

The State of the City 2019. Delivered January 28, 2019 at the Bessemer Civic Center

“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 tonight, 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 Toraine 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.

Before I tell you of all the positive things that are taking place in our city, I would like to take a moment and thank YOU, the citizens of Bessemer, for the confidence that you have shown in me as your mayor. In August, you went to the polls and overwhelmingly gave my administration your stamp of approval.

As many of you already know, I do not take my duties as your Mayor lightly. I pray every day for guidance as I seek to positively direct the affairs of this city. I ask for your continued prayers on behalf of myself and everyone who is working to make a difference in this city.

I would like to ask the members of the Bessemer City Council to please stand. Let's give them a hand. We have some veteran faces and some new faces, but the task ahead of us has not changed. When I became Mayor eight years ago, I pledged to myou, the citizens of this city that I would work with the city council to progress this city and I have done that. Bickering and devisiveness has held the progress if this city back for decades. By working together, we were able to accomplish historical feats, such as building the city's first Recreation Center, the building of a new city hand and the creation of over 3,000 jobs to our city. We can agree to disagree, but let us put our personal differences aside for the good of conducting city business.

I would also like to ask the members of our Bessemer Board of Education to please stand. Like our City Council, our school board is comprised of some new faces and some veterans. I ask you to keep them in your prayers daily. Each time they meet, they are making decisions that impact our cities most valuable asset – our children.

Our teachers, and administrators are tasked with a very difficult task of providing an education that will equip our children for the future. We all know that over this past year our school system have had some successes. But I recognize that we have some challenges and some tough decisions that lie ahead. But know that your city government as always, is here to assist your efforts.

As we prepare to celebrate the city of Bessemer's 132nd birthday, I can say confidently that the state of our city is very positive. We know there is still much work to be done in many areas, but the seeds of progress have been sown over the past eight years. And now we are starting to reap the harvest.

In 2018 we were able to secure a world renown company to the marvel city of Bessemer. Competing with three other sites in the southeast, Amazon chose to make Bessemer its choice. This \$325 million dollar investment by Amazon makes it the largest single investment in our city's history.

We all watched this past June, when the company announced to the world that it would build its first Fulfillment Center in Alabama in our city limits. This Fulfillment Center will employ upwards of 3,000 people when it opens in late July. Special thanks to the state of Alabama, the Jefferson County Commission, Alabama Power, the Birmingham Business Alliance, U.S. Steel and many others. This is truly a testament of what can be accomplished when entities can come together for the good of a common goal. I would be remiss if I did not mention the Birmingham Jefferson Transit Authority and our board representative Ms. Johnnye Lassiter. Seattle based Amazon was adamant about having bus service to the site when it opens and it was tremendously important to them to connect our citizens with the jobs via bus transportation.

As I told a reporter from the Wall Street Journal, this facility is the largest single investment in the city of Bessemer's history. It puts us on a glorious path and reverses the economic turmoil left by the closing of the Pullman Standard in the mid eighties.

Folks, Bessemer is on the move.

The city of Bessemer has had a hospital for over 100 years. I received many calls and correspondences from many of you last fall when news broke that the city of Hoover was pursuing Medical West Hospital. I was on the phone constantly with the Medical West administrators stating our desire to keep the hospital here to service you and residents of communities throughout west

Jefferson County. I was joined by other mayors, elected officials and clergy from throughout this area in support of the hospital remaining in Bessemer.

According to Medical West officials, Bessemer will continue to have a hospital. Mr. Keith Pennington, CEO of Bessemer Medical West Hospital, joined me and others at the Bessemer Civic Center in October and announced that the hospital would not pursue a proposal to move to Hoover, but would continue with its plan to build a new full-service hospital off of Exit 1. We are working with hospital administrators to repurpose and refurbish the existing facility on Ninth Avenue so that it does not sit vacant and become an eyesore in the city of Bessemer.

