

2020 State of the City Address

All of us in Dayton have a story of how we heard about the shooting on August 4th. Some saw the terrible news as they awoke to Sunday morning's news or social media post. Others received frantic texts from friends and family members checking on their safety. Some heard the sounds of gunshots down the street.

Several moments are seared into my memory from last year, and I suspect that is true for many of us. The eerie silence following the roar of tornadoes. The rising anger at strangers coming to our city to try to inflict hatred and fear. The sickening news that senseless violence had taken another young person too soon.

There were these tragic memories, but there were also moments of incredible beauty. Strangers hugging one another on Fifth Street. A young family showing up at a fire station with pallets of water. Hundreds of people standing in the cold to pay respects to a fallen hero.

With one crisis after another, 2019 was certainly the most challenging year I have faced as your Mayor.

But Dayton has always risen to the challenge posed by crisis. And last year was not the first time tragedy has threatened to destroy our community.

During Easter weekend in March 1913, the already-saturated levies holding back the swollen Great Miami River finally gave way. The confluence of rivers that first drew native people and European settlers to Dayton now threatened its very existence.

Parts of the city were under twenty feet of water. More water flowed through the river channel in a few days in Dayton as flows over Niagara Falls in a month.

As the water crested, a massive gas explosion at the corner of 5th and Wilkinson started a fire that consumed an entire city block. More fires started throughout the city from broken gas lines.

In 1913, Dayton was brought to the brink of destruction. And today, our city is flooded once again. Our whole country is. White supremacy. Gun violence. Economic inequality.

But in Dayton, we don't run away from our problems.

When the news broke last spring that a Ku Klux Klan-affiliated group planned to rally in downtown Dayton, many people felt anger and pain that such an overt display of hate could show up on our doorstep.

But Daytonians would not let hate win. The Dayton United Against Hate campaign sprung up, giving people the opportunity to share our city's values: respect, diversity,

2020 State of the City Address

and inclusion. People organized events in peaceful opposition with attendance far greater than at the hate rally.

The day passed without incident. Not a single arrest or citation, despite significant tension downtown. As the New York Times reported the next day, "Hate comes to Dayton, and Dayton unites against it."

This racist group was from out of town, but their presence required us to reckon with problems that are distinctly our own. Dayton is still too segregated and too unequal. African Americans have been systematically denied access to the same opportunities as white people, here in Dayton and around our entire country.

And although the hate group's rally was deeply painful, it requires all of us to look at how systemic racism continues to play out in our community. Especially people like me that do not face racial discrimination in our own lives.

I will not claim that we have solved these problems, or that we even know how to. But I am encouraged by the many people in all corners of our city that are keeping this conversation alive even past the immediate crisis of the hate rally. We have much more work to do to make sure Dayton is more equitable for all of our residents - and I am committed to doing that work.

Just two days after the hate group left town, a different kind of crisis swept in. A series of tornadoes ripped through the region, leaving a trail of destruction in Dayton and surrounding communities.

Even before the sun came up, Daytonians got to work taking care of their neighbors. The Dayton Fire Department visited 5,600 properties for search and rescue operations. Given the level of destruction, it is incredible that there were so few injuries and no direct loss of life.

Once again, Dayton stood together. Churches and nonprofits were overwhelmed with the amount of food, water, and clothing donations. Businesses like Tanks Bar and Grill, forced to close with the water outage, shifted to making peanut butter sandwiches for victims and first responders instead. Fewer people checked into shelters than expected, likely because friends and family took in those displaced by the storm.

And relief efforts only grew as time went on. Groups like the Living City Project organized massive clean ups - with over 3,000 people volunteering on a single day. Businesses like Heart Mercantile used their large social media followings to share information about where help was most needed. Dozens of nonprofit organizations and faith groups stepped in to help connect people with temporary housing.

2020 State of the City Address

What amazed me most about Dayton's response to the tornadoes was that no one was directing any of this. Daytonians didn't wait to be told what to do, or how they should help. They just helped.

