

City of Gainesville State of the City 2024

Good morning and welcome!

I'll begin by thanking Santa Fe College and President Paul Broadie for providing this beautiful space in downtown Gainesville. We are grateful for their partnership and happy to be with you today for this event.

Exactly 125 years ago yesterday, the people of Gainesville had a pretty unremarkable February day with high temperatures around 70 degrees. The next day, February 13th, 1899, the biggest snowstorm in history dropped one full inch of snow on our city. As the newspaper later reported, "Through Marion and Alachua counties the snow came down in regular northern style, and during the forenoon the temperature fell as low as ten. A fierce gale wind blew all day, keeping almost everybody indoors."

I ran for mayor, and was sworn into office, in fine metaphorical weather. Soon after, the weather changed, and we found ourselves in an unprecedented storm. Over the past eleven and a half months we've plowed a lot of unexpected snow together. But we found, and we continue to find, a way over, under, around or through.

When I first entered politics as an ambitious young kid, it was 1987 and I was a sophomore at what was then Santa Fe Community College. I was determined to start up a student government to help people take advantage of the many opportunities that existed at Santa Fe. One of my professors at Santa Fe, Donna Waller—who is here today-- supported those early student government efforts and also helped me understand the role our history plays in our present and in the future of a great community like ours. For that reason, I asked her and Ms. Vivian Filer to provide a Gainesville History Moment at every one of our regular city commission meetings. We are in the process of archiving those history moments, and you can already find several of them on the city's YouTube page.

Today, as a leader of the City of Gainesville, the work is similar to that Santa Fe student government work. I am honored to join my fellow commissioners in supporting neighbors across our community to find services and programs and to uncover new possibilities.

I want to take a moment to recognize my fellow commissioners. Each one brings a deep desire to serve our community, and it is a privilege to work beside them.

They are, of course:

- At-Large Commissioner and Mayor Pro-Tem Cynthia Moore Chestnut

- At-Large Commissioner Reina Saco
- District One Commissioner Desmon Duncan-Walker
- District Two Commissioner Ed Book
- District Three Commissioner Casey Willits
- and District Four Commissioner Bryan Eastman

We are supported and guided by our excellent and capable charter officers. These are the leaders who manage our outstanding team of community builders, the staff who work to provide the services, events and programs that make Gainesville a special place to live.

Please join me in recognizing:

- City Manager Cynthia Williams Curry
- City Attorney Dan Nee
- City Clerk Kristen Bryant
- Director of Equity and Inclusion Zeria Folston
- and our new City Auditor Stephen Mhere.

Let me also include Mrs. Brecka Anderson, who only last week ended her full year as interim city auditor and recognize her excellent service during this most challenging year.

As with all our staff and commissioners, our charter officers were called upon to perform in ways no one could have predicted in 2023, and everyone was up to the task. When it felt like the tide was rising around us, rather than allowing the ship that is our city to take on water, our crew set sail.

During the past year, we have done many things. We have focused on traffic safety and gun violence prevention. We have rightsized the City's budget and determined the best use of more than \$32 million in American Rescue Plan Act—or ARPA—funds from the Biden administration, including using more than seven-million dollars of that to directly build affordable housing with our community partners.

Always, we aim to make wise, smart, strong choices that take us closer to our goals. We have made progress over the past year.

We are a City on the move.

As I prepared this speech, I asked myself which issues would be most important to walk through in our limited time together today. Then I realized, as mayor, I have access to materials that will tell me exactly which subjects to discuss. So I plunged into

the emails that neighbors have sent to City Hall over the past year. These bring up questions and concerns, and I want to read some of them to you now.

About our trees and greenspace, this is from Dr. Ken Dodd – “I doubt seriously whether natural areas will fit into the long-term future of Gainesville.”

From Ruby Grey – “Exactly what does the City of Gainesville consider affordable housing?”

Regarding our work to balance the budget, Jeff Montgomery says – “As a Gainesville resident I appreciate the efforts being made to tighten the belt.”

Another appreciative email came from Lea Todaro – “I support our public safety, police officers, firefighters, and first responders as they put their needs second to everyone they help.”

We heard this important concern from Patrick Mitchell – “What do you do for the east side of town?”

Regarding sustainability and climate action, Ruth Lewis said – “We would like more information about how our household can participate in the food waste composting project.”

And then there’s this from Paul Jeselskis – “Why the hell am I getting an email from you? I live in northern Indiana.”

Apart from that one—and I apologize, Mr. Jeselskis, we’ll have someone look into it—these are much like the comments I hear from the folks who stop me at Publix or at church or on the street downtown. They say, “Mr. Mayor, I love Gainesville but I want to know what we can do to make it even better.”

The fact that so many of you care enough to ask is the first part of my answer. You are the key. Gainesville is pretty terrific, but it gets even better when we all work together, when we leave behind the outdated belief that Gainesville is a fragmented community—split down the middle.

Whether that means town and gown, east and west, black and white, or rich and poor—it doesn’t matter. Because I believe it is fundamentally untrue. We are one City. We are best when we convene, collaborate and evolve as one.

My favorite recent example comes from the day a couple of months ago when we revived a wonderful tradition. For the first time since the 1990s, we gathered along University Avenue for a holiday parade.

Commissioner At-Large Cynthia Moore Chestnut, our new mayor pro-tem, proposed and championed that parade. It fits into her vision for developing even bigger plans in 2024.

