President Gray, members of the Omaha City Council, friends, and to every citizen of our great city, Good Afternoon.

First, let me say what an honor it has been for me, and my family, to serve as Omaha’s 51st Mayor.

My husband Joe is here today and I would like to introduce him.

Joe is a good listener and has great perspective. I asked for this job, but he puts up with the changes it brought to our family life.

Thank you for being there for me.

Omaha is experiencing levels of opportunity and progress that are nearly unequalled in our history and our future is one of further growth and great potential. These will be achieved by working together.

Each year for the past 162 years, the people of Omaha have added to the foundation of civic achievement on which we stand.

Each generation worked hard to shape a bright future for themselves and their families.

They built what is now one of the most productive, livable, and creative cities in the country.

National news organizations and industry publications continue to tell the story of Omaha: positive stories of ingenuity, opportunity, and culture.

The list of rankings is impressive.

Omaha is the second best city for recreation.

Number one on the top 10 best American cities to work in technology.

And number one on the best places to live among Midwest cities.

The Omaha we share is confident, determined, and proud.

The Omaha we share is compassionate and charitable, with acts of good will at every turn.

And the Omaha we share is financially strong, hard-at-work, and focused on the future.

Our city has challenges too, and I will discuss those.

As citizen leaders, we have the obligation to be creative and resourceful in our approach to these challenges.

Two and a half years ago, when I accepted the honor and privilege to serve as Mayor, I pledged my experience, independence, and passion for public service to the job, to listen to you, work tirelessly, and deliver results.

While I am pleased with what we have accomplished together so far, it was Will Rogers who reminds us, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there."

Governing is a team business by design, and the City Council has helped our team do our jobs better.

You have been instrumental in the progress we have made on many issues, some of which I would like to highlight.

The overarching goal of city government is to enhance public safety. Taxpayers expect us to focus on it and deliver. Public safety has been and will continue to be my top priority.

We initiated a three-year plan in 2013 to increase the number of sworn police officers from 804 to 840; to do so without raising taxes and to reduce the occurrence of property crimes and violent crimes.

I am very pleased to report that we are meeting these goals.

The number of sworn officers will actually increase to 851 with the 2016 recruit class.

With our strong annexation packages, we fully funded these positions even though we enacted a modest 2 percent property tax rate cut last year.

Our just released 2015 crime stats are encouraging, with an overall 14% reduction of both violent and property crime.

In fact, of the seven index crimes we track, six show reductions.

The one increase is homicide. We reached an unacceptable number of 50.

Last year at this time, we had nine homicides. This year, we have had one. Our focus remains steadfast that 50 grieving families will not define the City of Omaha.

The violent crime category that includes rape, robbery, assault, and homicide is down 5 percent. Robbery is down 9 percent. Burglaries are down 38 percent.

All of these statistics are publicly reported by the Omaha Police Department.

So, I’m encouraged, but not satisfied.

Protecting you, your home, and your family is the reason for every action taken, and planned.

Chief Schmaderer has reorganized the detective bureau.

These officers are now experts in one property crime category, such as car theft. This change makes sense and makes a difference. Car thefts are down 19%.

We have also had great success working with our federal partners, planning large operations that target gangs, guns and drugs.

The Red Rising Operation put a dozen violent gang members in jail.

Chief Schmaderer said those arrested are at the core of a very violent street gang that has endangered our city.

Last month, we announced the arrest of six gang members using the federal “RICO” law.

This investigation started three years ago and will be ongoing.

Using RICO, law enforcement can address the criminal enterprise of a gang .

Since we have more police officers and overall crime is down, you would expect that crime clearance rates would improve, and they have.

The Omaha Police clearance rate for violent and property crimes is better than the national average. It’s especially important to note, over the last three years, the clearance rate for homicides exceeds 70%. Again, well above the national average for cities our size.

This success is shared with the community that works in partnership with our police department.

This is why Omaha is different from the cities we see in the headlines, like Ferguson, Baltimore and Chicago.

In fact, the Omaha Police Department has seen an overall drop in the use of force and use of force complaints over the last five years.

The department will roll out the first body cameras for officers in March.

As we hear news of crime in our city, we are all reminded that law enforcement officers have difficult and dangerous jobs.

Here in Omaha, we understand this in the most heartbreaking way possible.

Kerrie Orozco, seven-year veteran of the Omaha police department, lost her life serving the public.

We all grieved as if Kerrie was our family member, neighbor, or best friend.

She was all of those to many; especially our men and women in blue.

I am always honored to recognize Officer Orozco.

Even those of us who did not know her personally, know she set an outstanding example as an officer, a wife and mother and a community volunteer.

Fortunately, for all of us, citizens still answer the call for careers in public safety, just as Kerrie did.

These men and women make up our 2016 police and fire recruit classes.

51 police officers from one of the most diverse classes ever, will finish their field training and be on the streets of Omaha next month.

We are currently selecting the next police recruit class.