Bessemer has many amenities other cities in our state do not have. One of these is the Bessemer Airport. Bessemer's Airport is starting to make waves and is becoming an asset to us in terms of economic development. We have invested tremendously in our airport over the past eight years. We have refunded ad valorem taxes back to the airport to assist with operations and satisfaction of past debt. Additionally, the airport has been successful in securing federal grant dollars to assist with improvements. Private developers such as Sanders Capital Partners, LLC, a Birmingham-based real estate development company, announced this past year that it was investing 1.3 million dollars to purchase three corporate hangers at the Airport. In addition, three other companies have relocated to a building at the airport creating 30 new jobs.

I am very proud of what the airport has been able to accomplish over the past eight years.

The business climate in Bessemer is strong and we are committed to focusing our efforts on revitalization of downtown. Our Downtown district continues to garner interest for everything from housing to new businesses. We had nine new businesses to move into our downtown district last year.

I was pleased to see a new Dollar General opened on Dartmouth Avenue, as did a new Family Dollar on 14th Street. Both of these areas were designated as food deserts because there were no grocery stores in the areas. Many new businesses are seeing the benefits of locating in our city. Diablo's Restaurant opened its first location in Alabama at the Colonial Promenade; Jack's Family Restaurants opened two new locations in the city last year and is in the process of renovating their store on 19th Street in the Pipe Shop. A new Planet Fitness, the largest in the state of Alabama,

opened in Bessemer last year. In 2018 alone, we issued building permits of just over \$15.5 million for commercial construction in our city.

City revenues have grown almost 17 percent since 2014. When we entered office, our budget was at \$38 million. This current year's budget, passed in October, is almost \$58 million, an increase of 53 percent, or \$20 million, since 2010. We have managed revenues responsibly and have been good stewards of your tax payers' dollars. We are a city that is not in the red, but in the black. Our annual audit has come back strong each year. To God be the glory.

Bessemer become a federally-recognized Opportunity Zones. An Opportunity Zone is tailored to attract private investment to economically-distressed communities and areas. Our goal is to find ways to take advantage of this designation to assist us in the revitalization of our downtown.

This past year, as promised, we upgraded infrastructure in many areas throughout the city. With state and federal grant funds that we were able to secure through ATRIP, TAP and Street Scape, we were able to complete paving of 4th Avenue from 18th Street to McAdory School Road; Dartmouth Avenue from highway 150 to the Lipscomb city limits and McAshan Drive. We were also able to complete the construction of three bridges in our city.

In addition, we were able to use your local gas tax funds to pave streets in your communities such as Cedar Hill Drive; Alice Street, Medical Center Drive, Hickory Road, Dickey Springs Road and portions of Granville Avenue and many others. We will continue to aggressively work to secure funds to pave much needed streets in our communities.

We're continuing to make strides on the residential front and in our neighborhoods.

New homes are currently being constructed in our city in the Cedar Creek community, and Prominence Homes are continuing to build more residential homes in the Parkwood community.

We partnered this past October, with Habitat for Humanity of Greater Birmingham for the city of Bessemer's first-ever Homebuilders Blitz. On the day of completion, I was proud to hand out keys to ten new homeowners. Currently, my administration is discussing ways to increase homeownership in our city. We've spoken with the Bessemer Housing Authority about ways we can reuse vacant lots for infill housing in many of our older neighborhoods.

Our demolition program has been very successful in creating a working relationship between several city departments, including my office, Building Inspections, Economic and Community Development and Public Improvements. We have removed over 500 dilapidated structures in our city over the past eight years. We will continue to designate funds in our annual budget each to eliminate blight in our city.

After many failed studies over the past decade dealing with flooding in the Pipe Shop community, last year we instituted a local buy-out program. This program will give residents closer to the creek priority in assisting them in relocating. I am optimistic that we will still be able to secure federal assistance to help our residents in the Pipe Shop community.

Last year, we began working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on a study of flooding along Valley Creek. I am hopeful that this study will offer recommendations on solving the long-standing problem of flooding in the Pipe Shop community.

Unfortunately, there is still much to be done in the area of law enforcement. Not only in Bessemer but throughout America. The crime rate in the city of Bessemer continues to drop. Our crime rate dropped for the seventh consecutive year in 2018. Our homicide rate dropped 33 percent. Overall, crime was down six percent. Going forward we will direct more focus on property crime such as burglaries, vehicle theft and vehicle break-ins. Many of these crimes are crimes of opportunity. Citizens, I encourage you to secure your vehicles and make sure valuables are not in plain view.

