

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

State of the City of Bessemer Address 2017

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

I'd like to start this evening's address by giving honor to the Almighty God for allowing us all to be here on this evening. We know that it is by God's grace and mercy that we all stand. Without Him, we can do nothing.

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.

Many of the items I will highlight tonight are a result of the spirit of cooperation that has manifested itself in this city over the past six years. Let us continue to sow the seeds of cooperation in this city, especially since we have already witnessed the fruits of our past cooperation.

I am truly humbled to be standing before you again this evening. God has truly blessed our city over the past year. We pray His continued blessings upon Bessemer.

We are showing the world that our future does not rest on the opinions of others hundreds of miles away, but on the willingness of Bessemer residents to roll up our sleeves and make our shared vision a reality.

The highlight of our shared vision was the opening of Bessemer's First Recreation Center. I say highlight because this Mayor and Council body promised the citizens of Bessemer a Recreation Center when we first entered office and set aside the funds to make it a reality.

Many of you were there on July 2nd when we cut the ribbon on the new facility. Words cannot express how honored I was to stand there with Bessemer residents of all backgrounds to celebrate that historic occasion. This project is something all residents of Bessemer, regardless of color or background, can enjoy! This recreation center is something this community can be proud to have achieved!

We also finished construction of a new Recycling Center on First Avenue North and a one million dollar Clubhouse at the Frank House Municipal Golf Course.

Mark your calendars for Feb. 12. On that day, we will celebrate another historic milestone in our city with the ribbon-cutting of the new Bessemer City Hall!

This City Hall is representative of a new Bessemer. It gives potential business and industry leaders a new gateway into our city. It gives our employees a safe, healthy environment in which to work. And it too is a symbol of what can happen when we all work together towards a common goal.

The Alabama Emergency Management Association recently announced that the city of Bessemer has been approved for funding to build a storm shelter at the Emergency Operations Center. This shelter will house some 100 individuals in times of storm. This is the first shelter we will look to construct in the city and we will work with the City Council on areas and funding for additional storm shelters.

I continue to hear positive news from our business community. A few weeks ago I sat down with Mr. Dan Koch of Alabama Splash Adventure. Mr. Koch informed me that attendance increased by 11 percent this past year at the park, and 40 percent the past two years. Many of those visitors to our city were from neighboring states such as Mississippi, meaning they stayed in our hotel rooms and visited our restaurants.

Many of you have driven down Fourth Avenue to 22nd Street and watched the JB Processing facility come up from the ground. This \$35 million investment, now known as American Minerals Three, will attract visitors from throughout the world. Just a few weeks ago a delegation of investors from China was in our city to tour the facility.

This is a Bessemer-based company that is manufacturing and selling tile not only in America, but throughout the world.

This Mayor and Council approved incentives for projects such as Flex-N-Gate's expansion of its facility here in Bessemer. These incentives will not only maintain current jobs within our city, but will create 107 new jobs.

I had the opportunity to tour the BLOX facility at the Interstate Industrial Park, a place many of you know as Pullman Standard. BLOX is a company that specializes in pre-fabricated restrooms for hospitals. This Company moved from Birmingham to Bessemer and is doing business all across the United States.

These types of private investments in our city, such as the ones I have mentioned, and expansion projects at Milo's Tea and relocations such as Steyr Arms, show that our city can attract industry and jobs. Bessemer is truly opened for business!

Our next step will be to explore ways to attract new businesses into our downtown. While we have witnessed some investment in our downtown, we want to look at ways to revitalize downtown and possibly bring entertainment and retail dollars back into the heart of the city.

We will continue to take steps on a local level to position our city as not only an economic hub in Jefferson County, but as a place where business and industry can thrive and succeed. We will continue to invest in city services to make sure we position ourselves to handle the prospective growth.

We live in very turbulent times and crime rates across the country have risen over the past few years. But I am proud to stand here tonight and announce that our crime rate is below the national trend. Major crime in the city of Bessemer is down 15 percent from this past year.

Unfortunately, there were five homicides reported in the city of Bessemer and all five were solved by our **police department**. Our ultimate goal is zero homicides each year, and we still ask that men and women find a way to resolve their disputes without resorting to violence against one another.

Last year we hired 39 new personnel throughout our police department, 28 of which were new officers in the patrol division. We have secured federal funding to hire and pay the salaries of 5 officers beginning this year. I believe our crime rates are dropping due to the presence of our police department in the community. The city is now staffed with more police officers than any other time in the city's history.

