

2017 State of the City Address

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Mayor Vinis's 2017 State of the City Address

Many people have said to me “Boy, do you have big shoes to fill.”

And I say – I don’t have to fill them. Those shoes – that foundation that Mayor Piercy was so instrumental in building – stands on its own. I get to stand on that foundation to take the next steps.

Every era brings its own challenges and opportunities. We face a divided nation, tumultuous and dangerous times, and a great uncertainty about the direction of the federal government and the financial capacity of our state to pay for services. That uncertainty and anxiety deepens my resolve – as I believe it should deepen all of yours – that the work we do here in Eugene matters. Cities will lead the way on social justice, climate change, and on growing our own economies. Thankfully, we have a strong record to stand on – we know how to do this work. We have a dedicated and skilled city staff, an experienced and knowledgeable council, and an engaged, passionate and articulate public.

I want to do three things in this speech:

- 1) Share with you the lessons learned in almost two years of preparing for this role
- 2) Update you on the issues I prioritized in my campaign and how I plan to work on them; and
- 3) Reinforce my commitment to our shared values of social justice, concern about climate change, and aspirations to create a vibrant, inclusive community.

Lessons learned.

Communication is the key to everything else. We face a wide array of challenging issues, including neighborhood planning, downtown development, transportation, climate change, homelessness, economic growth, and jobs. Our best path forward will be built on clarity and trust about our goals, our choices, and our investment of public funds.

During my primary race and through the fall, I knocked on thousands of doors. The lesson I learned is that we are more alike than different. All neighborhoods value their trees, aspire to more and better parks, are frustrated by traffic, and savor walkability and bike paths. Everyone wants to feel safe. Everyone is troubled by homelessness and concerned about job opportunities and economic growth. As a community we want answers to these issues, and we need information about the choices before us.

On any given issue, there are a range of opinions of equal passion. At the end of the day, council will make a decision. How we get to that decision matters. Many of our long-range decisions take years, with lots of input on a shifting landscape. It is easy for the public conversation to get tangled in the weeds. Once the path is lost, it’s hard to find common ground again.

My goal is to improve our framework for communicating and accounting for our decisions so that everyone feels informed, heard, and is comfortable with the decision-making process. This begins by taking the public’s concerns seriously; and taking the time in my first year in office to see from the inside where and how we could improve.

Campaign priorities.

This leads me to my first campaign priority: the Mayor’s monthly report.

I have developed the framework for an ongoing, dynamic list of projects that council and staff are directing— a real-time living tool to track our work and progress online. The idea is to provide a consistent update of where we are on important issues and ample opportunity for public input.

Every month, I will release a short summary of the previous month’s work and the work ahead for the coming month, with a link to my working document on the website. Look for the first monthly report the first week of February – it will be posted on the city’s website; on my new blog; on Facebook; and in the newspapers.

I also plan to continue to canvass as a way of reaching out directly to the public, most of whom do not have the time or capacity for attending meetings. My goal is to canvass each of the eight wards every four months. Councilors and neighborhood groups can direct my steps to areas of town where residents need to be heard.

My second priority is to support ongoing efforts to address housing and homelessness, and to champion a new focus. One of the things I said when I

announced my candidacy was that I want Eugene to be a place where everyone can thrive, as my family was able to do. It will be an ongoing top priority to make good on that promise.

I'll begin by saying that I fully support the emergency and transitional programs the city has encouraged in the past five or so years – the rest stops, Opportunity Village, Occupy Medical, and now the tiny house movement. I am an advocate for Housing First, which seeks to stabilize people in housing and then address the causes of their instability. We should be proud of the success in housing over 400 veterans in 2015 using this model.

This achievement resulted from the public/private partnerships of the Poverty and Homelessness Board. Building on the success in housing veterans, the Board now proposes to add 600 Housing First units over the coming five years. Some projects are already planned. We will make progress – the challenge is bigger than Eugene – but we will continue to model humane and sensible solutions.

I join many others in our community and in the state who see the need for more emergency shelter in some form. While not always the most cost-effective solution, it may be the only humane short-term solution.