That's what makes our community great. No one in Dayton looks for permission to help a neighbor in need.

This was especially true in the Oregon District. Throughout the summer, people and businesses in the District helped stand up against hatred and clean up from the tornadoes.

The Oregon District is the heart of our community. No matter what neighborhood you live in, the Oregon District is still your place.

We may not all spend time in the same establishments, but you can be sure you'll bump into Daytonians from all walks of life on Fifth Street.

That is why the attack was particularly cruel. The Oregon District is our place. And in an instant, it felt like it had been ripped away from us.

But then just hours after the shooting, somehow the Oregon District was ours again. Thousands of people packed Fifth Street to hold onto their friends and neighbors. We prayed together for those we had lost and the countless people grieving them. We hugged neighbors and friends and strangers. We sang. We demanded that this never be allowed to happen again.

I looked at all of the faces in the crowd from the stage, and what I saw made me stronger. In your faces I saw terrible sorrow, but I also saw incredible resolve.

Something unthinkable had happened – to all of us – but we were not going to let that make us afraid.

In the days after the shooting, the Oregon District was once again transformed by the small acts of kindness that popped-up everywhere. Homemade memorials in front of Ned Peppers. Musicians wherever they could find sidewalk space. Small notes with words of encouragement on shop windows.

And then just a few weeks later, tens of thousands of people came out to support the victims and their families at Gem City Shine.

But our tragic August was not quite over. Within two days of each other, two pairs of young lives were stolen, rocking a community already overwhelmed with grief.

Then in early November, the Dayton Police Department, which had protected our community through so many of these earlier tragedies, was shocked by the loss of one of their own, Detective Jorge Del Rio.

Yet even in his death, Detective Del Rio managed to showcase the best of our community. He donated his organs, something he encouraged others to do as well. His colleagues remembered him for his kindness and his bravery, noting that he had a plaque on his desk that read: "courage: being scared to death but saddling up anyway."

Our community has responded to all of the events of last year with so much courage, grit, and resiliency. It has been simply amazing to see so much beauty from our response.

Dayton has done what Dayton does best – we took care of each other.

Although the tragic events of 2019 are behind us, their effects are sure to linger for a long time. Neighborhoods struck by the tornadoes have slowly begun to recover. But the physical scars left by the storms are still apparent, and many families have not been able to return to their homes. Some businesses are still working to reopen after catastrophic damages.

The scars of many of the other tragedies of last year are harder to see. I've met people who were in the District that night who have a newfound fear of crowds or dread the sound of sirens. I've met a mother whose child panics at the sign of an approaching thunderstorm. I've talked to first responders who describe being weighed down by witnessing so much violence and pain up close.

All of this is normal. It is okay not to be okay. As a community, we have a great deal of healing to do.

Rebuilding our city physically and emotionally will take a long time, but this year I want us to intentionally focus on how we heal together. Last week, representatives from a variety of organizations focused on healing and recovery from 2019's tragic events gathered to discuss how we can heal, serve, and connect as a community.

In the next few weeks, we will be rolling out Dayton Stronger, a new campaign that will celebrate and build upon our community's resiliency. A key part of this will be a website, DaytonStronger.org, which will aggregate many existing resources like [DaytonHeals](http://DaytonHeals.org) or [MVStrong](http://MVStrong.org) into a single platform. I am so excited that leaders from many of the communities and organizations impacted by last year's events – many of whom are here today - have agreed to rally around the Dayton Stronger campaign.

As a community, we must acknowledge the real mental health impacts of witnessing so many traumatic events. I am grateful for the leadership of Public Health – Dayton and Montgomery County and Montgomery County ADAMHS in raising awareness about trauma and the availability of mental health resources through the DaytonHeals.org website.

2020 State of the City Address

If you are hurting, or just feel like something is still off, please check out their list of resources to see if something seems right for you.

We must also acknowledge that gun violence is far too normal of an occurrence in our city.

A month before the Oregon District shooting, a 45-year-old woman was killed by her partner in front of dozens of people in a dollar store parking lot.