I want to take this opportunity to commend the police department on its community engagement efforts. We are all aware of the turmoil going on across the country between law enforcement and citizens. In an effort to be proactive, we have invested heavily in state of the art equipment such as vehicle and body cameras to insure the safety of our citizens, as well as our police officers. We will continue to work and invest in community relations and activities to forge positive interaction between the community and law enforcement.

Last year, the Bessemer Police Department received grants totaling almost one million dollars to hire additional officers and address issues surrounding at risk youth in the City of Bessemer.

I have always believed that our **Bessemer Fire Department** is one of the best in the country and that was confirmed this past year when the ISO Ratings agency rated Bessemer as a Class 1 fire department. Of the 52,000 fire departments across our nation, only 200 have achieved this rating. Our department is the first in Jefferson County and one of only three in the state of Alabama to achieve this distinction.

I am also pleased to note that although fire fatalities across the state are at an all-time high, there were no fire fatalities in the city of Bessemer in 2016. I believe our department's educational outreach efforts have helped to achieve this mark.

The Bessemer Fire Department has searched for ways to integrate more into the community. The **Emergency Paramedics In the Community, or EPIC Program**, was introduced in 2015. This program puts a paramedic in the community to assist citizens who do not have the resources they need to address their basic medical issues. As part of the program, paramedics have identified and assisted 573 Bessemer residents last year. Those needs have ranged from issues as small as medication refills to as large as building ramps on houses and assisting in relocations. We will continue to look for innovative ways to assist residents in our city.

Making progress in our city depends largely on good financial management. Two years ago, we made a decision to separate the duties of the City Clerk's Office with those of our finance department due to increases in our city's revenue. I can report those efforts have proven successful. Our Finance department and City Clerk's Office have both made great strides in the past year.

I am proud of the accomplishments of our **Finance Department**. This department is responsible for timely and accurately reporting of all finances of the city. We have had some challenges, but over the past couple of years the department has made great improvements in the areas of financial reporting, grant compliance, and budget preparation. The department has also implemented several departmental policies and procedures which aids in producing more accurate and timely financial reporting of city activities. We have been able to address a great deal of our audit findings, eliminating additional charges relevant to our annual audit. The department implemented electronic document imaging. This system will reduce the burden of unnecessary paper files, improve office workflow and make documents easier to receive. We continue to look for great things from our finance department.

The **City Clerk's Office** is responsible for keeping and preserving public documents and records of the city. It also has the responsibility of managing

municipal elections in our city. This office has been very busy over the past year with preparing old documents to be electronically preserved as we prepare for the move into our new city hall.

The City Clerk also oversees the operations of Municipal Court. Last year, your municipal court serviced over 20,000 people and produced over 1.3 million dollars in revenue.

Our **Public Improvement**, as, always, was very busy last year. We continued to purchase needed equipment in their fleet to insure that they continue to maintain the cleanliness and upkeep of our city. They continue to cut right of ways, repair sidewalks and pick up trash and garbage in a timely manner.

Through our weed enforcement ordinance, the public improvement department along with private contractors cut over 800 properties last year.

We continue to appeal to you, our citizens, to help us keep our city clean. Our litter crews are working diligently picking up litter in the communities on a daily basis, but these efforts are futile and I cannot employ enough people to pick up litter without the citizens helping us to keep our city clean.

Cedar Hill Cemetery took the initiative to improve its business office. The former superintendent's residence was remodeled and made the new business office for the cemetery. The upgrade is a much nicer facility to receive customers and a better atmosphere for employees to work.

In an effort to continue with upgrades of our city buildings, our animal control building has been painted and several repairs completed.

As you recall, we were able to secure several ATRIP grants from the state of Alabama totaling 7.5 million dollars. Under these 80/20 grants we were able to make substantial progress last year. We completed synchronization of lights downtown 18th and 19th streets and made all intersections ADA compliant. We replaced bridge culverts on Third Avenue and Eighth Avenue, marking the first time in Bessemer's history that bridges have been replaced. We will continue to work with the state's ATRIP program to continue replacement of the bridge culvert on 23rd street and paving of 4th Avenue and Dartmouth Avenue; and improvement projects on McCalla Road and McAshan Drive. We also partnered with the state to complete a railroad signal enhancement project to improve safety and traffic flow at Highway 150 and Carolina Avenue.

