

To the members of the Bessemer City Council, elected officials, the business community, religious leaders, employees and to all residents of the great Marvel City of Bessemer, Good Evening.

I'd like to start this evening's address, as always, by giving honor to the Almighty God. It is He who has allowed each us to be here this evening.

I'd like to thank Ms. Lassiter for that introduction. Thank you.

I would like to introduce The First Lady of Bessemer and my lovely wife, Mrs. Yvonne Whitely Gulley. Yvonne, would you please stand.

This is my seventh time presenting the State of the City and it never gets old. But I stand here tonight as a man who is truly humbled. I am awed by the gracious favor the Almighty God has bestowed on our city.

This year has truly been a remarkable one for our city. But so were the previous years during this administration. We all have taken part in a remarkable journey. One-hundred years from now, when our city celebrates its 230th anniversary, historians from that era will look back and mark these as some of the most important years in our city's history.

Back in 2010, we all knew Bessemer was at a crossroads.

Our communities and neighborhoods were suffering from neglect and confidence in City Hall was low. There were no organized programs for our elderly, and no city supported recreational programs for our youth.

Sadly, city finances were in bad shape. Our finances were in such disarray that it was difficult to fathom how this great city would operate from day-to-day. Relations between the Mayor's Office and the City Council were at an all-time low, and the residents of this city were suffering because of it.

So in 2010, we all began the long and sometimes difficult journey of changing the course of our city's history.

I joined with each of you, from the City Council to churches to civic organizations and to business interests, to move Bessemer in a new and positive direction.

And working together over the past seven years, we have brought about great change in the Marvel City.

Whether it is roads or infrastructure, economic development, public safety, quality of life or education, there is no area of this city that has been untouched.

And as Coach Nick Saban said the other day, following Alabama's National Championship Parade in Tuscaloosa, "we're not finished yet"!

There is still much work to be done, but working together, we have impacted every area of our city for the better.

There is no one who can honestly say, Bessemer is not better off today, than it was seven years ago.

Over the last seven years we have accomplished great things on many fronts.

When we entered office, our city was millions of dollars in debt. Local vendors would not even take the city's credit. Employee morale was low.

But working together and being good stewards of the public's money, we have taken our city from millions of dollars in the red to an annual budget of almost \$60 million. It's quite a remarkable turnaround and one we should all celebrate.

Being good stewards of the public's money has allowed us to build new municipal facilities, such as our new 6.2 million dollar City Hall, which opened almost one year ago. It is truly a testament to the progress in our city.

You can see it in the eyes of our employees each day they come to work. There is a renewed sense of productivity and excitement about working in offices where the roof doesn't leak and where there

is no mold on the walls. The building itself has made quite the impression on all visitors and gives them a new perspective on the city of Bessemer.

That financial accountability we established has allowed us to invest in our employees. This past year, working with the City Council, we approved a 2 percent cost-of-living increase for all city workers and their families and a one-time bonus for our retirees.

We have been able to update and modernize fleets in police, fire and public works, while bringing our fleet maintenance department online. When we got here many of our garbage and trash trucks were old and outdated. Some were more than 25 years old and it was a chore just to keep them running. But by purchasing new trucks and equipment we have been able to literally keep Bessemer moving by making sure our garbage and trash routes are consistently maintained.

Think about it. Seven years ago I did not even know if we could make payroll when I came into office. But because we made the hard choices at the time and managed our resources wisely, we have been able to give cost-of-living increases to our employees and their families for six of the past eight years and expanded benefits coverage.

Our Finance Department in conjunction with the Information Technology Department and the Mayor's Office, ensures that annual budgets and audits are posted on the city's website which can be found at bessemeral.org. We want to make sure you, the public, know how tax dollars are budgeted and spent.

Because we managed city finances wisely, we were able to protect our investments in our city school system and not rob our students and teachers of the critical supplies they need to learn.

When we entered office, the previous administration and the Board of Education were at odds in the form of a lawsuit over the distribution of property taxes for our children's education. This Mayor and Council settled that \$4 million lawsuit and have made sure monies designated for our schools have been passed along each year to our students and teachers.

Some 37 percent of the school system's \$41 million budget comes from local support. I said it then, and I will say it now, we will not deprive our children of the resources they need to be successful.

The money we have provided has gone into programs such as the 154 courses offered at Bessemer City High School. All students in grades 5 thru 12 participate in the system's Laptop Initiative.

