
STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

State of the City of Bessemer Address 2016

I'd like to start by taking a moment and reflecting on the progress that has taken place in our city over the past year. There are things taking place now which will greatly benefit future generations. A new day has dawned in our city and we all have the privilege of being a part of something very special.

God has truly been good to the city of Bessemer and we thank Him for His continued grace. We know that it is by God's hand that Bessemer is moving into a wonderful future filled great promise and possibilities.

As I look back over the past year, so many awesome things have happened. We've talked about it, debated it and watched it come up from the dust, but I am thrilled to say we are just **months** away from the opening of the city of Bessemer's first-ever Senior and Youth Recreational Facility!

Our youth and seniors have never had a place in Bessemer to engage in physical and social activities. We envision this facility being a place where our young men and women can participate in various athletic activities, or a place where our seniors can come and exercise and

socialize during the day. It will be a place where our citizens can make themselves healthier. Study after study has shown that families move into communities where there are recreation amenities at their disposal. Recreation centers have an ability to bring communities together and give us a sense of unity.

This is what many of our detractors did not understand. But we knew the positive benefits of sowing into a recreation facility and we are now ready to reap the benefits.

We are presently in the process of bringing on board a new director for the facility that will begin hiring staff and planning programs that will fit our community and its needs. We are working now on an opening date for the center, as well as a celebration of this historic event in our city.

In addition, our New City Hall project is on track and is expected to be completed by August. This too is a historic building project in the city of Bessemer and we are just as excited about giving our employees and citizens a building that is truly representative of a new day in Bessemer. By working with our project management team, AG Gaston Construction, and architects Charles Williams and Associates and Carl Exford LLC, we have kept these projects on schedule and within budget.

I could talk all day about these two projects, but that wouldn't leave me much time to discuss all the other great things happening in our city. As many of you have noticed, a new Recycling Center is being built at the corner of First Avenue North and 16th Street. We have partnered with the Alabama Environmental Council to operate the facility and we expect it to open in late spring. This facility will allow us to recycle products such as glass, plastic and cardboard and prolong the life of our landfill, saving future generations millions!

In 2014, the Frank House Municipal Golf Course was devastated by the tornado that hit our city. This past September, we re-opened the Golf Course! We are in the process of hiring a new Golf Pro to manage the facility. In addition, construction has started on a new \$1 million Clubhouse at the Course. This Clubhouse will have an extension which will allow the course to host more tournaments and other events such as wedding receptions, family reunions, class reunions and luncheons. This is a great time in our city!

We have made great strides this year to keep our city finances on the right track. In a time when other cities in our area are struggling because of low tax revenues, our finances remain strong and show positive signs of growth. In order to hire and retain the best and brightest employees, we must continue to invest in them. Last year, we were able to give our employees another 2% cost-of-living adjustment. This raise represents an 11% cost of living adjustment over the past five years. Working with the city council, we were able to give our retirees a long overdue 7% Cost of Living Increase. When we look around at some of our sister cities and the financial struggles they are experiencing, we should feel tremendously blessed.

Because of the tremendous growth of our city, we have had to restructure our finance department. In the past the City Clerk's office managed both the finances and records of the city. Because of great growth in our tax revenues, we have had to hire a Finance Director to manage our finances and make the City Clerk's Office a separate department.

Our new Finance Director is Ms. Kela Pryor. Ms. Pryor has shown great enthusiasm in handling our finance department.

Already the department has established several goals and benchmarks. We know these steps and others will result in better financial management and better accounting of taxpayers' dollars.

Our new City Clerk is a good example of my administration's willingness to give deserving current employees an opportunity for advancement. Last year, Mrs. Wanda Taylor was promoted to City Clerk. Our goal will always be to try and promote deserving candidates from within rather than first looking outside for employees to fill positions. That is a testament to the qualifications of the people we have working right here in the city of Bessemer.

The business climate in the city of Bessemer remains positive and strong. Everywhere we look, we are seeing either expansions or welcoming new businesses and industry into our city.

Expansion projects at Milo's Tea and the former Masonry Arts, now JB Processing, are shining a new light on our city and will serve as a catalyst for business and industry recruitment in the upcoming years. This Mayor and Council approved incentives for several projects which will represent numerous jobs in the city of Bessemer in the coming years. I feel there is no better place for business and industry in this entire state than in Bessemer, Alabama! If you are a business or industry, and you are looking for a place to expand or relocate, you would do yourself a disservice to not at least have Bessemer on your radar.

We are beginning to see new businesses move into downtown. Over the past 18 months, 25 new businesses have secured licenses in our downtown district. This is another sign of great growth in our city.