This year, we will work with the City Council to identify residential streets in need of paving and advance a paving project for approval by the end of the summer.

Our **Building Inspections Department** continues to indicate growth in our city. In 2016, we issued some 13 million dollars in commercial projects and 9 million dollars in residential projects. In addition to the public projects, building inspections oversaw completion of new facilities such as the American Mineral's Three facility, the expansion at Flex-N-Gate and for you shoppers, the addition of a new TJ Maxx at the Tannehill Promenade.

But it is not just on the commercial front where we are experiencing growth. Valor Properties built 15 new homes in the Cedar Creek Subdivision just below Carriage Hills and plans are to build more in the upcoming year. Likewise, KEAM LLC continues to work on a three phase development on the property in Bessemer adjacent to Lake Cyrus with Prominence Homes building 37 new residential homes.

We remain committed to removing unsightly and dilapidated structures from our neighborhoods. Last year, some 66 condemned structures were demolished under our demolition program. Already in this budget year, our City Council has appropriated \$200,000 to continue the demolition of dilapidated structures in our city. We will continue to attack blight in our neighborhoods. As we know, dilapidated houses and unsightly areas lead to drops in property values and create havens for criminal activities.

But we are not just committed to tearing down houses in our city. This past year, our **Community and Economic Development Department**, made two significant partnerships with agencies committed to affordable housing. We approved some \$50,000 in matching funds for a program with the Alabama Assets Building Coalition. This money will help 22 future homeowners in our city make down payments on houses within the city of Bessemer. City funds will be leveraged with federal funds and the savings of homeowners to put them in houses right here in our city.

A partnership with Habitat for Humanity resulted in the rehabilitation of four houses, reconstruction of another and we are working with Habitat on a plan to bring an average of 10 new houses a year to Bessemer through 2020. A Habitat workshop two weeks ago brought in dozens of people from throughout our metro area. Attendees from those cities asked Habitat and Community Development staff about programs they could use to move to Bessemer!

We know we have some older neighborhoods in our city that are in need of rehabilitation. So we are making appropriate steps to use CDBG money to

revitalize these communities. In addition, we have applied for a Brownfields Assessment Grant through the US Environmental Protection Agency to help us. This \$300,000 grant, if awarded, will allow the city to assess former Brownfields sites such as old gas stations and dry cleaners for reuse. We hope to hear positive news from federal officials in the spring, when the grants are awarded.

The Community and Economic Development Department also sponsored workshops for seniors and veterans, and plans on a workshop for small businesses in 2017.

Our newest department **Bessemer Recreation Center** opened its doors with a ribbon cutting on July 2nd of last year with a concert featuring the Temptations Review. Since its opening in September, over twenty eight hundred people have joined our new Recreation Center. Of those, over 600 are seniors. These citizens are enjoying a variety of classes including aquatics, line dancing, aerobics, youth activities and senior activities.

This facility is also equipped with rooms that can be rented for special events and have already hosted 10 events in its first three months of operation.

I am equally proud of the improvements that we have made in our parks around the city. Two new pavilions were constructed in McNeil Park and our newly recreated Beautification Board is currently working on a project to plant trees at McNeil Park. A portion of the project will be paid for by a grant from the Alabama Power Foundation.

Last year, improvements were made at all the parks in the city of Bessemer.

The **Frank House Municipal Golf Course** and Clubhouse were decimated by a F2 tornado in April 2014. But because of the strong financial stewardship of this mayor and council body, we were able to rebuild and expand the Clubhouse to include a banquet facility. After many years of leasing the golf course, last year we pulled the course back under the operations of the city. This has proven to be a successful move. Revenues at the course are up over 150% compared to this time last year and we project revenues of \$400,000 through the end of this fiscal year.

Each year we have undertaken a significant improvement project to our **Bessemer Civic Center**. We have painted and replaced the flooring throughout the facility and purchased a new sound system. Last year, we completed a landscape and irrigation project. It is the first significant landscape improvement here at the Civic Center since its construction in 1984. We also installed a new stage curtain last year and negotiated with the Birmingham Conventions and Visitors Bureau to receive on-line referrals for meetings and conventions space. Our rental utilization here at the Bessemer Civic Center has increased 25 percent over previous years. This year, the Civic Center will upgrade the main bathrooms on the first and second floors and renovate the board room all in an effort to make our civic center more attractive to future customers.