Our schools have made great strides, but we know the system has much work to be done. Our graduation rate is still too low. There are still challenges with discipline and student absences. But I see a growing legion of parents and community leaders, ready and willing to work with our school administration to take the Bessemer City School system to the next level. And to each student and teacher, I want you to know, you have a friend at City Hall!

We have increased funding to the Bessemer Public Library, money it has used to purchase new computers. In 2016, the library started Launch Pads. This initiative has led to the creation of educational gaming stations in the library's youth department, keyboarding and texting classes for seniors, girls coding and a partnership with the Bessemer Housing Authority along with T-Mobile to host distributions of tablets to some of the schools in our area.

The library is partnering with our schools to assist our students and inform them of what is available for free to enhance their studies.

That is what it takes, a community working together and reaching across the aisles to make the lives of all of our residents better.

Because we have managed our finances wisely, we have been able to make great strides in improving the infrastructure in our city.

I am proud to say that in just the last month, we have finally begun the long-awaited projects to resurface Dartmouth Avenue from 14th Street to the Lipscomb City Limits and Fourth Avenue from 18th Street to McAdory School Road.

But that is not all. There is a \$700,000 project to resurface the Academy Drive area scheduled for this year. This project will make the area more attractive for perspective new businesses as well as for those dining in our restaurants, staying in our hotels, or visiting the automobile dealerships in the area.

Working with the Council, we approved a 1.2 million paving project for city streets this year. This paving project is expected to start next month and will improve several of our residential streets. Over the past seven years we have used over three million dollars in our gas tax funds to pave streets across each district and to make our roadways a little easier to travel.

McCalla Road and McAshan Drive are set for resurfacing projects as well to accommodate the industrial and retail growth in our city.

I met a young lady of 80 years of age on Center Street not long ago, who said her street had not been paved since the 70s. But we were able to pave her street recently. And our commitment is to continue to pave our city's residential streets into the future.

In addition, we have secured millions in funding for projects such as traffic signal upgrades in our downtown district and the upcoming Safe Routes to School project, which will build new sidewalks around Abrams, Charles F. Hard and Jonesboro Elementary Schools. This will take our children from walking to and from school in the streets to being able to bike or walk on sidewalks!

For the first time in 100 years we replaced bridges in our city. We secured 80/20 ATRIP grants and the city of Bessemer completed the replacement of bridges on 3rd Avenue and 8th Avenue over Hall's Creek. And work is in progress on replacing a third bridge on 23rd Street over Blue Creek.

In just the past year, our Public Improvement Department has replaced some 8500 square feet of sidewalks in our downtown and neighborhoods. We have been able to make ADA improvements on sidewalks throughout our city.

Bessemer Utilities is currently working on over a ten million dollar project to increase the capacity of our water system to meet the growing demands of Bessemer Water customers. This project will make major upgrades at our water filtration plant, add an additional water tank on 15th Street and upgrade water lines throughout our system.

I could literally stand here most of the night and talk about the infrastructure improvements being made in our city. Because we know good infrastructure benefits not just our residents, but it leads to a better economic environment.

And we have made great strides economically in Bessemer. Because we have invested in ourselves, others have shown a willingness to invest in us.

Over the past several years we have watched companies such as Milo's Tea, Flex-N-Gate and U.S. Pipe expand their operations in our city, offering new opportunities for jobs to our residents. Other companies such as the world-renown Steyr Arms and BLOX have relocated from other cities to Bessemer. BLOX is planning a further expansion of its facility here, which will lead to the creation of some 200 jobs.

American Minerals Three, formerly J.B. Processing, has built a new state-of-the-art facility near downtown and is doing business on a global scale.

Many of you remember that The Birmingham News ran an article sometime back calling Bessemer an "Economic Powerhouse" in this county. And we have worked hard to create a business climate in this city that will draw industry and jobs for our residents.

The Dollar General Distribution Center which opened in late 2011 was just the beginning.

One of the things we wanted to do was connect our residents to the places where the jobs are located. Working with the Birmingham-Jefferson County Transit Authority, we developed a bus route that will touch both the Dollar General facility and the retail rich jobs along Academy Drive and in the Tannehill Promenade off of I-459. We are currently working on revamping all of our routes to better serve our citizens' needs.

In the last two years alone, our Building Department has issued permits for some 50 million dollars in residential and commercial projects in our city. Those projects include the construction of a new Pinnacle Motorsports facility on Academy Way, a new Cheerleading Center on Parkwood Road and a new Planet Fitness.