In addition, we were recently notified by President Obama's Administration that the city of Bessemer has been selected to take part in the 2016 Local Foods, Local Places program. Bessemer is the only city in the state of Alabama, and one of only 27 nationwide selected for this program. Federal agencies, including the EPA and USDA, will partner with the city to draft a plan to incorporate food networks into our revitalization efforts. In addition, we will look at the possibility of bringing a stable Farmer's Market to our city and using current vacant properties in the city for community gardens and urban farming.

As I said, great things are happening in our city.

It angers me when people or organizations create rankings of our city, comparing us with larger areas and perpetrating a myth that Bessemer is not a safe place. Apparently, these websites and social media experts are not doing a good job if their goal is to keep people from visiting Bessemer. Just last year alone, we saw thousands of visitors come to Bessemer for events like the Bob Sykes Blues and BBQ Festival and Jazz in the Park. All these visitors left raving about the atmosphere in our city. Alabama Splash Adventure saw a 30 percent increase in attendance in 2015 and the Koch family has made a commitment to bringing more rides and attractions to the park.

We welcomed the only indoor cart track in our state to our city when the Autobahn Indoor Racing Facility opened off of Morgan Road this past year.

It is really sad when people who have never set foot in our city have the audacity to stereotype us as "unsafe" or dangerous. Crime can happen anywhere and no community is immune. It is unfair to categorize a city as "dangerous" based on numbers which the authors do not understand. We are embarking on a campaign to tell our own story and refute some of these lies. It is time we in Bessemer started telling the world about ourselves rather than allowing those outside our city to define us.

We will continue to be aggressive in our policing thanks to the **Bessemer Police Department**. Nationally, the FBI reports that violent crime was on the increase in 2015. We were not exempted from that nationwide trend. Our homicide total, after years of decrease, rose from just 2 in 2014 to 9 in 2015. Out of the nine crimes, perpetrators of 6 of these crimes have been apprehended and brought to justice. We continue to urge our residents to find peaceful solutions to their problems. One of our major concerns is the crimes that are committed by our youth. One of the goals of our Senior and Youth Recreation Facility is to introduce programs that will encourage our young men and women to find productive outlets for their anger and emotions. It will take a collaborative effort of government, schools, churches, civic, neighborhood groups and individuals to lead some of our at-risk youth away from a lifestyle of crime. But we know that the most important deterrent in a young person's life is a good stable home environment. Overall, we saw a decrease in major crimes such as burglaries and robberies in our city this past year.

The Bessemer Police Department will continue to take the steps necessary to improve its patrol coverage. Last year, 11 new officers were hired in patrol, but we lost some valuable members of the department, some to higher paying municipalities in the area, and also the deaths of Lt. Henry Carter and Lt. Carl Anderson. We have hired new officers since 2011 and plans are to continue to hire additional officers until we reach full capacity. We opened a new substation in the Tannehill Promenade last year to increase coverage to our southwest neighborhoods such as Carriage Hills and Greenwood, in addition to improving visibility at the Promenade.

Our police department will continue to be engaged in the community, especially in light of the recent incidents around the country. We will continue to take the necessary steps to make certain the criminal element feels very unwelcome in our city.

The **Bessemer Fire Department** continues to be one of the finest around. This past year, the department responded to 7,364 emergency calls, including 101 structure fires. This number marks a 15 percent decrease in structure fires in our city. With the record number of fire deaths in our surrounding cities and throughout the state, I must say that the angel of mercy has surrounded our city and **I am glad to report that there were no fire fatalities in the city of Bessemer in 2015.** I believe the reduction in fires and fire fatalities can be traced to the continued efforts of our fire department to educate our citizens. Last year the department personnel provided fire safety education programs to more than 5,000 adults and children. Something that most people are not aware of is that the city of Bessemer receives a Public Protection Classification Rating from an agency called Insurance Services Office. This rating impacts the insurance premiums residents and businesses pay for their personal property. The higher the score, the lower the rates you pay in insurance. In the past, the city of Bessemer had a rating of 4, on a scale of 1 to 10. I am pleased to announce that the city of Bessemer has joined an elite club. Our ISO rating is now a 2, placing us among the top 2% of communities in the country. The city of Montgomery is the only city in the state of Alabama with a Class One distinction and we hope to one day join its ranks.

