I want to begin by thanking my deputy mayor, Dr. Tomalin.

Thank you, Helen Pruitt Wallace. St. Petersburg is a City of the Arts and we are so fortunate to have world-class talent, like our poet laureate, across every discipline of the arts world. Thank you for your elevation of arts and letters in our city.

To Chairwoman Amy Foster, thank you for that introduction, for your leadership, and your service to our city. I greatly admire your commitment to the most vulnerable members of our society and your efforts to bring a better quality of life to our neighborhoods along the 34th Street corridor.

I want to thank your colleagues, the rest of our partners in progress, Vice-Chair Darden Rice, Charlie Gerdes, Jim Kennedy, Ed Montanari, Steve Kornell, Karl Nurse, and Lisa Wheeler-Brown. Please stand and be recognized.

To the elected officials here today from our congressional delegation, legislative delegation, county commission, and school board - thank you for joining us, and for all you do for our community.

I am also thankful for our entire city team. Many are here. They are dedicated public servants who help the sun shine on us every day. The hard work, skilled expertise and commitment of our team - keeping this city on track 24-hours-a-day...it’s really inspiring, it’s beyond the understanding of most, and it truly exceeds expectations. Please stand and be recognized.

Finally, some of my youngest, smartest advisors are here.

They are the Mayor’s Youth Congress, and they are one of the reasons I have so much hope for the future. Please give them a round of applause.

Ladies and gentlemen...

The state of St. Petersburg is sunny and strong.

It’s sparkling...creative...limitless...progressively dynamic...emerging...delicious...awe-inspiring...eclectic…transforming...awake…bustling...transcendent...and Trump-Free.

Those are just some of the words that were shared with us on Facebook and Twitter when we asked our followers to describe the state of our city, and I couldn’t agree more.

We love where we live.

But we’re not perfect.

For all of our recent accomplishments, for all of our strides, there are still many lives to improve and many problems to solve.

There is still much work to do.

This is evidenced by the seven young men killed by gunfire at the end of 2015.

Now, it is true that crime, including homicides, is trending down in St. Petersburg. We’re a safe city. And our return to community-oriented policing has strengthened the relationship between our police and our residents.

But statistics and progress reports provide no comfort to the mother who finds her son face down in an alley.

And nor should they.

What you should know is that this is the issue I care the most about. Issues like the pier and the baseball team - they’re important, but they don't keep me up at night.

What means the most to me are people’s lives, their quality of life, their safety, and whether opportunities exist for them. That’s also what our city council cares the most about. It's our top job.

With the help of many in our community, and many of you here today, we are addressing the risk factors that affect our children and young adults. We are determined to do what we can to end gun violence, and most importantly, the underlying choices that lead to violence. Violence that too often leads to an exponential loss of life.

Those killed, and those who have killed…both are promises broken. Both are lives lost. These are the stories we read about.

But, there are many other stories that never make the paper. Many other lives that don’t end with a bullet, but languish in a reality of disenfranchisement and despair.

It’s unacceptable to me. It’s unacceptable in a place we’ve nicknamed the Sunshine City. And with your help, with the help of our city council and my entire team, we can write a new story for these young men.

Our approach is multifaceted.

From the halls of our government to the streets of our city, we’ve put policies in place to create opportunity, such as implementing paid parental leave for moms and dads.

We’ve raised the minimum wage to $12.50, with a plan to reach $15.00 by 2020.

New programs are connecting our police and fire departments to aspiring first responders at two south St. Pete High Schools. We’re working to establish a First Responders graduate preparation program at Gibbs High School that allows students to dually earn their high school diplomas and train to work with the St. Pete Fire Department after graduation, and we’ve introduced a new cadet program that helps defray the costs of training to be a firefighter- so the doors of opportunity can swing open a little wider for the underserved in our city.

At Lakewood High, the new Student Police Cadet Program allows juniors and seniors to take college level courses and receive law enforcement training to prepare for a career as a police officer. This training serves to strengthen their skills and improves their likelihood of completing the police academy. And hopefully, when eligible, the participants will apply to join the best police department in America, the St. Petersburg Police Department.