Our Bessemer Utilities has had many accomplishments last year, and we will continue to work with staff to ensure our customers are treated courteously and respectable when conducting business. We recognize that some complaints are warranted, but we also recognize that some are not. Bessemer Utilities has changed the timeline of bill mailings to better assist customers, initiated pay by phone services, initiated check scanning, improved back up equipment for billing and completed the Jefferson Avenue and Brighton water projects. Because of our aging system, we will continue to install and replace pipe throughout our system to better serve our customers.

The Bessemer Electric Service received the TVA 2015 Top Performance Award and placed 4th out of 142 TVA local power companies in TVA energy right solution program.

Some of our departments are not as visible in the community, but are crucial to the operations of our city.

Our **IT Department** has been very instrumental in document management and new construction projects at the New City Hall, the Recreation Center and the Golf Pro Shop with the installation of new phone systems, and computers throughout these departments.

In addition, it worked with the finance department to bid, purchase and install a new Enterprise Financial Management System to replace an outdated system.

Our **Fleet Maintenance Department** is responsible for keeping our city fleet moving. The department successfully repaired and serviced over 1,000 vehicles this past year. It upgraded technology to assist technicians with diagnosing vehicles and made upgrades to meet OSHA safety requirements. We will continue to offer training in this department to keep our city's vehicle fleet moving.

When we were elected in 2010 we were in a lawsuit with our Bessemer Board of Education. We settled that lawsuit for four million dollars. I am happy to report to you that as of December 2016, all of our debts to the Bessemer Board of Education have been satisfied.

On that note, we'd like to extend a warm welcome to Bessemer City Schools' Superintendent Dr. Keith Stewart. We look forward to his leadership and that of the board in making Bessemer schools some of the best in the state of Alabama. Last year we had five schools on the failing list, but this year only one, but one is too many. I encourage our parents to become more involved in the education of our children.

Bessemer City Schools have begun a 1 on 1 computer initiative for students in grades 5-12, and as part of the Career Tech Program, the school system operates its own local radio station.

The Jefferson County Commission voted to call an election on March 7th of this year for the renewal of two countywide school taxes. As a result, the Bessemer City Board of Education passed a resolution supporting the renewal, and I would like to encourage each of you to go out and vote to support the renewal of these taxes for our school system.

The **Bessemer Public Library** continues to provide service excellence. In doing so, the staff at the library has had training in Workplace Safety, ADA Compliance, Active Shooter Training and Customer Service. In 2016, the Bessemer Public Library serviced 97,194 patrons; circulated over 35,000 books, and 114,328 patrons utilized the library's internet system.

The library now has a Watchfire sign. This sign will inform the community of events at the library. We would like to thank Brashfield and Gorrie, Masonry Arts, and Marathon Electric for donating the informational sign at the library.

During 2016, the **Bessemer Housing Authority** continued its RAD (Rental Assistance Demonstration) Transition. First, closing on Thompson Manor and starting additional property updates. Secondly, Cobb and Hillside prepared all architectural, construction costs and financial requirements, a total project of 3.1 million with total RAD investment of approximately 11.5 million dollars.

Next year the **Housing Authority** has plans to begin the Comprehensive Scattered Site Lease Purchase Home Ownership Program. This will be a citywide effort and will involve purchase and rehabilitation of vacated or abandoned homes throughout the City; this will be a 4 to 5 year effort of 50 to 60 properties.

I would like to personally thank the Housing Authority for partnering with the city to address a drainage issue that we had off Fairfax Avenue.

Our **Bessemer Airport** continues to grow and for the first time in recent years it is financially sound. Fuel sales have increased tremendously and we will be breaking ground to build hangers for the first time in 20 years. We will be stepping up marketing efforts in 2017 bringing additional awareness to Bessemer Airport.

Our **Bessemer Area Chamber of Commerce** is always supportive of, and promotes the City of Bessemer. Last year, the Chamber participated in over 20 ribbon cuttings in our city. Over 3000 copies of the Bessemer Magazine were distributed inside Bessemer and throughout the state of Alabama. The Chamber of Commerce coordinated our annual Veteran's Day Program, Taste of Bessemer Business and Expo, and the city of Bessemer's Christmas Parade which was one of the best ever with over 100 participants.

Ladies and gentlemen, many great things have transpired in the city of Bessemer this past year, and we anticipate more great things in the coming year. God is **still** blessing this great city and as we move forward we ask for your prayers, your patience and your help.

May God bless you and the city of Bessemer.

Thank you and good night.