

Good evening, Little Rock.

Thank you *Shankul (pronounced Shawn-Cool) and Siyona* for that thoughtful introduction.

And thanks to *all of this evening's participants* for your time and commitment to our City.

It's always a privilege and honor to share the stage with our city's leaders and future leaders, reflecting the diverse fabric of Little Rock.

Thank you, specifically, to Director Andrea Lewis, our newest City director, for welcoming us to Ward 6.

I'd like to recognize all of my colleagues in attendance who serve this great city with me - to the Little Rock City Board of Directors and City Manager Bruce Moore, thank you for your commitment to our great City and its residents.

To our elected officials, our Mexican Consulate and other dignitaries - we appreciate your continued leadership for the people of Little Rock.

And now will our Department Directors please stand?

Members of the Office of Executive Administration?

And all employees of the City of Little Rock?

I appreciate each of you for your tireless work to improve the quality of life for our residents. I am grateful for your support of this administration, and look forward to continuing our efforts over the next four years.

Please join me in giving them a round of applause.

Lastly, thanks to Superintendent Dr. Jermall Wright and the Little Rock School District for being hosts for this year's State of the City address.

I'm proud to return to Parkview High School, my alma mater, where students are aspiring to greatness and achieving it every day.

And this past football season, Parkview blessed Little Rock with a 5A state title. Big ups to Coach Brad Bolding and the players who are here with us tonight! This was Parkview's first state football championship since 1978, and as an alumnus and as your Mayor, we celebrate your success. Congratulations, again, to the BIG RED BIG WHITE BIG BLUE!

I'm certain that if you were to ask Coach Bolding the recipe for building a championship football program, the most important ingredient would be teamwork. A coach can do nothing without his or her players. A quarterback can't throw a pass without receivers and a running back doesn't get very far without a strong offensive line. No one on any team, anywhere, can move the ball down the field alone. Everyone must work as a unit.

Together.

In the same way, a Mayor alone cannot recruit new jobs, protect a neighborhood or pave a street. To move a city forward, it takes every single resident, every single city employee, every City Director, every taxpayer, moving forward - GROWING forward - Together.

Since voters first elected me as Mayor in 2018, we've grown forward TOGETHER despite multiple challenges and setbacks. From a global health pandemic and historic weather events to an unfortunate uptick in violence and divisive and polarizing politics...we've emerged more resilient and more resolved to work together to shape our city as a catalyst

for the new South.

We've persevered, and you, our residents, re-elected me to a second term following a hard-fought election.

From the bottom of my heart,

Thank you, Little Rock! I am grateful for another opportunity to serve you.

As we overcome our challenges and continue to build a thriving city, Little Rock's full potential is within reach.

Friends, I'm here to tell you today - the state of our City is better than it's ever been! We are strong. Our future is bright. We are poised to take our city to even higher heights if we commit to working TOGETHER.

Together, Little Rock was named Number One for jobs growth early last year by the Initiative for a Competitive Inner City.

Together, we have announced more than 9000 jobs since 2019, 739 just last year alone.

The Little Rock Port continues to be a prime location for jobs growth in our city. In the center of the State, it's a hub of road and rail, river and runway, setting us apart from many locales in the region and country. We've worked closely with the Port to purchase the necessary land to support expansions like those announced by AFCO Steel and Amazon to position ourselves for MORE jobs. THIS is how we grow forward TOGETHER.

We've also seen expansions at Little Rock-based Arkana and at Aptegy, a homegrown education tech startup that's one of the fastest growing tech companies in the world. Jeston

George could have gone anywhere when he started Apptegy in 2015 but instead he became the first tenant at the Little Rock Tech Park. Apptegy's rapid success proves that we can compete for tech jobs with anybody, anywhere.

We've made and kept promises when it comes to commercial development that enhances quality of life. Places like Main Event and Whataburger are about to discover what Trader Joe's and Costco learned very quickly - Little Rock is great for business!