This year the fire department has introduced a new service for our citizens. This program is called “**EPIC**”, **Emergency Paramedics in the Community.** The EPIC program puts a paramedic in the community, Monday through Friday, to assist our citizens who do not have the resources they need to address their basic medical issues. Last year, EPIC medics made over 400 visits to Bessemer residents and assisted with medication refills, scheduled doctor’s appointments, helped with transportation and various other medical concerns. This is just a small fraction of the great work being done in our fire department. We look forward to more great things in the coming year.

The maintenance of our parks is an area of which I remain very proud. Significant upgrades have been made in Carver Park following the tornado. A new press box has been completed, along with new concession stands, a new pavilion, new lights and a new scoreboard has been installed. We expanded the playground area at the park and resurfaced the walking track. Essentially, Carver Park has been transformed into a brand new park. Hard Park was renamed Southside Community Park and dedicated to Sarah Wallace Belcher. A new walking track was constructed; handicapped accessible sidewalks were installed as well as new lighting for the baseball field at Southside Community Park. Great things are happening in our parks and we are committed to continue to invest in them. We upgraded the lighting at the baseball field at Abrams Park, we purchased Enoch Brown Park on 21st Street, and this year, we will see the construction of new pavilions at McNeil Park in the Pipe Shop community.

Our **Building and Inspections Department** was very busy last year. The department issued building permits at approximately \$50 million for commercial projects last year and \$6 million for residential projects. Among the major commercial projects is the new \$35 million JB Processing facility, a new Children’s Hospital Pediatric Clinic and the new America’s First Credit Union building on 10th Street. Valor Properties is currently building homes in the Cedar Creek Subdivision and we are optimistic that they will continue their efforts to build even more residential homes in the city of Bessemer. Also, Keam LLC has begun Phase One of a three-phase development, building new homes in the Greenwood community of Bessemer. Not only are we experiencing tremendous commercial growth, but residential growth as well.

We remain committed to tearing down dilapidated structures in our city. This past year we demolished approximately 62 condemned structures, representing over 200 structures demolished over the past three years. In this year’s budget we earmarked a quarter of a million dollars to continue to attack and eliminate blight in our city.

Our **Public Improvement Department** consistently rises to the challenge before them of keeping our city clean. Each year we purchase new garbage and refuse trucks to update the aging fleet in the street department. As a result, our city is cleaner today. But, keeping our city clean is not something that the street department can do alone. We appeal to you to work with us in your communities to help keep our city clean. Last year our litter crews picked up 25,000 bags of trash. This past year we removed 13,500 tons of garbage and approximately 102,000 cubic yards of trash from our streets and neighborhoods.

The department worked on a pilot program to “precision cut” sidewalks on six city blocks to eliminate trip hazards. In addition, 5,000 square feet of sidewalk or concrete surfaces were repaired or replaced this past year.

We have completed the synchronization of the street lights on 18th and 19th streets and made all intersections handicapped accessible. As a result of a \$7.5 million grant that this administration was able to secure through the state ATRIP program, this year, we will begin bridge replacements, resurfacing 4th Avenue to McAdory School Road, McCalla Road and Dartmouth Avenue from 14th Street to the Lipscomb City Limits.

With input from the city council, last year we completed a \$1.3 million resurfacing project and we are committed to continue resurfacing in our communities.

Our **Fleet Maintenance Department**, under the newly appointed

superintendent, William Herron, Jr. is preparing for the changing times. Mr. Herron please stand.

In an effort to keep up with the changing technology, fleet maintenance has purchased and installed new software to assist in identifying problem with vehicles, thereby repairing and returning to designated departments in a timelier manner. We are sending mechanic technicians to workshops and training classes to be able to repair and maintain the more modern vehicles.

As promised, I spent substantial time at **Bessemer Utilities** last year assessing the total operation. We have streamlined customer service, eliminating payments from services other than Bessemer Utilities so that we can better serve our own customers. As a result of the new phone system that was previously installed, we have tremendously eliminated the long wait time and we have experienced fewer complaints. Also, in an effort to bring Bessemer Utilities into the 21st century, we have instituted a new automated pay by phone service for our customers' convenience. All this is in an effort to eliminate your wait.

Bessemer Utilities in 2015 saw the completion of several major projects. It finished the Brighton project, a 60/40 matching grant with Jefferson County that replaced approximately 5 miles of pipe and service in that area; New and more accurate meters have been installed throughout the system. We replaced approximately 8000 feet of pipe in the Bessemer area, finished the renovation of the Holbrook water tank and the Lipscomb tank at a cost of 1.2 million dollar. The Lipscomb tank had been out of service for approximately 15 years. All of these repairs and upgrades will make our water system more efficient in the coming years.

