

ANNUAL STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

February 2021

Greetings and Happy New Year!

I cannot recall when those three words meant so much for so many people, not only in the United States, but across the globe. We would normally gather in person to hear about our past year in this annual State of the City address; however, like so many other events, this must be shared virtually due to the coronavirus pandemic.

While the residual impacts of 2020 will not magically disappear in 2021, clearly our ability to stare them in the face, work together and confront them head on will be significantly greater. While we'd like to forget most of the bad memories of 2020, there were some highlights that did not follow suit.

However, before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the extremely dedicated members of the Leawood City Council and City Administrator Scott Lambers. Working together with our talented professional staff, the storms of this past year were weathered in what should be considered remarkable fashion through innovation and team collaboration.

Along this journey, we also developed a much greater appreciation for our front line workers in the fields of public safety and the medical profession. When Fire Chief Dave Williams retired in early March, Deputy Chief Colin Fitzgerald was appointed our new Chief the next day. Just a few days later, Leawood was ordered into lock-down due to the pandemic. Chief Fitzgerald became the point person and liaison between the City of Leawood and the Johnson County Department of Health and Environment and provided excellent leadership throughout those difficult days.

Other high points included the fact that in February, the Kansas City Chiefs made a remarkable comeback to win the 2020 Super Bowl and to be crowned the "NFL World Champions."

The Kansas City Royals were able to play in a shortened baseball season in the midst of the pandemic to remind us all that a return to normalcy was indeed within reach.

The stock market continued to set new highs.

Private pharmaceutical companies worked around the clock with the federal government to fast-track clinical trials for approval of vaccines. Indeed, their heroic efforts were successful as the first doses were administered in December to those of greatest need.

Information Services Director Ross Kurz and his team ensured that we could effectively use new technology and meet remotely to safely carry on with our daily work requirements, while at the same time reducing exposure to the coronavirus. Furthermore, this opportunity for virtual meetings was provided for our dedicated residents serving on volunteer groups as well as for our Service Clubs, Leawood Rotary Club and Leawood Lions Club.

During this past year, we elevated our appreciation of NETFLIX, while at the same time taking advantage of enjoying the outdoors more than ever. We also found joy in being able to spend more quality time with our families. We developed a new sense of awareness for the needs of our neighbors and became more proactive in checking on their well-being.

Finally, we witnessed the end of 2020 and the start of 2021 with a renewed hope of better things to come for everyone, everywhere.

To put it mildly, 2020 was a year like no other. Never have the words “unprecedented” and “pivot” been used so many times to describe event after event after event during this past year.

At the national level, COVID-19 and the Presidential election shared center stage. As for the coronavirus, we were totally and completely unprepared. Consequently, by year’s end, more than 300,000 Americans had lost their lives. That is three times, I will say it again, *three times*, the number of Americans who were killed in the Korean and Vietnam Wars-- *COMBINED!* What

a horrific statistic! Fortunately, we are on a positive path forward to witness the demise of this devastating disease.

As for the Presidential election, it clearly demonstrated how politically divided we are as a nation. With regards to the election's aftermath, I really have no words. Maybe that is a good thing. Perhaps more contemplated silence and reflection is what we need at this highly charged time in our nation's history.

Looking back at 2020 from the City's perspective, the impact of COVID-19 forced many changes in how we conduct our business activities. In order to reduce the risk of infection, City employees found it necessary to adapt their daily activities to the new normal of masking up, social distancing and monitoring themselves for possible symptoms of the virus. While we did experience some confirmed cases of COVID-19 among our employees resulting in them being quarantined as called for by the CDC, the non-affected ones stepped up their games to ensure that City services were not significantly diminished.

We were still heartened by the annual survey of cities by personal finance website *WalletHub.com* where Leawood's previous two years of consecutive national rankings of "Number One" did see us drop to "Number 11" in 2020. This was, nevertheless, very good news considering that nearly 1,300 cities were included in the comparison. This latest ranking actually resulted in us having a national average of "Fourth in the Country" over a six-year period. I fully expect us to rebound in 2021 and move back into the *Top 10* next year.

One reason for my confidence is that in 2020, Fire Chief Fitzgerald and our Fire Department retained their status as an "Internationally Accredited Agency" by the *Commission on Fire Accreditation International*. Also, as a result of the Fire Department's efforts, the City's current "Insurance Services Office" (ISO) rating of "One," which is their highest ranking, was reconfirmed. As a result, the Leawood Fire Department is one of only 102 Fire Departments with both recognitions of all of the fire departments worldwide.