And this Spring, Topgolf will break ground on its newest location near I-430 and Colonel Glenn Road! It's expected to bring along with it even more retail development in that growing corridor of West Little Rock.

We are committed to working TOGETHER with developers and companies to pursue the development residents demand and deserve.

Together we are also transforming our city's downtown.

We have allocated 1.5 million dollars for a downtown master plan to ensure we are strategic and intentional about reimagining our city's core. While that is underway, my team and I are working with residents, business owners, and other stakeholders to make improvements NOW.

For example, our Downtown Density Task Force is hard at work developing recommendations to create density downtown through more recreational, residential, and commercial activity. City Director Antwan Phillips is chairing this Task Force, and I'm excited to see his unique perspective transform our city.

I recently joined members of our Capitol Avenue Revitalization Committee to walk what was once one of our busiest thoroughfares. This year, we will prioritize lighting and streetscapes to reignite occupancy in some of our city's most prominent buildings.

This year, we will create a public private partnership to secure vacant property in our downtown to redevelop into attractive live, work, and play spaces.

This is how we grow forward TOGETHER.

Last year, the City Board and I allocated funds along with our convention and visitors' bureau to restart our Downtown Ambassador program. This is yet another team effort to support our downtown businesses, residents, and guests. You will begin seeing these concierge-like ambassadors as soon as this summer.

TOGETHER, we will ensure that Downtown Little Rock's next phase is its BEST phase!

With a thriving downtown and diverse neighborhoods, there should be no doubt that Little Rock can be as attractive as Austin, Atlanta, Denver and Dallas for start-ups, entrepreneurs, and young professionals. We are the cradle of FinTech - the birthplace of Systematics. And I'm confident the next SoFi or Venmo could start RIGHT HERE IN LITTLE ROCK.

I will work with our local Chamber, institutions of higher education, and other stakeholders to shape Little Rock as Silicon South.

That work begins with an expansion of the Little Rock Tech Park. Together, we will uplift a new generation of business by supporting entrepreneurs, investing in tech infrastructure,

and creating a city that supports entrepreneurs from all walks of life.

We will also continue to transform our city's public spaces...TOGETHER.

I'm sure you've heard that Little Rock was recently awarded a 2 million dollar Department of Transportation planning grant for a deck park connecting Sixth Street to Ninth Street over Interstate 30. It is my hope that this park will help us bridge neighborhoods destroyed by highway placement decades ago.

In addition, the City will develop about 18 acres of new park land along Second Street as part of the 30 Crossing project.

We anxiously anticipate another milestone for Little Rock as the Arkansas Museum of Fine Arts re-opens its doors on April 22. The remodeled museum will draw visitors from around the world to historic MacArthur Park, rivaling the Art Institute of Chicago, the Met in New York, and our neighbors in Bentonville, Crystal Bridges.

I am grateful that this world-class museum in the heart of our city, shares our guiding light - improving life and increasing access for all.

And they are doing this with free admission to the public.

Thank you to the donors and museum leadership, represented here tonight by Dr. Victoria Ramirez, for your commitment to the City and our state. With the City's \$31 million contribution and the ongoing strategic partnership, we know our creative economy will be forever transformed. Thank you.

(applause)

Last year, we opened the MacArthur Unlimited Playground, next door to the museum, to ensure children, children-at-heart, and their loved ones of any ability can utilize the equipment on this accessible playground. If you happen to drive by on a sunny afternoon, there are dozens of children of all backgrounds laughing and playing...TOGETHER.

Over the next 10 years we will work to transform ALL playgrounds in our city by installing inclusive equipment when we upgrade our play areas.

We recognize that our 63 parks create the cornerstone for all of Little Rock's quality-of-life-and-place initiatives. To truly be a "City in a Park," we must not only maintain but TRANSFORM our parks system. Last year, we replaced the aging lighting structure at Southside Park, so that the Sunset Tigers football team can position itself for another 50 years of success and opportunity for kids in the South End. We made good on a promise to upgrade Kanis Park, and we are rebuilding the Kanis basketball courts, where so many hoops legends were made.

