the fire, clothing and feeding Chattanoogaans in need.

That public participation in the serving the entire community has happened again and again.

In March I started a citywide book drive; 5 weeks later, we had sixty-three hundred books given away to kids in need.

With Chattanooga Forward, we have brought together the community and City Hall to take our next steps in 6 key areas. Whether it's reminding all Chattanoogaans of the importance of the arts in developing our community or coming up with new ideas to bridge the digital divide -- these groups are making a real difference for our City.

As we reach out with public meetings over the next few months, I am excited for the concrete actions emerging from these task forces.

After all, these interactions with Chattanoogaans are a vital part of my job, and they continually remind me of the importance of the work we do.

Going door to door to ask about the Wilcox Tunnel, doing a twitter hour, hearing concerns on the street, answering emails -- the constant dialogue makes a difference. At a Burgers with Berke on Highway 58 last fall, Marie asked me why we didn't do monthly Neighborhood Roundtables anymore. I didn't have a good answer. It turns out we had just let it slip off the map. We restarted the roundtables right away, and I've seen Marie at two of the meetings already.

These exchanges with constituents tell me whether we are making progress toward being the city I spoke about in my inauguration speech. We are Chattanooga; a place where the Chattanooga story is mythic in the retelling.

We are a city of such great hope and such great promise. We have made progress when we have stood together, when we have been united in our efforts to advance our city. When we work and act as one, there are no limits to our ability to achieve our collective hopes and dreams, to write a story that all of our children will be proud of.

But sometimes, there are those -- from our community and from the outside -- who seek to thwart our ambitions and aspirations through division and by driving people apart. Instead of dialogue, they seek diatribe. Instead of reason, they seek to influence by rant.

Let me promise this to you today. In this government and in this city, there is no place for intolerance, there is no quarter for those who seek to put their personal interests and

ideologies above the good of our city and ahead of the future of our children. Not here and not now and certainly not under my watch.

Our city will be a better place with safer streets, a stronger economy, great places to live, a government that works for and with our people every day.

But not just government. The strength of our city emerges when private industry, non-profits, and the public sector are all pushing in the same direction. I ask you today to get involved. Volunteer to mentor a CAP teen. Turn property you own into affordable housing. Use a local company when you buy goods for your business.

In the long run, we will be judged by how well we help our friends and neighbors write their own stories. While we all ultimately succeed or fail on our own merits, our role as a City and a community is to help knock down the obstacles that often hold us back.

Norman served our country. He was shot at while flying planes with tens of thousands of gallons of fuel behind him. Now he lives in a parking garage at the age of 61. So he can live the life of his choosing, we can help Norman put a roof over his head.

Dedrick is learning reading skills at Brown and our YFD Centers. He is full of energy, a lifetime of possibility ahead of him. To be able to succeed or fail on his own merits, we can help Dedrick have the skills to compete in the 21st century.

Marie loves her neighborhood. She drove out to Armandos on a cold rainy night just to make sure people knew what was going on in Washington Hills. To write her own story, we can help Marie build a healthy, vibrant neighborhood around her.

We are Chattanooga. We have the ability to ensure more individuals in our city are empowered to make their own choices. Safer streets. Smarter Students. Stronger neighborhoods and a growing economy. Sounder government.

We have done more than a year's worth of work in 365 days. And over the next year, it will only get better.

Thank you.