24 fire recruits are in training today and will graduate in the spring.

We thank all our recruits for their dedication to public safety.

Police work is more than enforcement.

Prevention is critical.

This year, we will work to expand our gang prevention specialist program.

Through our partnership with Boys and Girls Club of the Midlands, “Beto” Gonzales and Terrence Mackey are working every day to steer at risk-youth away from gangs, to focus on positive alternatives to gang life, and opportunities for kids to excel.

“Beto” and Terrence are role models.

They can relate to kids and their parents because their personal stories are similar to the stories they hear on the street every day.

Both have started parents groups.

Both work in schools to match youth with adult mentors.

Both teach a program created by “Beto”, called Gangs 101.

They are partners with our police officers, and are sought out by judges to work with youth who have taken a wrong turn.

“Beto” and Terrence show us we can have an impact through one-to-one relationships.

Gentlemen, will you please stand and be recognized?

Thank you for the difference you make.

A second area of focus for our administration has been creating government efficiencies and improving transparency for taxpayers.

We are pleased that our work to better manage employee health care contracts is paying off.

This year, our budget for employee health care is $45 million dollars.

This is a significant expense and we continue to find ways to manage these costs.

We have found savings through provider contract discounts, pharmacy manager arrangements and effective disease and case management programs.

This results in improved health care and taxpayer savings.

Likewise, our commitment is clear to better manage our resources for public facilities, and street maintenance and construction.

In July, we announced that an additional 100 million dollars would be available for important projects in our six-year Capital Improvement Plan.

These projects are possible in part, due to anticipated property tax growth from annexation, lower interest rates and early retirement of bond debt.

This results in additional bonding capacity without a tax increase.

In the coming months, we expect to resurface more than 80 lane miles of streets at a cost of over 8 million dollars.

The 2016 resurfacing budget is significantly more than last year.

I am committed to maintaining this high level of funding and will propose an increase in 2017.

Consistent with my long-time commitment to open and transparent city government, we have taken steps to always do the public’s business in public where it belongs.

We enacted a first-of-its-kind executive order for elected officials and employees covering the use of work-related electronic communications.

And, we were successful in our push over several years to persuade the Metropolitan Entertainment and Convention Authority to abide by Nebraska’s public records and open meetings laws.

Each year, our seven town hall meetings allow citizens to ask questions and comment on any subject. And they do. You have great ideas.

Our first budget briefing on city finances in mid-2013 did not present a very pretty picture.

Since that time, the City Council, department leadership, and all city employees have been part of a new management approach.

Our goals were to freeze tax rates or cut them if we could, stop rampant overspending in city departments, and end each year with a strong cash balance.

These goals have been achieved.

The carry forward amount for all three budget years totals more than 30 million dollars.

And for the first time in many years, under the leadership of Chief Bernie Kanger, we project the Omaha Fire Department will be under budget by approximately $1 million for the 2015 fiscal year.

Chief Kanger’s effective budget management allows us to put a new rig into service this year, buy new equipment and add new firefighters.

As you know, Chief Kanger plans to retire in May. Thank you for your leadership, dedication and your friendship.

We have some big firefighter boots to fill.

I want to thank our entire management team and employees for meeting challenging spending targets. Our continued vigilance on fiscal issues is imperative.

Another area of significant taxpayer expense in desperate need of reform was the ongoing issue of city union contracts.

There is a long and colorful history with these contracts, including the misguided approach of pushing expensive provisions to future years when someone else would have to figure out how to fund them.

That approach has stopped.

Since 2011, when the City Council asked me to assume the lead role in labor negotiations, and now through my service as Mayor, we have successfully negotiated and adopted 11 labor agreements: all three civilian unions, fire union local 385 and fire and police management.

Only the agreement with the police union remains and that is now before the state labor court.

These successful agreements include creative and unique cost-saving provisions that are good for taxpayers and employees.

I want to thank the leaders of the bargaining units with whom agreements have been reached.

We agreed to changes that some thought were impossible to enact.

You have recognized that the long-term impact on taxpayers is important while still aggressively representing your members’ interests.

And, you won’t be surprised to hear me say that more needs to be done to manage our unfunded liability.

A continued stable workforce, an improved bond rating, and common sense tax policy requires that we continue to work together and make more progress.

In terms of our economy and job growth, Omaha is at the point many cities hope to be.

With an unemployment rate two percentage points below the national average, Omaha is growing, building, hiring, and producing.

Fortune magazine recently highlighted Omaha, naming us the second best city in which to find a job.

Downtown Omaha is in the middle of a transformation.

The Capitol District, Kiewit University, the Civic Auditorium development, and HDR’s new global headquarters will create new jobs, housing, and entertainment.

North and south Omaha are also experiencing exciting changes and new development.

The Highlander 75 North development will provide housing and job opportunities in an area long overdue for change.

The nearby Prospect Village initiative is impacting families in the same, positive way.