But more must be done to reach our full potential.

As you know, our priorities list is long, but our revenue base is finite.

In 2022, we accomplished a lot together because of the one-time infusion of *American Rescue Plan Act* funds. Without those funding sources, though, it's incumbent on us to consider other methods to KEEP GROWING FORWARD.

And the time is NOW.

So tonight, I am announcing Little Rock FORWARD - our new sales tax initiative focused

on strategic efforts to unite, grow, and transform our city TOGETHER. Little Rock FORWARD will:

- **revitalize our premiere public spaces like War Memorial Park and Hindman Park;**
- **Expand our footprint at the Little Rock Port to attract more jobs for residents;**
- **Upgrade public safety facilities and equipment; and**
- **Improve critical infrastructure for our city's residents.**

I hear it everyday - Little Rock's residents have had enough of traveling to neighboring cities for youth tournaments. We should and we WILL keep these dollars here, as visitors from surrounding cities and states descend on Arkansas's capital city for baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball and swimming events.

Let's have a state of the art youth sports complex.

Let's make War Memorial Park a destination for residents and tourists alike with a variety of amenities for us to enjoy.

Let's stop making young people feel they have to leave our city to enjoy themselves or to even be successful.

Friends, we can get this done.

Let's do it ... TOGETHER and immediately transform our city into a destination for young professionals and families from across the region.

We've learned some valuable lessons from Rebuild the Rock and Renew Little Rock, and I

believe our city is ready for growth.

I am committed to working with the City Board of Directors and with residents to determine the priorities and the timeline, so that TOGETHER we can position ourselves as an innovative, thriving progressive city for ALL.

It's up to us to create the city we want to call home 5, 10, and even 20 years from now.

I firmly believe we can find common ground on a measure that addresses our most urgent needs in a way that benefits everyone.

Just imagine what we can accomplish when we are ALIGNED working towards a common goal. TOGETHER.

There is NOTHING that can stop us!

Little Rock, this is my vision FORWARD, and it includes ALL of us.

Join me, so we can move this great city forward TOGETHER.

Forward together also requires strategic and compassionate leadership to ensure we leave our future leaders a better city than we inherited.

As the capital city, Little Rock should be a leader in identifying ways to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels, decrease our overall energy usage and, in turn, save money that we can then invest in some of our most pressing needs.

And we will do just that.

Soon - I'm talking in a matter of weeks - we will seek proposals for an energy savings initiative.

Later this year, we will also complete a greenhouse gas inventory and formally adopt a sustainability action plan that will inform all city operations, including our goal of at least 50% of the City's fleet being electric vehicles by 2030.

Sustainability isn't just renewable energy and recycling. It's also finding innovative solutions for tackling one of our city's persistent issues, food deserts. We are already taking a step toward this, as the Board of Directors and I allocated \$1 million in ARPA funds to this issue last year.

Since then, I have asked Vice Mayor Kathy Webb to lead our new Food Deserts Task Force to help us identify ways to target food insecurity and eliminate food deserts once and for all. This work is underway and I look forward to the recommendations later this year.

It's no coincidence that Little Rock's food deserts are in areas of our city that are some of the most impoverished. This is why we continue to focus on these areas - south of 630 and east of 30 - for reinvestment and redevelopment. We've done this by waiving nearly one million dollars in fees for development in these areas.

We will consider other innovative approaches, from incentives to fee waivers, to spur much needed development, like grocery stores, in those critical areas of our city.

Did you know that from the intersection of 12th and University to the intersection of Kavanaugh and University per capita income increases from 21,000 to 70,000.

I question anyone challenging our targeted community development efforts in Wards 1, 2, 6 and 7 after looking at that data. This is why the work of our Targeted Community Development task force is so important as we strive for the betterment of this great city we call home.

As long as I'm mayor - or as long as our friends continue to face inherent and systemic disadvantages - we will enact policies and programs that strive for equity across our city.

Last year, I announced a goal to develop 100 new affordable housing units by 2025, and we are on track to surpass our goal! It's important that we keep housing affordable for working class people.