As you know, I come to my role as mayor having worked at ShelterCare for seven years. Last year's United Way report should be alarming to us all. It found that 43% of Lane County households live in poverty. Too many families in our community are one missed paycheck or one medical bill away from homelessness. Too many families face increasing rent, with few alternatives for more affordable housing.

This situation is not sustainable. The failure of families to thrive jeopardizes not only the futures of their children, it jeopardizes all of our futures.

I plan to work on what is known as missing middle housing. This refers mostly to a housing style – to apartments and townhouses that meet our need for denser development, and can begin to fill our affordability gap. This fall, I engaged a pair of UO graduate students in creating a briefing book of the models that have been used throughout the country to increase missing middle housing supply, and I intend to work with knowledgeable stakeholders over the coming year to focus on some specific opportunities for the city of Eugene. Stay tuned.

My third campaign priority focuses on our dual challenges of climate change and population growth. At its core, this is an economic and infrastructure challenge. How we construct our built environment will determine our capacity to grow and at the same time retain the qualities in our community that we most cherish.

There are many moving parts in this process, all heading for council discussion this year. We're reviewing for approval a transportation plan, making a final decision about our urban growth boundary, implementing practices and infrastructure to enable us to meet our Climate Recovery and Vision Zero goals, and continuing our investment in our economic growth by improving the business and living environment of our downtown. I am eager to see us move forward on these commitments.

Which brings me to one overriding reality: our economic health. Our capacity to make progress on all of these issues depends on our financial strength. We are experiencing promising growth in our tech center – most visible in our revitalized downtown. Our ongoing investment in other sectors—food and beverage and green technology, for example—promise continuing growth in employment options at a range of educational and training levels. I plan to participate in monthly roundtables with the business community to hear their thoughts and priorities as we go forward. I will support the work of Lane Workforce Partnership in promoting clearer pathways for young people to acquire the education and skills they need to fill the jobs we are creating. And I plan to bring into sharper focus our investment in downtown as an innovation district -- a hub of shared workspaces and art places that will energize and be energized by our other investments in housing, fiber optics, and our public spaces.

Finally: our shared values.

I have often said that it is the unexpected events that determine the course of our lives, as individuals and as a community. Our job is to be prepared.

Our recent ice storm offered a test of our preparedness and support systems. The storm strained our public works and utility crews, our Egan Warming Center volunteers, and our individual tolerance for prolonged discomfort, anxiety and uncertainty.

We know that at some point in our future, our community will shake from the impact of a large earthquake. While the actual point in time is unknown, there are specific actions we can take to prepare for it. We can strengthen our infrastructure, we can plan for alternative water resources, we can increase the agility and responsiveness of our public safety systems. We have to make these investments even though many of us in this room may not be around for the coming shakedown.

This very specific crisis offers us an opportunity to think as a community about resiliency, not just in terms of our systems, but in terms of how we support one

another as a community. There's no time like the present.

In light of new national leadership and struggling state resources, we must strengthen our commitment to work together to advance the values that define our community: social justice, human rights, and environmental responsibility. These issues must be part of every decision we make: how we grow, the impact of new industry and new jobs, and how we, every day as individuals and as a community, stand for equality, fairness, respect and dignity for all of our citizens.

Quiero que Eugene sea una ciudad donde todos serán bienvenidos.

I want Eugene to be a city where everyone feels welcome.

It is unacceptable for anyone to be subjected to harassment because of their race, their religious beliefs, their national origin, their sex, their gender identity – or targeted simply because the victim works, lives, or shops downtown. I have been listening carefully over the past two years and I've heard about too many such incidents. I can tell you that I will not be silent when any of our neighbors is threatened or disrespected.

I am confident that, working together, we can enhance public safety while still respecting the constitutional and human rights of all.

I have been struck by the number of you, citizens in Eugene, who devote your time, your skills, and your passion in countless ways to help us fulfill our potential. We need to extend this conversation to communities whose voices are not always heard. We need to instill a culture of enthusiasm for the opportunities before us to create a robust economy and a city that is inclusive and accessible to all.

I count on you to share your insights and priorities with me and with council as we navigate the challenges ahead.

We build on a foundation of hard work and good will. We do this work together. Thank you.