In 2018, we had 8 homicides. Our police department will continue with our city-wide programs aimed at engaging our youth concerning conflict resolution. I am appealing to our faith based community, non-profit organizations, schools and parents to assist me in this battle against violence in our city. We have to find strategies to deter our citizens from crime.

The Bessemer Fire Department has continued its outreach efforts and is still one of the most premiere fire departments in the region. Bessemer Fire Department is the first Class 1 Fire Department in Jefferson County and we continue to offer the best training to our firefighters, such as partnering with the University of West Alabama to give our employees the opportunity to earn a Bachelor of Science in Public Safety degree.

The fire department has always made community outreach a part of its mission. In 2018 the fire department continued to do outreach in our schools, senior facilities and with organizations such as Muscular Dystrophy Association and Breast Cancer Awareness. The department partnered with the American Red Cross for a Smoke Detector Blitz Campaign that put smoke detectors in many of our residents homes here in Bessemer.

I am proud to inform you that for the seventh straight year there were no fire-related fatalities in the city of Bessemer!

When a devastating tornado hit our city in April of 2014, we found ourselves in a vulnerable situation. We did not have a facility equipped that could temporarily house our affected citizens. We applied for a Federal Emergency Management Agency Grant and was approved; and we have begun the construction of Bessemer's first ever storm shelter by the Emergency Operations Center on 9th Avenue. It is my desire to work with the City Council and other agencies such as FEMA to find funding for additional storm shelters in our city.

We continued to invest in our parks and recreation. In April we cut the ribbon on the first phase of the city's Rail-Trail system along Highway 150. Funding has already been approved for phases 2 and 3 of the Walking Trail and work will begin this year on those phases. We have also secured funding to build a pedestrian bridge across Highway 150 to connect to the recreation center. This will allow you to get on the trail at the Recreation Center and safely cross the highway to the Rail-Trail. In the future, we want to bring the rail-trail into downtown Bessemer and expand our green space in the city.

Our Bessemer Recreation Center currently boast a membership of over 10,000 members. In addition to structured youth athletics such as football, baseball and basketball, the center hosts many other activities such as Movies in the Park, Line Dancing Classes, Youth Summer Camps, Scale Back Alabama, Health Awareness Seminars through partnering with the University of Alabama in Birmingham and Grandview Medical Center, and many others. Senior groups like the Silver Boomers continues to give our seniors an outlet to fellowship and thrive. Because of the success of our Bessemer Recreation Center, our 7 youth and 9 youth football teams had an opportunity to travel to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to compete on a national level.

This past year, we maintained our pledge to upgrade city parks by installing new playground equipment, new fencing and pavilions in several of our parks. We've been blessed with great parks here in Bessemer.

Frank House Golf Course, as many of you are aware, was completely destroyed by the tornado of April 2014. When the facility was rebuilt, the decision was made to add a clubhouse. This has proven to be a great decision. The clubhouse has become not only a great amenity to the golf course, but also to the city. It is being rented on a weekly basis for everything from weddings, to receptions to baby showers and reunions. For the first time in decades, the Frank House Golf is a profitable venue in our city.

2018 proved that Bessemer's best days are still ahead. New industry and jobs are moving in. New homes are either planned or being constructed.

If you truly love Bessemer, let each of us ask ourselves what role can I play in helping move my city forward? Join with me, this City Council, the Board of Education, our Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce and other individuals and groups who are attempting to make a difference in our city.

You can join many of the volunteer groups making a difference in the city. Or you can choose to serve on one of the city-appointed boards. You can start a neighborhood organization that assist us in helping to keep our city clean or work with our police department to create a Neighborhood Watch program. Whatever your decision, don't let this opportunity to help your city pass you by. Be a part of the solutions, not part of the problems.

I believe there are good people here. Good churches. Good businesses. Good parents and families. I believe God has great things in store for Bessemer.

May God bless each of you and may God continue to bless the Marvel City of Bessemer.

Thank you."