A few weeks later a 24-year-old man was shot to death one Tuesday evening on a neighborhood street after an argument escalated.

Both of these incidents barely made the news.

Gun violence has become too routine in too much of our city. And just as much as the high-profile tragic events of last year, regular gun violence causes widespread trauma and pain.

Our approaches to dealing with it do not seem to be yielding the results we would like. So last year, we piloted a program focused on using a public health approach to reduce gun violence. Early results are encouraging, and we are hoping to spread this model into more neighborhoods this year.

We know that gun violence also occurs because it is too easy for guns to get in the wrong hands. And Daytonians made loud and clear that this has to change.

When Gov. Mike DeWine took the stage at the vigil hours after the Oregon District shooting, hundreds of people shouted in frustration, "Do something."

Do something.

Since that night, I have been doing everything in my power to compel legislators in Columbus and Washington to heed your call.

I have joined other mayors from around the country to call for common sense gun legislation.

I told Dayton's story during testimony in front of the House Judiciary Committee on assault weapons.

I have taken absolutely every opportunity I can to make sure that our national lawmakers cannot forget what happened in Dayton.

2020 State of the City Address

I'm happy to be working with Gov. DeWine and a bipartisan group of mayors and legislators to pass gun safety reforms in Ohio. The bill is not perfect, and I know that it does not go far enough to end gun violence in our communities. But this is an important first step.

And if the legislature refuses to act – if the legislature refuses to do the right thing – then we will take the issue directly to voters.

As last year's high-profile events stole away much attention, work continued on reinvesting in our city's neighborhoods and residents.

4-year-olds enrolled in Preschool Promise continued to show significant gains in their Kindergarten readiness. Evidence shows regular attendance is critical for learning, but some families struggle to get their children to Preschool every day.

Dayton is one of nine cities participating in a national initiative called What Works Cities, in its program focused on increasing economic mobility. City staff have been working closely with Preschool Promise to develop and test new approaches that could help increase attendance at Preschool.

Being a City of Learners is much broader than what happens in a classroom. Through the What Works Cities program and our partnerships with Preschool Promise and Learn to Earn Dayton, we are working on other, creative ways that we can bring learning out into our city streets. Some of these are small but impactful. Very young children learn by playing. We are exploring how we can make everyday locations like bus stops and grocery stores places that children can learn.

Everyone in Dayton deserves to live in a safe, affordable, well-maintained neighborhood. But years of population loss, private disinvestment, predatory lending and government-sanctioned discrimination have left too many of our neighborhoods in poor condition.

Too many houses and commercial buildings sit empty, slowly being reclaimed by nature. People are stuck in homes they cannot afford to fix when the gutter falls off, neighbored by properties that predatory out-of-town landlords allow to fall into disrepair.

This will sound familiar to many people in our city. It will sound like their neighborhood. It sounds like my neighborhood.

People are angry that the neighborhoods they love have been allowed to fall into this condition. They should be angry.

And understandably, many people looked to the City for what could be done about it. But rapidly shrinking budgets meant we had to focus on rebuilding downtown – our job

2020 State of the City Address

center – in order to be able to provide even basic city services. The large majority of Dayton's budget is funded by income taxes generated downtown and seventy-five cents out of every dollar goes back into neighborhood services.

Thankfully, our budgets have stabilized as jobs have started to move back into the city. Market momentum has finally taken on a life of its own downtown. It is sure to accelerate as big projects like the Dayton Arcade finally come to life.

We are now in a position to give our neighborhoods the level of care and attention they need and they deserve.

The Eviction Task Force I convened in 2019 will play an important role in this.

I have been so impressed by the candor and willingness of the members of the eviction task force to get something done to protect tenants and responsible landlords and to improve the conditions of our neighborhoods. The task force is meeting again next week, and I believe we will have initial recommendations to share very soon.

And there are other important efforts to develop new strategies around neighborhoods and housing.