Our police department has come a long way in a short amount of time. There’s no reason to mince words. The department I inherited was appalling. For too long, we were failing the men and women who work there - the people who protect us. We were also failing the public, and making the news for all the wrong reasons. Today, we have a professional, compassionate police department led by a first-rate police chief and command staff. St. Petersburg, you are well served.

Now, externally, our Urban Affairs agenda, under the direction of Nikki Capehart, guides our work in South St. Pete.

Our focus areas include Opportunity Creation, Commerce, Neighborhoods and Families, and Cultural Affairs.

With leadership from partners like the 2020 Plan Taskforce, Boley, the Pinellas Opportunity Council, the Urban League, and the Pinellas Ex-Offender Reentry Coalition, and policy shifts like those I mentioned earlier, more of our residents are being given the jobs, tools and second chances necessary to thrive.

In fact, the number of youth served by our community’s workforce readiness programs jumped from 277 in 2014 to 478 in 2015 - a more than 70 percent increase.

Our monetary investment in youth employment for Fiscal Year 16 is $885,000 - a nearly 200 percent increase from a decade ago, and more than double the investment I inherited. And I want to thank City Council for sharing this priority.

The 2020 Plan pilot program, administered by the Urban League and the Opportunity Council, has helped to lift 38 families out of poverty, while simultaneously training their children in leadership and employment. After 18 months of hands-on work with our families, 36 parents-in-poverty have completed career skills training and at least 19 secured a new and better paying job as a result.

Through job recruitment, entrepreneurship, and business retention, we are stabilizing and growing our economy south of Central Avenue. I want to thank the Deuces Live and the 16th Street Business Association for their hard work and dedication to these vital corridors - corridors that both require and contribute to strong, safe neighborhoods.

And I need to pause here and recognize Mike Dove, our Neighborhood Affairs Administrator. Mike and his team have made remarkable progress in just two years. And this progress is most evident in south St. Pete, where we’ve reduced boarded properties by 45 percent.

Our final focus area for Urban Affairs is arts and culture. And a walk down 22nd Street South proves we have no shortage of either. But, we need to be strategic, and we need to ensure that the rich history and character of south St. Pete is preserved.

Our Urban Affairs Agenda - it’s working. We’re seeing results. But we must be patient. We know that breaking the cycle of poverty and lifting up our south St. Pete community requires a long term approach. An approach that is not simply window dressing - but instead creates sustainable results.

The results of our investment may not be politically expedient. In fact, our work may not all manifest during my administration, or even my lifetime. But it’s the right thing to do.

For too long, City Hall didn’t always do the right thing. Our leaders took short cuts. They erected pretty street lights and built things...without building up the people who live here.

Important work was done, but it wasn’t enough. We know we have to do more.

Now, we don’t have all the answers; not to gun violence, not to poverty. But we will do everything in our power to find the answers and the resources to implement them.

If it's time - we'll take it.

If it’s partnerships - we’ll build them.

If it’s money - we’ll invest it.

And, while we’re doing our part, Pinellas County Schools must do theirs.

I don’t want anything called a failure factory in my city.

I don’t want any child going to a school called a failure factory.

But the time has come to stop the finger pointing. It’s time for action and solutions. And it’s time we realize that we all have a role to play.

Everyone, in every corner of this city; whether you’re a retiree in Shore Acres or a young family in Lake Maggiore Shores. Everyone needs to be involved.

Zamarie Johnson understands this.

He’s twenty years old and a student at St. Pete College. He busses tables to make a few dollars. He has no children.

Zamarie could spend his free time doing what a lot of twenty year olds do.

But instead he stepped up to be the President of the Southside St. Petersburg Community PTA.

In a recent Tampa Bay Times story, Zamarie spoke of the important role his parents played in his education. Of his mom, he said, “She didn't make excuses, she got it done. She found a way to be involved.”

The same goes for Zamarie Johnson.

He is here with us today and I’d like for him to stand and be recognized.

Thank you, Zamarie.

There are so many good stories like this...so many people just doing the right thing.

People like Tameka Lindsey, whose son James attends Campbell Park Elementary.

