

Mayor Strickland's 2019 SOTC – Memphis, TN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- Neighborhood leaders, etc.
- Council members
- Other elected officials
- City directors/employees

Three years ago this month, I stood and took the oath of office for what has been the honor of my life — being your mayor.

My standing there was a choice you made — and you made it loud and clear. You wanted change in how the City of Memphis operated. You wanted change in how we tackle our challenges. You saw the potential of this city we all love and fight for, and you wanted change — period.

We accepted your challenge. And every day since, we've worked to continue to change City government and the direction of Memphis.

I'm proud of our team, many of whom are here tonight. We've asked a lot of them — long hours, big projects, and not taking 'no' for an answer when it came to finding ways to improve how we serve you.

Now, we have much more work ahead of us. But in three years, we've made so much progress. So tonight, let me take a broad view of the past, the present, and the future.

That's why I've divided this State of the City speech into three parts:

1. What we've done
2. What we're doing
3. Where we're going — together, and with your help.

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Let's start with what we've done.

The best way to do that, I think, is a quick list of what's up and what's down. You'll find there's a common theme to almost all of these: We've made a lot of progress, and we have so much more work ahead of us.

Jobs are up — About 18,000 more Memphians are working today than when I took office and unemployment is near record lows.

Poverty is down — The [latest Census estimates](#) show it's down about 17 percent since 2014.

Police officer hires are up — We've hired more officers in the last 17 months than in the entire six years prior to that. More in 17 months than in six years.

Police officers leaving are down — Last year, a little more than 120 left, which is much closer to the usual average we lose each year to things like retirement.

Prosecution of violent crime is up — There are few more common things I hear from the community, in every neighborhood in our city, than this: We've got to stop the revolving door at 201 Poplar. People who commit violent acts need to go to prison and they need to stay there for a long time. Period. I'm glad to report that our strengthened partnership with the U.S. Attorney's Office has resulted in a [58 percent increase in gun crime prosecutions](#) in the tougher federal system since late 2017.

Gun crime and violent crime are down — Now, I know it doesn't feel like crime is down, but we have seen some encouraging signs. In 2018, our major violent crime rate dropped by a little over 4 percent — including a 12 percent decrease in robberies. And gun crimes alone dropped 16 percent. So yes, violent crime is down. But the work to reduce violent crime remains our No. 1 focus.

Development is up — Some [\\$15 billion in recent, current, and future development](#) is happening in Greater Memphis area, and for the first time in decades, more of that is happening inside our city limits than in the suburbs. For example, Union Row is poised to remake a key Downtown stretch, Indigo Ag just located its North American headquarters and 700 new jobs here, and we all know that when ServiceMaster was about to leave Memphis, we got to work and convinced them to stay in Memphis and move Downtown. We're also making inroads in communities that haven't seen as much development recently. An example is when the grocery store closed on South Third, we went to work alongside so many great community partners, like former Councilman and current County Commissioner Edmund Ford Jr., and a new grocery store opened last year.

What we do for our youth is up — Youth summer jobs have increased by 50 percent, and this summer, it will be 75 percent. We've increased hours at community centers and libraries, and we've almost tripled the number of youth who are taking

part in library programming. Community center summer camps are free now, as are spring break camps. And for the first time in decades, we have staffed summer play in our City parks.

Homelessness is down — The most recently released numbers show a 14 percent decrease in one year and a 41 percent decline since 2012. And with our [Work Local](#) program, we're connecting those who want to earn money with work cleaning up our city. Using City funds, our partners at the Hospitality Hub drive around offering work and social services, and we've seen lives changed, literally, as a result.

Affordable housing units are up — Through direct investments or incentives, we've upgraded about 5,000 affordable housing units in Memphis. Developments like the massive South City project at the old Foote Homes may make the headlines, but our programs are also impacting apartment complexes in every corner of our city. And as our city grows, this will continue to be more and more important.