Several weeks ago, leaders from the City, Citywide Development, the County Land Bank, and County Treasurer Russ Joseph participated in for an intensive program on collaboration. They worked together to develop a strategy for reducing vacant, abandoned, obsolete, and poorly maintained properties in the city.

Their strategy includes gathering and analyzing data to gain a much deeper understanding of market dynamics in our neighborhoods. A much larger group of neighborhood leaders, advocates, and housing and community development experts will work alongside the original team to vet this data and make recommendations about how to move forward.

Making sure we have sufficient resources from the federal government is going to be key to truly address our neighborhoods' conditions. The Census, which occurs every ten years, is critical in determining how much federal money comes into our community.

To make sure all Daytonians are counted, we have convened a Complete Count Committee and are working with community partners to encourage everyone to fill out the 2020 Census by April 1st. This unique partnership will help to secure billions of dollars for our community and serves as an excellent example of Dayton's collaborative spirit.

You'll notice that none of these efforts regarding our neighborhoods involve the City alone. This problem is far too large, far too complex, and far too important for us to solve on our own.

2020 State of the City Address

This is not one organization's problem – it is a problem for all of us. And the only way we are going to get something done is by working side-by-side with neighborhood leaders, housing providers, businesses, landlords, and community organizations to find a solution.

But if I've learned one thing this last year, it's that the people of Dayton can do amazing things if we do them together.

We broke ground on a community-owned grocery store in a part of town starved for fresh food and new investment.

We started to bring life back to a grand old building that had sat empty for nearly thirty years.

We reduced opioid deaths by more than half last year – and kept them down.

We refused to be divided by a hate group that wanted to make our community cower in fear.

We took care of neighbors and strangers whose lives were ripped apart in the storm.

We held one another close as we mourned lives cut short by violence and demanded that no other city should have to go through what we had.

We made it through last year stronger – together.

In cities like Dayton, it is easy to focus on what was and what we don't have. Easy to be held back by our past.

But we don't have time to focus on what is behind us, or where we should place the blame for our current situations. Instead, we have to do the real – and hard – work of figuring out where we go from here.

In times like these, doing something hard is an act of hope. After this year we've had in Dayton, it is easy to want to retreat, or to fail to keep our promises. But that simply isn't an option for us.

As the water rose into their homes during the 1913 flood, Daytonians had nowhere to go but their attics. They sat in the dark, praying for deliverance and promising to do everything they could to rebuild their city and ensure such a catastrophe would never happen again.

2020 State of the City Address

When it was finally safe to go outside, they were surely stunned by the destruction. Hundreds of people had died and 65,000 had lost their homes. The streets were littered with mud and debris. Houses had been lifted off their foundations and flipped over by the current. And to make matters worse, they had no way to know if another flood was just a rainstorm away.

Frankly, you wouldn't have blamed them for just walking away from this city.

But they didn't walk away. That's not what we do in Dayton.

Instead they undertook a huge campaign to rebuild the city and keep such a flood from ever happening again. Their rallying cry was, "Remember the promises you made in the attic."

Civic leaders, businesses, and everyday Daytonians banded together for their city. They built a massive flood control system that has kept our city safe for over one hundred years. The Miami Conservancy District became the model for the Tennessee Valley Authority and similar systems across the country and around the world.

To raise money to build this new flood control system, they constructed a giant cash register on Courthouse Square to keep track of the donations coming in. On it, they wrote, "For the Love of Dayton."

Instead of shying away from the hard work of fixing the city, Daytonians came together. They kept the promises they made in the attic. They kept the promises they made in a crisis.

Today, we must do the same. For the love of Dayton.

We are a resilient city. We came back stronger in 1913 and we will come back stronger in 2020.

It will not be easy. It will not be quick. But together, we can keep the promises we made to one another last year.

We can rebuild our city, for those still impacted by the tornadoes.

We can make our city more equitable and inclusive for all of our residents, regardless of their race or neighborhood.

We can come together to stop gun violence in all of its forms.

And we can heal from trauma – seen and unseen.

Dayton, we can do anything – if we do it together.