The year 2020 also witnessed Police Chief Troy Rettig and the City's Police Department having to deal not only with COVID-19, but also with both legal and unlawful protests due to out-of-state police shootings. While the objective of both protests may have been increased

accountability for the use of lethal force by police officers, the similarity ended there. The unlawful protesters who took to the streets to engage in violence and create civil unrest that resulted in injuries and property damage were not demonstrating for a just cause.

I am always proud that the City of Leawood's core values include inclusivity and empathy for the common good for one and all. These principles are shared by our elected officials and professional staff. Thankfully, through the diligence of Chief Rettig and his leadership team, our Police Department was proactively engaged with the protesters; and we were fortunate that all activities within our borders remained peaceful.

On another positive note for our Police Department, Leawood was named the "Safest City in Kansas" by three rating groups: *Alarms.org.*, *BackgroundChecks.org.* and *LendEDU.com.* We were ranked "Number Two" in overall safety in Kansas by the *National Council for Home Safety and Security.* We also received the "AAA Platinum Community Traffic Safety Award" for the seventh consecutive year. Finally, six Police Officers, Cody Morse, John McLaughlin, Jake Woods, Ethan Caldwell, Christina Farquhar and David Tompkins all received "Lifesaving Awards."

Both of our public safety Departments were featured in the fall edition of the Leawood Chamber of Commerce semiannual publication of *Look to Leawood.* The articles included interviews with both Police Chief Rettig and Fire Chief Fitzgerald describing their efforts to work in tandem to accomplish their joint mission to serve with compassion, especially with the onset of COVID-19. They and the members of their respective Departments deserve a hearty "shout-out" every day for all they do to keep us safe.

Another reason I expect our *WalletHub.com* rating to improve next year is because of the confirmation of the nation's financial institutions of Leawood's strong fiscal position in the municipal bond market. We retained our "AAA" bond rating from *Moody's Investors Services* and issued over \$33 million in temporary notes at an interest rate of .32%; and over \$2 million in general obligation bonds at an interest rate of .53%. While the City did experience a \$2 million COVID-related revenue loss this past year, this shortfall was made up through strategic reductions in expenses that have been carefully managed from the onset of the coronavirus. At the same time, there were no reductions in our highly-valued professional staff.

Another factor considered in classifications is a city's tax levy. The City of Leawood's 2020 mill levy rate once again remained flat and was the third lowest of all of the 25 cities of the First Class in the State of Kansas. Tremendous kudos to Director of Finance Dawn Long and her outstanding team.

Public Works Director David Ley and his Department did their part to maintain the City's infrastructure components. While some planned projects were necessarily deferred due to the fiscal impact of the pandemic on the City's 2020 budget, over \$14 million in roadway improvements were constructed. The South Bike Loop route consisting of 12 miles was also completed. There were 2400 linear feet of sidewalks, curbs and gutters replaced. Finally, the snow plow crews responded to 17 winter events.

We were fortunate to receive over \$200,000 in CARES Act funding that was spent installing touchless fixtures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. There were also ionization improvements installed within the City's HVAC systems to enhance air quality and the disinfection of municipal buildings.

As anticipated, the onset of the coronavirus had a chilling effect on the City's planning activities. However, Community Development Director Richard Coleman and Planning Director Mark Klein and their group did not sit idle during the pandemic as evidenced by the following new business announcements:

- *Nall Valley Shops* added The Aesthetic Place;
- *Iron Horse Center* welcomed Iron Horse Bar & Grill;
- *Bi-State Business Park* brought in The Medical Spa;
- *Parkway Plaza* had a number of new additions including Weber Flooring; Advanced Cosmetic Surgery; Kiddi Kollege Childcare Learning Center expansion; Umstattd Medical Office Building; HOTWORX – Gym/Physical Fitness Center; Pollie Skin + Nail Bar; Kincare Behavioral Health; Haven Salon Suites; and Black Label Threads Clothing Boutique;
- *Plaza Pointe* added Blooming Home Décor & Upholstery; Wok & Roll Express Chinese Restaurant; and Guidepost Montessori Early Education Center;
- *Market Square* celebrated Animal Health Center of Leawood; Carmelle Hair Artistry; and Optimal Health and Wellness;
- *Leawood Plaza* added Eskie and Associates Real Estate Development & Property Management Services; COMPASSION FIX Coaching Company; and Duck Donuts;
- *Town Center Crossing* saw the opening of Peloton Exercise Equipment and Apparel;

- *Town Center Plaza* announced AKT Fitness Center; Dry Goods Women’s Clothing Store; Amazing Lash Studio; devAAudio Systems; and First Ascent Climbing and Fitness Center;
- *Park Place* welcomed Ice Cream BAE KC; Modo Domani Men’s Clothing; and Verdigris Cocktail Bar & Lounge;
- *University Park* saw the opening of Robinson Wealth Advisors; and
- *State Line and 103rd Street* development announced Blue Beetle Pest Control; and D1-N It to Win It athletic training and practice facility.