A strong component of our economic development is the Bessemer Airport. In 2010 we were being asked to sell our airport, but with strong leadership and good decisions we were able to revive it. In just the last year, the Airport reached a milestone with a quarter-million dollars in fuel sales. We believe the Airport can be a strong incentive to economic development in our city. The airport staff and board have secured grant funding to update hangars and build new ones to meet the demand

for aircraft. The coaches of the Southeastern Conference have used it for travel to and from Media Day in Hoover, and many other business leaders fly in and out of our airport because it is so conveniently located.

Most importantly, the airport is marketing itself and working with other agencies such as the city and the Industrial Development Board to push economic development in the city of Bessemer. Our future plans are to provide fire and rescue services at the airport. This will greatly increase our ability to secure more and larger aircrafts at our airport.

Private developers are beginning to see the advantage of building new homes in the city of Bessemer. We are seeing an influx of new homes and subdivisions in our city. Fifteen new homes were built in the Cedar Creek subdivision last year, and over the past five years 97 new homes were built in the Greenwood community with another 27 new homes being readied for construction in that area. As many of you have no doubt heard, there is a planned development of some 140 garden homes which will be located in the city of Bessemer along Eastern Valley Road.

In the past five years we have invested over 2.5 million in equipment in our Public Improvements Department including two new garbage trucks, two new trash trucks and a new street sweeper all in an effort to keep our city clean.

A few years ago we created a litter crew program to address litter in our streets. I know of no other municipality in Jefferson County that hires and pay benefits to individuals just to pick up litter. We continue to ask for your help in deterring litter and dump sites. We need you to help us keep our city clean.

We continue to combat blight. Since 2011, we have demolished some 500 unsightly structures in our city. We have demolished homes in all of our districts and set aside some 1.2 million dollars over the past five years to combat blight, and we will continue to do whatever is necessary to make our city more attractive.

But we are not just tearing down; we are looking at ways to build up. One key is home ownership. This past year Community Development staff hosted programs aimed at homebuyers in our city and formed a collaborative effort with the Consumer Credit Counseling Service to provide credit counseling to applicants. It partnered with local banks to host a Homebuyers workshop.

In another effort for our citizens to be home owners, the Bessemer Housing Authority is instituting a Scattered Site Home Ownership Program. Plans are to start a single family Rehab and New Construction Lease Purchase Ownership Program. This program will include Home ownership Counseling, Wealth Building and Economic empowerment for the buyers. Families will assume ownership in three to five years. My desire for this program is to partner with the Bessemer Housing Authority to repurpose some of the vacant lots for this scattered site home ownership program and provide affordable residential housing for our citizens.

Flooding in the Pipe Shop community continues to be a challenge. We have applied unsuccessfully for several grants. However, we earmarked \$250,000 in the 2018 general fund budget to start our own buyout program and we are in the infancy stages of this program to address flooding in the Pipe Shop Community. We will continue to apply for grants and request \$250,000 yearly in our general fund budget until this situation is alleviated.

Our Storm Water efforts have sought to educate residents at no charge about ways to improve their homes and maintain a safe, clean environment in the city. One such project will be the first Hazardous Waste Day in Bessemer where residents will be able to safely dispose of harmful materials and keep them off our streets and roadways. Recycling also helps to keep our city clean. I would like to encourage our citizens to take advantage of our new constructed recycling center at the corner of 1st Avenue and 16th Street.

I share in our residents' desire for clean, livable neighborhoods. And we're going to continue to hold Public Works and other departments accountable when they are out in the fields. But we need the public's help as well.

Unfortunately, there has been great unrest all over our country when it comes to our men and women in law enforcement. We have invested greatly in the area of public safety. We have all the latest equipment and technology and all of our patrol officers are equipped with body cameras for the safety of them as well as the citizens of Bessemer.

For years, people have unfairly named Bessemer as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. The FBI has constantly warned the public not to buy into rankings from various blogs that do not give an accurate picture of crime in any particular area, as these ratings are too simplistic and can have a negative impact on the perceptions of a city.

I have long agreed with the FBI's assessment, but that does not mean we have not made every effort to make our city safer. For the last seven years, we have funded the hiring of new police officers and staff in the police department, purchased new vehicles and equipment, and worked with the department on launching new initiatives like Neighborhood Watch, where the public and our officers can work together to make our streets safer.

The results of these efforts have been a declining crime rate in our city. In the five year period from 2007 to 2011, there were a total of 62 homicides reported in the city of Bessemer. That is an average of 12 a year. But in the six years between 2012 and 2017, there has been a 40 percent drop in the city's homicide rate compared to those previous five years. Those are facts.