The number of roads paved is up — Now, we all hate potholes. You do, and I do. But instead of ignoring them, [we're tackling them in two ways](#): We're filling potholes faster, and we are greatly increasing the long-term, permanent repairs to our streets. We've doubled street paving allocations from just four years ago. And when this fiscal year's pavings are complete on June 30, we'll have paved 90 percent more streets in our first three years than the three years that preceded our administration. Ninety percent — almost double. Now, we've got a long way to go, of course. (You probably noticed that driving in today on Holmes Road. You'll be happy to know that it's on the schedule to be paved this year.) Earlier this decade, our paving was so underfunded that even by doing more now, we still have a backlog that you can see and feel. The work ahead is massive — we have about 6,800 lane-miles of City streets, enough to drive back and forth to Los Angeles almost four times. But we are working our way through it, and we will continue to pave more streets.

911 answer times are down — When we came into office, the average time it took us to answer your 911 call was 59.7 seconds. Fifty-nine point seven seconds — almost a minute. That was unacceptable — no question about it. We took this challenge on, fixed our problems, and I'm proud to say that now, the average is 7 seconds.

Minority business spending is up — City government can't change this on our own, but we can be a leader in a more equitable economy. And that's what we're doing. When I took office, just 12 percent of City contracting dollars went to minority and women-owned businesses. I'm proud to report that we closed our most recent fiscal year having doubled that — to 24 percent. And, our work is turning heads

nationally. Black Enterprise magazine [just said](#) that Memphis is the No. 1 city for black-owned businesses. And recently, one of our minority business initiatives [was called](#) “a brilliant path for equitable urbanization.”

Our animal shelter’s live release rate is up — When we took office, just 50 percent of the animals at Memphis Animal Services were being adopted into new homes. Now, we’re routinely approaching 90 percent each month — and we were [just named a top five shelter nationally](#).

Our bond rating is up — Citing our responsible budgeting and growing economy, a rating agency upgraded our bond outlook last year from AA- to AA. This helps us get better rates on the money we borrow, meaning we can spend more of your tax dollars on the core city services we all value.

Our tax rate is down — Our high combined city-county property tax rate is a big hurdle for our growth — and no fun for us each year when we get our tax bills. When we took office, the tax rate was \$3.40, and today, it’s \$3.19. My job is to deliver an efficient government and balanced budget that makes raising taxes a last resort — and so far, we’ve succeeded.

Mentors and Memphians reading to children are up — and this is what I mean by how we’re working together. A year into our administration, I issued the call for more Memphians to step up to mentor young people or participate in a program that was proven to improve reading levels. As City government increased how it tackled our challenges, we also knew the community had a role, too. And I’m proud to say that hundreds more Memphians are participating in each program. I’m also proud to say that City government set a goal for 100 mentors, and we now have 200. Now, if you’re one of these volunteers, I’m sorry — you’re probably not good material for Facebook or the lead story on the 10 o’clock news. But you are walking the walk. But, you are doing the quiet, 1-on-1 work that’s helping make our city’s future brighter. And for that, I say, sincerely: Thank you.

And lastly, I’ll share something that doesn’t really fit as an “up” or a “down” — frankly, it’s more important to the future of our community than to be defined that way.

For years, our community has shared a goal of universal pre-Kindergarten for every child who needed it. We tried and tried to find a way to make it work, and never could get over the hump.

Early last year, though, we got it done.

We didn't take 'no' for an answer. Working with our partners on the County Commission and the City Council — in particular our current chairman, Kemp Conrad, and vice chair Patrice Robinson, [we got it done](#). And, this doesn't raise your taxes. And I'm proud to report that as a result of this work, universal needs-based Pre-K will be a reality for Memphis in less than two years.

For those reasons, and for so many more, I say this tonight about the state of the city that we all love: **Memphis has momentum.**

We have momentum in our spirit, momentum in our grind, and momentum with how we're running an efficient, responsible City government. We have momentum in how we're tackling our challenges, too. And under my watch, you can rest assured that tackling our challenges remains this administration's priority every waking hour.

That brings us to the second part of my speech — **what we're doing now.**

It doesn't take long to look around and see so much positive momentum centered around our Downtown. And that's good — Downtown is everyone's neighborhood, and it's the soul of our city.

But as much as we celebrate what's happening *Downtown*, it's just as important what's happening *down the street*.