As was noted earlier, Information Services Director Ross Kurz and his Department rose to the challenges that were created by the coronavirus. In response to the “new normal” sparked by the pandemic, successful inroads were made to improve the effectiveness of field personnel working from their City vehicles or homes which maintained social distancing and adhered to CDC guidelines. This was augmented by the installation of *CitizenServe*, a new online program expediting the City’s permitting, planning and licensing systems.

Not surprisingly, the City’s cultural arts efforts which are overseen by Parks and Recreation Director Chris Claxton and Cultural Arts Supervisor Holly York, were also impacted by the coronavirus; however, the *Art in Public Places Initiative* of the Leawood Arts Council managed to install two new pieces of public art adding to the City’s inventory of 19 sculptures. Both pieces of art were created by internationally renowned artists with local ties to the Kansas City metropolitan area. “Inspiration,” a 26-foot-tall abstract dancing figure by Rita Blitt, was donated by Leawood residents Bill and Mary Walker and sits at the southeast corner of Tomahawk Creek Parkway and College Boulevard. Kwan Wu’s “Women of the World,” donated by venture capital firm Nueterra Capital, has been placed in the entrance circle of the City’s Justice Center.

Another Department that was impacted heavily by the coronavirus was Human Resources led by Nic Sanders. This Department was charged with the implementation of the regulatory changes contained in the *SECURE ACT* and the *Families First Coronavirus Relief Act*. The Department also created and distributed over 300 coronavirus care boxes, including face coverings, personal and desktop sanitizers, as well as face-mask ear savers. It was also necessary to transition the City’s recruitment and interview procedures from in-person to virtual settings.

To our delight, an unexpected gift of 10,000 Personal Protection face masks was received due to our sister-city relationship with I-Lan, Taiwan. The masks were sent from I-Lan Mayor Chiang, Taipei Economic and Cultural Office Director General Chang, Lan-Yang Girls' Senior High School Principal Tseng and the family of Wei-Lun Hung. After distribution to our Leawood employees, the Leawood Fire Department graciously delivered them to Leawood students and staff in our area schools.

Surprisingly, the arrival of COVID-19 did not have a deterring impact on the City's building activities. Over 1800 building permits were issued in 2020. This included 1700 residential permits totaling almost \$71 million in value. Over 100 commercial building permits were issued with a value of nearly \$45 million, for a combined total of \$115 million for all permits in 2020 compared to \$83 million in 2019.

Other notable achievements for Leawood during 2020 included the following:

-The Cloister's Homes Association made their annual contribution to the City's Police and Fire Departments for the 25th year in a row. The total contribution over that time span is more than \$40,000;

-*HomeSnacks.net* ranked Leawood as the "Number One" "Best Place to Live" in Kansas for the third year in a row;

-*SmartAsset.com* ranked Leawood as the "Second" "Best Place to Retire" in Kansas;

-*The Kansas City Business Journal* categorized our four zip codes as the "First," "Second," "Fifth" and "Sixth" wealthiest zip code areas in the metropolitan region;

-*Money Magazine's* "Best Places to Live" ranked Leawood 42nd in the country, and it was the only city in Kansas to be recognized;

-*24/7 Wall St.* ranked Leawood as the "Number One" city in Kansas as part of their evaluation of "Best Cities to Live" in every State;

-Members of the Kansas National Guard from the 2nd Combined Arms Battalion, 137th Infantry Regiment, prepared over eight million meals at the Leawood Barstow School IDEA Space to be distributed to food-insecure Kansas residents in response to COVID-19;

-*LendEDU.com* ranked Leawood "13th" in the Country for having the highest proportion of residents that hold a "Bachelor's Degree;" and finally,

-*BarBend.com* recognized Leawood as “Number Four” in the State as part of its evaluation of “Best Cities for Fit Lifestyles” in Kansas.

Although I’m only mentioning a few accomplishments, I’m sure that you’ll agree that these are all very good reasons to celebrate.

In closing, I want all of you to realize that 2020 is forever in the rear view mirror. Let us not look back, but instead charge forward. The year 2021 is upon us, and with it is the dawn of a new year, bringing hope to inspire us to see the good that surrounds us. It is through innovation, wisdom, collaboration and entrepreneurship that we hope to continue to provide great service and results while at the same time embracing tolerance and respect for those with whom we disagree. It is said that hope is not a plan. That is true. It is far more than that. It is an indescribable and powerful belief in ourselves that we can survive while committing to deliver a better future for one and all for generations to come.

Thank you for allowing me the tremendous honor of serving as mayor of this great City. I am both humbled and grateful for the opportunity. May 2021 bring you and yours good health, much happiness and prosperity.