We still look forward to the day when men and women will find better ways of solving their problems than taking the life of their fellow man. To that end, we continue to ask churches and civic organizations to work with us to explore ways to educate our residents on problem-solving and conflict resolution.

In 2017, there was a 16 percent drop in burglaries and an 18 percent drop in robberies in our city. So we are making strides to make Bessemer safer. Currently, we have more police officers fighting crime in the city of Bessemer than in any other time in Bessemer's history.

This year we named a new Police Chief, Mike Roper. Chief Roper has 27 years of law enforcement experience, all here in the city of Bessemer. He has seen it all and is able to pass along that experience to many of the new, enthusiastic officers that join our department. What I am most excited about is Chief Roper's instructions to officers to treat all of our residents respectfully and fairly. We must continue to build the trust between the Bessemer Police Department and our residents.

Our future plans are to focus more on crime prevention and upgrades to Public Safety facilities. Our plan is to secure funds for a new Bessemer City Jail and Municipal Court Building.

Last year the department launched a new initiative aimed at working with troubled youth in our city. The Marvel City Youth Program is a program that has worked with 50 at-risk youth in our city to address juvenile delinquency issues and to get them out of the justice system and set them on a course for a better life. The program plans to work with an additional 40 youth in the upcoming year.

These are the type of programs, along with Neighborhood Watch and Crime Prevention strategies, that have proven successful in other communities and our police department is bringing that same prevention mindset to Bessemer. We will continue to work to make Bessemer a safer community.

We continue to invest in our Bessemer Fire Department. Over the past seven years we have purchased two new Pumper Trucks at a cost of almost one million dollars. We have also renovated all of the fire stations in the City of Bessemer.

In addition, our Fire Department has reached milestones that other cities in our county can only envy. The Bessemer Fire Department is one of only 200 nationwide and one of handful of departments in this state to have attained a Class 1 ISO rating. The Class 1 rating is so important because it will save homeowners and businesses in the city of Bessemer on insurance costs. When businesses and industry recognize our fire department as one of the best in the Southeast, it serves as an incentive to locate within our city.

The City of Bessemer experienced a reduction in total fires from 361 in 2016 to 261 in 2017 and I am proud to report that we experienced no fire related fatalities in our city in 2017.

There has been a reduction in the total number of emergency responses for the City of Bessemer. This reduction can be directly attributed to the Emergency Paramedic In Community Program, better known as the EPIC program. The EPIC program identifies and fills a void in our response and care execution by pre-emptive intervention within the community. Individuals who are placed in the EPIC program receives all types of assistance from procuring funds for ramps, calling in medications, liaisons with physicians and pharmacists, to scheduled welfare visits. This has improved the well-being of some of our most vulnerable citizens and has been and is still well received. The program will now be staffed permanently as a staff position.

This year we appointed a new Fire Chief, Mr. Randall McFarland, Jr. Chief McFarland is a 22 year veteran has begun the task of maintaining the excellent work done by the fire department and expanding on recruitment and programs to retain some of the best firefighters to continue working in our city for years to come.

I have longed believed that residents of Bessemer deserve the same amenities offered to residents of other cities. That was the reason we built a \$15 million Recreational Facility at Roosevelt Park.

There were many who said such a facility would never happen in Bessemer. But all you need do is ride down Highway 150 and THERE IT IS. This state of the art facility is a treasure to our city and will be so for many years to come. It is a place where our youth and seniors can take part in structured programs and all of our residents can work to better their health. I met a young lady recently from a neighboring city who said she wishes her city had a Recreation Center like Bessemer's. She then joined our Recreation Center.

In fact, we have some 8,000 members at our Recreation Center, including 1800 seniors and 2700 youth.

Isn't God good?

Just this past month, the Recreation Center staff has agreed to take part in Scale Back Alabama, a state-wide weight-loss program designed to encourage Alabamians to get healthy and fight obesity.

This past year the Recreation Center hosted its first Movie Night in the Park at the Amphitheater. It hosted two health fairs in partnership with local health providers such as UAB West Hospital and Cahaba Medical Center. The center also hosted a monthly Walk with the Mayor. There are affordable swimming classes for our youth and seniors. In April of this year we plan to host the first 5K Run in downtown Bessemer. How many of you could have dreamed that we would have accomplished so much just seven short years ago? But we have.

Working together we have rebuilt the Frank House Municipal Golf Course that was destroyed during the tornado of 2014. The Golf Course is no doubt the most affordable Golf Course in the entire metropolitan area. There were almost 16,000 rounds of golf played at the Course this past year! That is a staggering amount. About 40 percent of the golfers who go to Frank House are seniors living right here in Bessemer and surrounding areas. The Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce and Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. held their golf tournaments at Frank House Golf Course last year.