A few months ago, Deputy Mayor Tomalin and Leah McRae, our director of education and community engagement met Tameka on National Walk to School Day. Tameka volunteers through the United Way to run the walking school bus program at Campbell Park. After school, she often looks after other people’s children until they make it home from work.

Tameka is one of the many reasons the sun shines here. Please stand, Tameka.

Our public schools mean everything to us. They are certainly essential to our city’s economic health and our Grow Smarter strategy.

This strategy highlights five growth industries for our city; Manufacturing, Financial Services, Data Analytics, Creative Arts and Design, and Marine & Life Sciences.

I believe you’ll see this strategy unfold soon at the Commerce Park site on 22nd Street, formerly known as the DIP. We are excited about the development plans there, and the new jobs and opportunities that it will bring to the Deuces.

Another major development opportunity is less than a mile away from the Commerce Park. It’s called...the Tropicana Field site. You may have heard of it.

The understanding we’ve reached with the Tampa Bay Rays is good news. It’s good news for baseball fans, for our taxpayers, for the city of St. Petersburg, and for our entire region.

Allowing the team to explore future stadium locations in Pinellas and Hillsborough Counties prior to 2028 increases the likelihood that the team will remain in our city or our region. Our taxpayers are now protected, and we’ve given some clarity to those seeking to build, relocate, or invest in our downtown.

I, of course, still believe the team’s current site, reimagined and redeveloped, is the best place for a new stadium. In the coming years, more and more people will be living within walking and biking distance of the team’s current location. In fact, 2,383 residential units are currently under construction or being planned for our downtown.

The interstate will continue to offer an easy way in and out for fans traveling by car. Our bus system will be modernized, and the potential for a high-speed ferry linking our waterfront to Tampa is a real possibility.

Many of the St. Pete residents born since the Rays’ first pitch in 1998 are now young adults with ticket-buying power, and with no allegiance to the teams that once called St. Petersburg their spring home. Finally, Pinellas tourism dollars and site development proceeds could supplement the private financing needed to build a new stadium.

Finally, as it relates to the Rays, we know St. Petersburg is the best place for this team. We know we’re a major league city. We’re an international city. We’re home to world-class museums, auto racing, and film festivals. Our burgeoning Innovation District is anchored by renowned health and marine sciences. Our downtown walls are adorned with the murals of famous and soon-to-be famous street artists.

We’re a city that competes for a Cuban consulate. Us. Little St. Petersburg.

We’ve become the daring city that I spoke about on the steps of City Hall during my inaugural address two years ago.

The Rays now have the opportunity to learn what we already know.

And now, our focus must shift toward developing a master plan for the Trop site and keeping the Tampa Bay Rays in St. Petersburg forever. I will soon be announcing the formation of a Baseball Forever Campaign to include St. Pete-based fans of the team, business leaders, and elected and government officials. They will be asked to pitch our city to the Tampa Bay Rays by demonstrating future fan and corporate support and the many benefits of remaining on the current site, perhaps on the site’s eastern half closer to our bustling downtown and waterfront.

In the event the Rays do find a new home in the Tampa Bay area, we will have the unique opportunity to transform 85 acres of urban land and the team will still be just a short drive away. We will also receive up to 24 million dollars of compensation from the team. Among our strategic allocations - whether from compensation received or from our redevelopment escrow - should be at least $5 million toward our efforts in South St. Pete.

The bottom line is that this is a win-win. And I can assure you that St. Petersburg will come out on top.

Because that’s what we do.

It’s what we did in 2014.

It’s what we did again in 2015 - a year marked by tangible progress; a year marked by moving forward on issues that were stalled for far too long.

We said goodbye to an inverted pyramid and hello to an extension of our iconic waterfront park system.

The New St. Pete Pier will truly be the people’s pier. There will be something for everyone. It will once again be the crown jewel of St. Petersburg, and more specifically, our new Pier District - the first phase of our waterfront master plan.

I want to thank everyone for their patience as the team behind the new pier finalizes their design and we finalize the permitting process. 2016 won’t be the most exciting year for our new pier, but it’s an important one. And we remain committed to staying within budget and honoring the programming requested by our residents.