This holistic approach to neighborhood revitalization is expanding to south Omaha’s Deer Park neighborhood.

As with Prospect Village, the Planning Department’s focus in Deer Park will be on the demolition of unsafe structures, housing rehabilitation, lead mitigation, new construction, energy-efficiency and healthy homes upgrades.

Our focus is to partner with organizations working in the neighborhood to benefit the families that live there.

This progress and good news increases our commitment to create opportunities for employment and job training.

This is an area of ongoing challenge for our city. So, we are taking important steps.

We support the Step-Up Summer Jobs Program, the Kumani Center for vocational training, Heartland Workforce Solutions, and the Greater Omaha Chamber Reach program, for a total of more than one-million dollars in 2016.

This is an investment that will pay off for job seekers, employers and small businesses.

As of today, we have certified 268 companies in our small and emerging business program. Nearly 15% of the total tracked contracts awarded in 2015 went to certified companies, exceeding our goal.

Many of these companies are working with the Chamber’s reach program to grow their businesses.

The report card is excellent.

More than 250 individuals have already participated in a reach program.

68 existing firms or people planning to start their own business are receiving training or technical assistance.

Let me share a few success stories:

Kenny Ingram owns Ken and Associates, a construction company specializing in concrete flatwork and sheetrock.

Working with reach, Kenny has secured a business loan, improved his credit score and grown his revenues.

His goal is to expand to general contracting. Kenny believes reach will make that possible.

Perkins and Perkins is a flatwork company. Since working with reach, owner Mike Perkins has secured bonding for the first time.

He has also qualified for financing to buy more than 100-thousand dollars in new equipment; important steps to build his business.

Reach has also provided resources for Gale Adams to expand his commercial painting business.

Adams Painting recently won a large contract at Metro Community College.

Gale credits reach with the tools he needs to continue growing.

Kenny, Mike and Gale are small business owners with big opportunities, made possible with the help of reach.

Gentlemen, thank you for your participation and, your strong work ethic. We look forward to your continued success.

This year, Heartland Workforce Solutions will introduce the successful “National Career Readiness Certificate” program.

This is a national credential employers use to identify career-ready, qualified job applicants.

Heartland Workforce Solutions will identify job seekers in high-poverty, high unemployment areas to increase linkage with workforce providers for training and education.

This program is intended to fill the gap between Omaha’s labor shortage and the unemployed.

It’s already achieving outstanding results in Iowa with more than 27,000 people earning a National Career Readiness Certificate.

Erin Porterfield, the Executive Director of Heartland Workforce Solutions, Keith Station, the Director of Business Relations, along with the Heartland Workforce Solutions Board of Directors will oversee this exciting program. Thanks to all of you.

I also want to point out that 13-thousand unique people visited their one-stop shop last year.

Our support of Heartland Workforce Solutions is helping thousands of people!

Our free enterprise system allows for achievement, competition, success, and disappointment.

In October, one of Omaha’s Fortune 500 companies announced its decision to relocate their headquarters and layoff a significant number of employees.

Regardless of the reasons, all of us are profoundly disappointed in ConAgra’s decision.

These are our friends and neighbors and their personal and professional well-being is important to our community.

Immediately after the announcement, we initiated efforts in partnership with the greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce and other leading Omaha companies to help those who may need employment assistance.

We are fortunate that Omaha will continue to be the home of more ConAgra employees than any other city.

Finally, our work continues to help Omaha be more livable, appealing, and generous.

The new Human Services Campus will provide shelter and services for our homeless.

When the campus vision is fully realized, the homeless in our community will have a single location for the assistance they need, including overnight shelter, a day shelter and services that lead to the ultimate goal of independent living.

Looking ahead,

For many years, elected City and County leaders in Omaha have talked about merging departments to reduce redundancy and improve services.

We are in serious discussions with Douglas County and the University of Nebraska Medical Center to open a crime lab on the UNMC campus with a full range of services.

It is critical for the Omaha Police Department, the Douglas County Sheriff and the County Attorney to have the facilities and tools they need to investigate crimes and successfully prosecute suspects.

I will urge the City Council and Douglas County Commissioners to support resolutions that allow these talks to continue.

We are also considering changes to our solid waste collection programs.

This includes upgrading curbside collection technologies and providing long-term green alternatives.

We are working now on our next annexation package.

Omaha is unique in how we are able to annex neighborhoods to ensure orderly growth and fiscally sound services to all residents.

In the last two years, we welcomed nearly 21,000 new residents to our city. The majority are now paying less in property taxes and receiving quality City services.

We strive to provide excellent customer service every day, to every citizen who interacts with city government.

Whether you call the Mayor’s Hotline, interact with an Omaha Police officer or firefighter, apply for a permit from our Planning Department or visit a city park or community center, we want you to have a good experience.

We are accountable and transparent.

We communicate and collaborate.

Solving people’s everyday problems is the best part of my job, because after all, this is the Omaha we share.

Thank you.