In our continued efforts to bring our **Bessemer Civic Center** into the 21st century, in the past five years we have painted the facility throughout; replaced the flooring; installed a new sound system; completed a \$45,000 landscaping and irrigation project. Last year we hired a new Civic Center Director, Mr. Terry Dawson, and we are already beginning to reap the benefits. Utilization of our Main Hall has increased 20 percent over the previous year for events such as stage plays and cultural events. Our director is working with the Alabama Conventions and Visitors Bureau to promote the Civic Center as one of the preferred locations for conventions and events in this state.

Our **Economic and Community Development Department** has been instrumental in assisting the elderly and disabled in our community. Over \$100,000 in grants was spent for repairs on 26 houses under the emergency grant program, and almost \$250,000 was provided for housing rehabilitation loans. Community and Economic Development also assisted in the clearing of dilapidated structures, the building of our new recycling center, as well as helped to fund our Camp Bessemer program. Last year, they partnered with Habitat for Humanity in an effort to help repurpose some of the empty lots that are left from the demolition of abandoned properties. We will continue efforts in Community and Economic Development to find creative ways to assist the citizens in our area.

Our **Information Technology Department** has been at the forefront of great innovation in the city. Some of you may have noticed the new digital signage displays in several of our public buildings, such as the Bessemer Library, City Hall and the Civic Center. Our IT Department worked diligently in giving us that communication platform by which we can keep you the public informed.

In 2015, the department spear-headed the upgrade of the city-wide area fiber network which allowed for public Wi-Fi access in all buildings. It also worked with Bessemer Utilities to replace an antiquated telephone system that dropped customer calls, upgraded the online payment portal and added a pay-by-telephone service. We also started a new Bessemer Citizen Notification System which I encourage everyone here to sign up for by visiting the city's website.

This upcoming year the department will continue to work to upgrade our financial systems, the phone system for the new City Hall and Youth and Recreation facility and improve our document management system.

Our **Municipal Court** is striving to accommodate the growth of our city. It has maintained partnerships with community, church and civic organizations such as the Dannon Project, the UAB Fatherhood Initiative, Shady Grove Baptist Church and Grace Cove, to quell conflicts and help relieve addictions. Municipal Court instituted an online defensive driving school to better service out of town traffic offenders; instituted a Genesis Mentoring Program for our male youth and in 2016 will strive to create a positive and progressive program for our female youth and those who suffer from mental illness.

Take the time out to visit your **Public Library**, one of the finest in Jefferson County. More than 126,000 visitors came through the doors of the Bessemer Public Library this past year. One of the new initiatives of this past year is the addition of HotSpot devices. These devices allow patrons to take them home so that the patron will have internet capability. The program was put into operation in September and there has been great response. The library also partnered with SaveFirst, a free income tax service to the community. I encourage our citizens to take advantage of this service. We will continue to work with and invest in our Bessemer Public Library.

The **Bessemer Airport** is continuously growing. In 2014 the Airport Authority developed a detailed financial model. This model has served as the basis for

quarterly financial reports that have been presented to the mayor and city council throughout 2015. This financial model has also been helpful in developing aircraft recruitment strategies resulting in the relocation of one corporate aircraft from Shelby County Airport, and three corporate aircrafts from Birmingham-Shuttlesworth Airport. I believe that with the successful execution of the Airport's vision, it can become a significant contributor to, and supporter of the economics of the city of Bessemer, Jefferson County and the central Alabama region.

During 2015, the **Bessemer Housing Authority** received a second RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration) approval for a Portfolio Application which will impact Thompson Manor, Hillside and Cobb. The properties will move from Public Housing to HUD Multifamily platforms. The total RAD Portfolio estimated value is \$11,134,000.00. Renovations and construction at Davis Heights and Asbury Howard are progressing on schedule and will be approximately 60% complete by the end of the year. When all RAD conversions are completed the Bessemer Housing Authority Portfolio will be half Public Housing and half HUD Multifamily.

We would like to thank the **Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce** under the new leadership of Ms. LaTasha Cook for its continued efforts in promoting the city of Bessemer. In addition to the many accomplishments that the Chamber experienced in 2015, they were instrumental in promoting the city of Bessemer in the Excursion magazine, which is located in approximately 7,200 hotels rooms throughout the Jefferson County area.

God continues to do remarkable things in our city. We can all be proud that through working together we are doing historic things here in the city of Bessemer. It is only through continued cooperation of the Mayor, City Council, our department heads and employees, city agencies and most importantly, the public, can we make Bessemer into the Marvel City we all know she truly is.

Thank God and thank all of you.