Ours is a neighborhoods-first administration. And instead of just saying that, we're incorporating that philosophy into the long-term plan for our city, which you may have heard about — it's called [Memphis 3.0](#).

Over two years, our Memphis 3.0 staff heard from 15,000 of you, and came up with a new strategy for our growth: We're going to build up, not out. We're going to cast a [road map to better transit](#). We're going to invest in our core and our neighborhoods. We're going to invest in Memphians.

And tonight, I'm announcing a pair of initiatives that will put our money where our mouth is — that will ensure Memphis 3.0 isn't just another plan that collects dust on a shelf at City Hall.

Tonight, I'm proud to announce the **launch of the Memphis Community Catalyst Fund**. It's a dedicated, renewing source of money that we'll use to make infrastructure improvements in key areas of neighborhoods — places we're calling anchors. Here in

Whitehaven, anchors include the area in and around the Whitehaven Plaza shopping center.

With the Community Catalyst Fund, City government will work with neighborhoods to identify things we can improve with our infrastructure that can jump start private development. That can be anything from new sidewalks, new pedestrian crossings, new lighting. It's a tailored approach to what works best for you, and what will have the most lasting impact in making your neighborhood better for years to come.

We're still finalizing details, but we do know this: We plan to commit roughly \$2 million toward this fund in its first year and will be dedicating money to it each and year after that. We will formally propose details of this to the City Council in April, when we present our budget.

Later this year, we plan to unveil our first new investments with the Memphis Community Catalyst Fund. Things you can touch, feel, and see — and not just another thing up at City Hall.

To further our investment in our core city and our neighborhoods, we're also announcing tonight a **grouping of eight private investment opportunities** in properties either owned by the City or our partners. In the next couple of weeks, we'll launch a website with the details, which will include our call for redevelopment proposals from the private sector.

These properties include:

- The former Tillman Cove housing complex in Binghampton
- Nine acres in Midtown near Crosstown Concourse, where Interstate 40 was long ago planned
- Outparcels on the Raleigh Town Center, where Raleigh Springs Mall used to stand
- Parts of the Fairgrounds redevelopment
- Parts of the Pinch District
- The Historic Melrose High School building
- A block of land in the South City redevelopment, just south of Clayborn Temple, which we're calling the South City Cultural Block
- A proposed site for residential development on Powers Road in Raleigh

When the website launches next week, developers will have a chance to say what they want to do on these properties, and we'll move forward with the best uses based on what will best jump-start the neighborhood.

Now, we've spent a lot of our first three years working to improve city services — like the 911 time reductions I mentioned earlier.

When it comes to reacting, we've gotten better — and we'll continue that work. But now we're working on **taking the next step** — being proactive when it comes to delivering City services.

Take trash service, for instance. Right now, you have to call 311 to let us know if there's a big pile of limbs on the curb, and only then we'll come and get it. But we're fixing that. By this spring, you'll no longer have to call. And we'll pick it up twice each month.

Or take potholes. We've worked to get our response time to reported potholes to under two days. But those are “reported” potholes, which means we depend on you to tell us where they are.

Long-term, we want to improve that.

So as part of our overall efforts to deliver a smarter and more technologically savvy city, we're partnering with a major technology company to pilot machine learning that could lead to us scanning our own streets for potholes and filling them even faster. This would involve a camera on a city vehicle, probably a garbage truck, that would detect potholes and future potholes, then automatically generate a report for us to fill it.

Crews are coming next month to work on the pilot project, and we'll share more details then. If it looks like a great solution, we'll deploy it as soon as we can.

Our best long-term solution to make our roads smoother isn't rocket science, though: **It's simply paving more streets.**

I told you earlier that we've doubled funds for paving, and we'll continue that kind of emphasis. I've charged our team with paving early and often this spring, as soon as the weather allows. But as we stand here tonight in Whitehaven, I couldn't leave without sharing some good news on one specific street: **Construction on the long-awaited improvements to Elvis Presley Boulevard will start this spring.**

You've been waiting on this a while. The council approved it back in 2012, and when we took office, it hadn't gone very far. We dug in, dealt with a bunch of red tape with the state, negotiated deals with property owners, and put the contract out to bid last fall. We've selected a contractor, and I'll be back here in a few weeks for the groundbreaking.