In 2015, we stopped arresting kids who commit their first misdemeanor and started requiring them to give back to their community. Since the program began, 77 juveniles have attended our Second Chance program, and 70 have completed it successfully.

In 2015, we ensured our entire city team, from the mayor down, take inclusivity training because we know we must lead by example.

We kicked off our Healthy St. Pete initiative working with community partners to ensure our residents are living, eating, shopping, and playing healthy.

We welcomed Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez to St. Petersburg so that he could shine a national spotlight on our City of Opportunity initiatives.

We opened a new St. Pete College campus in Midtown, and with the help of Council and so many in our community, we made the Skyway Marina District a reality.

In 2015, we grew our cultural footprint with the start of SPF, the St. Petersburg Festival. And I cannot wait for SPF 16.

And we grew the footprint of our parks system by setting into motion the expansion of both both Boyd Hill Nature Preserve and Abercrombie Park in West St. Pete; nearly 40 more acres for preservation and exploration. Untouched. Forever.

We also put into place an executive order reinforcing my commitment to make St. Petersburg a model city for sustainable practices and set us on a path to becoming what’s called a STAR Community; Sustainability Tools for Assessing and Rating Communities. This will establish our baseline, help us identify gaps, and set goals for a sustainable St. Pete.

And with a grant from FEMA, we are funding the rebuild of five St. Petersburg homes in flood-prone areas, and physically elevating a sixth home above the floodplain. This should be complete by the end of this year, and our intent is to see this kind of work continue well into the future.

But there is still much work to do, and my concern about our city’s resilience when confronted by sea level rise, or the extreme weather like we saw this past summer, is only growing.

I remain hopeful that City Council will use a portion of our BP settlement to fund my recommendations for a professional, comprehensive resiliency plan and climate action plan.

Also in 2015, we recycled.

Finally.

I’m especially proud of our city because not only are we recycling in greater than expected numbers, but we’re recycling wisely. One of the things cities worry about as it relates to

recycling is the contamination level - or the amount of non-recyclable materials that are placed into the blue containers. Our contamination level was forecast to be as high as 20%.

To our surprise, the survey showed a 7% contamination level. That means more revenue received from our recycling materials and shows just how careful you have been to make sure we are successful. I anticipate the program will continue to grow, that more people will participate, and that we will save more money by diverting these materials from our solid waste stream.

I’m also proud of our city team. This was a huge undertaking for Mr. Ben Shirley and our sanitation department and they delivered.

And in just two days, recycling will get even easier for residents whose homes are on an alley.

Our progression to alley recycling is an example of listening, learning, and leading. Its how government should work.

In this instance, we listened to our neighbors. Specifically, the presidents of the Historic Old Northeast and Kenwood neighborhoods. Their advocacy for alley recycling prevailed and their civic engagement is to be commended. Peter Motzenbecker and Carolyn Gambuti are with us and I’d like for them to stand and be recognized.

Thank you, Peter and Carolyn.

And thank you to each of you, the people of the Sunshine City.

You know, over the last two years, I’ve traveled around a bit to promote St. Petersburg, to recruit businesses, or to increase trade opportunities for our existing businesses.

...other cities, other countries, other continents - I’ll go anywhere to tell the unique story of St. Petersburg, and the people who call it home.

Because it's the people who are our greatest asset - who make the sun shine here.

It’s the child running through the splash pad at Dell Holmes Park, and the teenager learning to mix music at TASCO.

It’s the Eckerd College Search & Rescue team responding to an emergency, and the entrepreneur wowing the crowd at the Greenhouse.

It’s Ralph’s Mob marching to the soccer match, and it’s the childhood friends opening up a market in the Old Southeast.

It’s the young woman selling strands of sunshine, and it’s the Kids & Kubs playing in it.

It’s two men getting married inside City Hall, and it’s the Tuskegee Airman celebrating his 100th birthday.

It’s the Bishop at Christ Gospel Church, but it’s also the rabbi at Temple Beth-EL.

It’s St. Petersburg, and it’s the best city in America.

Thank you.