We are moving forward with efforts to increase infill by prioritizing development of vacant and underused land, because we know that blight both decreases property value and increases crime in our neighborhoods. And we will ensure that this development is done in a way that we ALL can participate in this growth TOGETHER.

We owe it to our residents, like Ms. Pamela Carter and Mr. Royce Pace, tenants at Big Country Chateau, to ensure housing in our city is habitable. In fact, after my call for an emergency plan, our Housing staff has sheltered over 40 residents from that complex to date. This is growing forward TOGETHER.

Today we kicked off Project Impact 2.0, In conjunction with Fab 44, the City's day labor program. Project IMPACT has targeted over a dozen neighborhoods since June with at least 30 more scheduled for 2023, all while providing legitimate, honest work for residents who need it most.

Together has always been the motto for our “grow your own” economic efforts. Our small businesses are the soul of our city, and we support that entrepreneurial spirit in Little Rock. This week, we will kick off our third cohort of BUILD Academy, our very own small business development incubator. We’re now in the second year of Emprende, a pathway of the City’s BUILD Academy, which offers Little Rock’s Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs a series of free classes to support their businesses. We are proud to announce Emprende will graduate 38 small business owners THIS WEEK!

This intentional working TOGETHER can have life-changing results for these businesses, their families, and our city... like the owners of a local Honduran restaurant who were able to open their brick and mortar with the help of Emprende.

THIS is equity at work.

And we want more of this in Little Rock. This is why I’ve asked our office of diversity equity and inclusion to host our FIRST Economic Opportunity Summit later this summer.

I solicit partners near and far to invest in the growth of Little Rock TOGETHER with us.

Whether you are supporting our targeted community development efforts like Central Arkansas Water and Little Rock Water Reclamation Authority

or

Investing into small business development like our friends at Garver,

we need your help. And we welcome public private partnership to grow our city forward TOGETHER.

Equity is and has been more than just a buzzword in my administration.

That's because it's impossible for us to get very far if certain brothers and sisters are too far behind to grow forward with us.

Since the pandemic so plainly showed us the digital divide in Little Rock, we have focused on ensuring every resident has equitable access to broadband. Eligible households can now receive \$30 a month to pay for wifi.

We intend to make sure at least 20,000 households have enrolled in this federally funded program this year. And we will pursue funding this year for a public wifi pilot program in neighborhoods that need it most.

We will also continue our work providing wi-fi hotspots at parks and community centers and offer digital literacy training for parents who need it.

We cannot grow forward without intentional efforts to uplift and support our youth. Our partnership with LRSD in this community schools model continues to be a win-win for both the city and the district.

I had the opportunity last fall to highlight our community schools to an international audience as part of the Clinton Global Initiative. I told them what you already know - the model works.

This is why we will expand our community school sites over the next three years.

We know our investment will lead to stronger and safer students, families and communities.

If we want to grow forward, our children need equitable access to education; and that involves a cradle-to-career commitment to our students. This year, I will convene school district leadership, financial institutions, and savings experts to establish a 529 college savings program for Little Rock School District students and revisit plans for a Little Rock Promise scholarship.

But let's not stop there when it comes to preparing our students for better tomorrows.

Let's make sure every child in Little Rock has access to books early and is reading at grade level by the third grade. Data shows that many children are already behind when they start school. This is why I am committed to working with LRSD to increase availability and quality of infant and toddler care. But we cannot do this alone. I am calling on my colleagues on the Board along with our philanthropic community to help us make a historic investment into early childhood education that will pay dividends for our city for years to come.

Students should also be equipped to make sound financial decisions, and we are calling on our partners at LRSD to develop a district-wide financial literacy program for ninth graders, to prepare them for life beyond high school.

To truly transform our city, we must make bold and courageous investments in our most precious assets. And we must do it TOGETHER.

Over the past year, we've invested more than \$2 million in community violence intervention programs that will keep youth engaged, involved and off the streets. These proven successful programs are just one piece of our holistic and comprehensive approach to violence reduction. I'm proud to tell you today that our public safety plan is working.