Working with the City Council we took insurance money and secured another half million to build a new banquet facility at the Golf Course. This facility has hosted functions ranging from bridal showers, weddings, receptions and birthday parties.

We've invested in all of our parks.

New pavilions have been built at McNeil and Southside Community Parks. We've totally redeveloped Carver Park which was destroyed by the storm in 2014. We've placed new playground equipment at Abrams Park. And this year we plan to install new playground equipment and a new fence at Enoch Brown Park on Southside. We constructed a new walking track, the Sarah Wallace Belcher Walking Track at Southside Park. All of our walking tracks have been resurfaced.

Within the past two weeks, the Parks and Recreation staff and my office have been in communications with the Freshwater Land Trust on an initiative in which our walking tracks and the upcoming walking trail will take part in the Parks Prescription Initiative. This initiative is one where doctors prescribe outdoor activities to patients.

We reinstituted the city's Beautification Board and it worked with the Parks Department to plant trees at McNeil Park and plant new flowers and shrubs at both Debardeleben Park and Bradford Park in the heart of our city.

As we know Debardeleben Park hosts several events that draw visitors from all over the state and southeast to our city, including the Bob Sykes Blues and Barbecue Festival and the Jazz in the Park Concert Series.

This is what real change looks like. All you have to do is look around to see the progress in our city.

We began work this past year on the city's first Rail-Trail along Highway 150. The vision is to bring this trail into downtown Bessemer and link it by a pedestrian bridge across Highway 150 to the Bessemer Recreation Center. We are finishing the first phase of the project between Fairfax Avenue and Berkley Avenue which includes lighting, a paved surface, picnic tables and benches. The second phase of this project will start later this year and we have already secured federal funding for the second phase-in the amount of \$500,000 and the third phase in the amount of \$800,000. The Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham say that they see the great work being done in the city of Bessemer and want to be a part of the success of our community; so this foundation has partnered with us and contributed \$50,000 to the project.

We have made upgrades to facilities such as this Civic Center. We have given the facility a facelift, including new paint, new landscaping, new furnishings and a new sound system. This past year the Civic Center completed the bathroom refresh, which consisted of the installation of new granite

countertops, hand washing bowls and faucets, new restroom partitions and painting of the walls and ceilings.

As a result of these upgrades, utilization of the Bessemer Civic Center has increased tremendously.

When the city of Bessemer was hit with an ice storm and the devastating tornado in 2014, we found ourselves with no place to temporarily house displaced residents of our city. We are in the process of building the first-ever STORM SHELTER in the city of Bessemer. We were able to secure 80% federal funds for this shelter. This facility will be located near the Emergency Operations Center on Ninth Avenue. It will be a place for any emergencies, and can also be used as a warming station for residents with inadequate heating.

I would be remiss if I did not take the time tonight to thank so many of you who are diligently working in our community. Organizations such as the Bessemer Farmers Market, the Bessemer Historical Society, the STEM program and the Latch and Live Program are all out championing our city and making the lives of its residents better.

I want to thank our faith based community for all that you do to assist this administration. The Clergy in Action partnered with us this past year to provide backpacks and school supplies to our children. You and other ministers are truly doing the work of the kingdom by remembering the "least of these."

To the Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce and its members, we thank you for your continued efforts to market and promote our city. We appreciated the partnership that the city and chamber have forged in this city.

To my staff and employees, I appreciate your commitment to the progress of this city over the past seven years. Continue the good work you have done; it has not gone unnoticed!

To the members of the City Council; let's continue the cooperative spirit we have fostered these past seven years and keep the promise we gave to the residents of Bessemer to work together for the common good.

To the business community; we appreciate your business and support of this administration.

To the residents of Bessemer, your concerns are never forgotten and are always on the forefront of my decisions at City Hall.

In closing, I would just like to say it has been a pleasure serving you all as Mayor. We have accomplished a lot since those dark days of 2010. But as I said earlier "We're not done yet."

There are still hills to climb, but we have shown the determination and tenacity to conquer those hills and move our city to new heights.

None of us could have imagined all these things being done in our city some seven years ago. But each year we have made incremental progress.

This is not about our personal ambition; this is still about Putting Bessemer First. And with the help and grace of the Almighty God, we will do just that.

Let's all continue working together to Continue the Progress in Bessemer.

May God bless you and May God Bless the City of Bessemer.

Good evening.