A few moments ago, I mentioned our success in minority contracting, which we intend to sustain and improve. But as I said, we can't turn around the entire economy on our own. We need the private sector to help, and that even includes the dollars you spend day-in, day-out.

So we're launching a program that can help. We're calling it Buy901, and it's a searchable website of our entire directory of locally owned and certified minority and women-owned businesses. Instead of just having this information for ourselves, we thought: Why not share it with all Memphians?

Need a new roof or fence and want to hire a local or minority contractor? Great. Just visit Buy901.net, and you'll be able to pick the same contractors we use. Or even more, if you're in charge of purchasing for any size corporation in town, this resource is for you, too. It's that easy. It's a long-term way to build equity in our economy and attack poverty, and now you can help.

And of course, nothing is on all of our minds more than our ongoing, decades-old challenge with violent crime.

I mentioned the numbers earlier, which encourage us in knowing that things are heading in the right direction, and what we're doing is beginning to work.

But we must continue that work. I'll share a couple of quick items of what we're doing on that front:

1. A class of more than 80 officer recruits is now training at the academy, part of our improved recruiting that I mentioned earlier. These new officers will graduate in about five weeks. We had dropped to almost 1,900 officers in the middle of 2017, but we are on track now to have 2,100 officers by the end of this year. We've done this by recruiting more and also by taking care of our current officers better. Our officers have received raises of as much as 7.75 percent since we took office, after almost seven years without any raise at all. And as we assemble this year's budget, pay for our public safety employees is at the top of our priority list.
2. Too often recently, we've turned on the news and heard about a road rage shooting — where someone chooses to pull a trigger in the most public of spaces we have in the city. The more I dug into this, I realized that with our current state laws, it's possible for someone who makes this choice to not do a single day of prison time. Not a day. I don't think that's right, and I know most of you don't, either. So I'm working with the General Assembly to ask them to

pass a law to enhance the penalty for road rage shootings, so that when someone makes the choice to pull the trigger when you just might be driving by in the other lane, they pay a stiff price.

Finally, and quickly, I want to talk about **where we're going**. This is my vision for how Memphis, in its third century, will continue our momentum.

I'm working every day...

For a Memphis that will have safer streets — where we continue our progress to reduce violent crime

For a Memphis that will have smoother streets — where we treat our infrastructure with the care it deserves, sending that visual message to every neighborhood, in every part of our city, that we care

For a Memphis where our young children can take advantage of all of our wealth of opportunity — where they have every chance to take the right path and not the wrong path, and where they learn to read at an early age, so they can then read to learn their way to a successful career

For a Memphis that will continue to grow from within — by building up, not out, and doubling down on the assets that make every neighborhood special

For a Memphis that will be equitable and just — where poverty will continue to fall, and where black-owned businesses will flourish

For a Memphis that will have more jobs — where our current companies grow, where new companies move to town, and where everyone has the connection to the skills they need to succeed in the economy of the future.

We've made progress on that vision, and we're laser-focused on continuing the change that you asked for some three years ago.

So in closing, let me just say this.

Imagining this Memphis I just described, built on the foundation of the basics we've

worked to improve these past few years, gets me excited to drive to work every day. It gets me excited about the Memphis I love, and the Memphis I want to leave behind for our children.

I'm thrilled with the progress we've made. And I hope that you see it.

But, I am not satisfied with where we are. And neither are you.

I'm hungry for more. And I know you are, too.

I don't simply want to *have* momentum in Memphis — I want to *accelerate* our momentum. I want to take this special time in our history and continue turning the corner into a prosperous future for everyone — a prosperous future that we all know Memphis deserves.

This is how we multiply our growth — by committing ourselves to the quiet work of improving how we serve citizens, day in, day out.

This is how we keep our foot on the pedal — not by shouting or playing the partisan political games we read about in Washington, but by sitting down with each other, by listening, by compromising, and by working together on substance.

This is how we accelerate our momentum — together.

Thank you.