This time last year, we were at a crossroads. With the support of the City Board, I declared a public health emergency because of the uptick in violence, and we used every tool and every dollar at our disposal to change the trajectory of our city.

Our intense efforts reaped positive results.

Our most recent data shows that overall crime is down by 7 percent compared to the previous year and violent crime is down nearly 13 percent!

Nevertheless, we are not satisfied; we grow forward by maintaining an even stronger resolve to protect our families and prevent crime.

Our next step in that effort is to create a permanent Public Safety Commission, per our HOPE Council's recommendation, to assist our work in reducing crime by addressing root causes. We will be presenting an ordinance to form this commission in the coming months.

We know that giving young people something to do keeps them out of trouble. Accordingly, later this year we will pilot our first HOPE Center in one of our targeted neighborhoods.

We will continue our successful Midnight basketball program during the summer, and we will call on many of you to help us continue to expand our summer youth employment opportunity by signing up as job sites.

We will also hire additional social workers to address mental and behavioral health issues while officers focus on criminal matters.

TOGETHER, we can continue to reduce crime in our city.

We also address crime in the short term by leveraging innovative technology and

expanding our Real Time Crime Center.

Our real time crime center is state-of-the-art technology consisting of a network of cameras across the city, allowing LRPD to respond to crime as it happens, improving our efficiency and crime-fighting ability exponentially.

I am excited to share our new initiative “Connect LR,” a partnership and platform enabling people and businesses in Little Rock to voluntarily register their cameras to give LRPD additional eyes on the streets. We have set an initial goal of 4000 cameras by the end of this year, and we need your help, Little Rock, to reach it.

We will explore every technology from robots to drones to increase safety for residents and officers alike.

With our continued investment in the Little Rock Police Department, it's better equipped than it's ever been, and it's the highest-paid municipal police force in the State of Arkansas. We have funded the purchase of more than 100 new police cars, and we remain committed to filling vacancies and supporting our public servants in the police department, fire department, and emergency communications as we grow forward together.

Not only are we improving our services externally, we are reforming how we operate internally.

It's past time to change the definition of “bureaucracy” to something other than “City Hall.”

I have challenged our department directors to be transformational leaders in their jobs as

they become better stewards of their respective departments. And together, we will continue the work to unite, grow and transform our city.

We are transformational in how we address the plight of the homeless. With our micro home village, we are meeting the needs of our unsheltered community with the compassion they need and deserve.

This year, we will onboard staff responsible for our efforts toward “functional zero” homelessness by 2030.

We are transformational as we seek to reimagine the amenities that contribute to our quality of life and place. Our residents demand green spaces, arts, culture and experiences they can’t get anywhere else.

This past weekend, thousands of visitors descended upon our city for the Little Rock Marathon, spending upwards of \$1.5 million doing so.

We are grateful for the Marathon staff and the countless workers and volunteers that make this event a success for our city each year.

We have so many reasons to be proud of Little Rock, and we have so much more work to do.

I’m convinced the people of Little Rock want progress, and that they know it often comes with a price tag. It’s up to us to convince them that this City is worth the investment. I’m certain that it is, and I know members of the board agree, too.

When we move beyond politics and personalities, we all share a love of Little Rock. No

matter who you are, or where you live, from Pettaway to Pleasant Valley, Chenal to College Station, and Southwest to the Heights, we take pride in Little Rock and want the best for our city.

As Mayor of this growing, thriving City, I'm humbled by the opportunity to serve as Little Rock's CEO, and to work alongside a dynamic Board of Directors and 2,500 outstanding city employees.

Tonight I've put forward a vision that is achievable and within our reach. I can't do it alone, and neither can you. It takes every single one of us to move us forward. We can accomplish nothing unless we work as a team, together.

It's only when we unite with a common vision and purpose that we can grow forward.

Together.

Little Rock, let's do it.

I appreciate you.

God bless you all and God bless the City of Little Rock.