(Commissioner Chestnut- start video)

After 30 years of absence, we brought back a Very GNV Holiday Parade. Funded by the community for the community. We welcome you to join us for a very GMV holiday parade in December. Reserve your spot.

We're here at the MLK Dwight Hunter Pool, which is going to be included in the Eighth and Waldo Road Sports Project. We have received a feasibility study from our consultants on Citizens Field and the MLK Center as well as recommendations for the pool.

So now we are in the process of hiring an architect and with that they are putting pen to paper and we'll see the possibilities.

After we get the architectural plans, we'll be moving forward with procurement, staying in contact with you, the community, for your ideas and your input.

It's moving along. It may take a while, but it's on the way, so stay tuned. Stay in contact with us.

(End video)

Thank you, Commissioner Chestnut.

Back to the email messages we have received, I'd like to address the neighbor who voiced concern that we're not doing enough for east Gainesville. That is a historical fact, but as Commissioner Chestnut just shared, this commission is working hard to change the future.

The Gainesville City Commission, Alachua County, the University of Florida—represented here today by the now-retired, longtime Assistant Vice-President of Community Relations Susan Crowley—and other community partners are bringing true economic development and new amenities to our east Gainesville neighborhoods.

The Cornerstone Campus and Eastside Health and Economic Development Initiative is the most visible symbol of the City's commitment. Located at SE 20th Street and Hawthorne Road, it includes the Gainesville Technology Entrepreneurship Center—known as GTEC—a business incubator owned by the City and co-managed by Santa Fe College.

GTEC is a place where small businesses learn and grow. We are constructing a network of roads across the site. We're mitigating wetlands. And we're reviewing the full property for future projects. The goal is to attract a grocery store or food hub, mixed-use office development, and local shopping and retail.

The Eastside Health and Economic Development Initiative—what we call EHEDI—also is part of the Cornerstone Campus. This joint effort between UF Health, the City of Gainesville, Alachua County and the Biden administration is turning what had been open land into a state of the art health clinic and RTS transit hub. Gainesville and the county have each given \$2.25 million in funding to help build the 10,000-square-foot clinic that UF Health plans to open this year. The Biden administration added more than four-million dollars for construction of the transit hub.

Gainesville punches way above its weight when it comes to arts and culture, not only as a place to enjoy the art others have created, but as a sought-after workplace for artists in every venue. So much so that I've taken to calling Gainesville "Florida's Cultural Capital" ... and I hope you will as well. We have five working theatre groups. Our music history is literally unparalleled for a community our size, and this past October we gave a key to the city to one of our own homegrown talents, Laura Jane Grace, on the steps of city hall during Fest.

Gainesville is a nurturing and prolific home for writers as well. Today I want to especially recognize our local writers who together have accumulated the Pulitzer Prize; the Hugo and Nebula Awards; have been finalists for the PEN/EO Wilson Award and National Book Award; and have logged seemingly annual appearances on former President Barack Obama's public reading list.

All of these writers, I am proud to say, choose to make the city of Gainesville their home. We might take our neighbors Cynthia Barnett, Jack Davis, Lauren Groff and Joe Haldeman for granted, because they ARE our neighbors. We might see them at a local restaurant, in line at Publix, or just around the neighborhood, because they live and work shoulder to shoulder with us in Gainesville.

But we will NOT take them for granted today, as I call them up to receive the first Mayor's Awards for Excellence in the Arts, honoring their extraordinary contributions in the field of literature and creating works that are enjoyed around the globe.

I would be remiss by not now acknowledging our future bright lights, the young people from our community who are destined to do great things.

I'd like to take this moment to point out we are so very fortunate today to have with us representatives from our local high schools. Please join me in welcoming student government office holders from Eastside High School, Gainesville High School, Buchholz High School, Santa Fe High School, Lofton High School and P.K. Yonge.

We are so happy to have you here for this State of the City address.

And we are particularly proud of Justice Alexander, daughter of the City of Gainesville's Acting Director of Government Affairs and Community Relations, John Alexander.

Justice is the 2024 winner of the Edna M. Hart Keeper of the Dream Scholarship Award given by the Martin Luther King Jr. Commission of Florida. She is Eastside High School's student body president and vice president of the school's first Black Student Union. Justice, we are proud of you.

Ms. Alexander, I might add, also sings and plays the clarinet—which fits right in here in Florida's Cultural Capital. Concerts, theater, and learning opportunities contribute mightily to quality of life, and so over the past year the City launched a feasibility study to look into building a cultural arts center in east Gainesville.

Proposed by District One Commissioner Desmon Duncan-Walker, this idea is tied to the City Commission's larger effort to support young people by bringing to all areas of the City a variety of worthwhile activities, education and "things to do."

(Commissioner Duncan-Walker – start video)

Here at the Clarence R. Kelly Center in the heart of District one. We have the opportunity to educate, encourage and reach the lives of many young people. As we know, gun violence has proliferated throughout this country, including throughout District One and this Duval neighborhood. Centers just like the one behind me, the Clarence R. Kelly Center, are more crucial now than ever. The city commission just last year voted unanimously to support the creation of a cultural arts center.

As we work to plan for this new and exciting venture, we are responding to the needs and the literal requests of our youth who have asked us for jobs, mentors, things to do and places to go.

In 2023, the city commission declared gun violence a public health crisis in Gainesville. We brought on our partners and our colleagues over at Alachua County. We're grateful to them for their assistance, but we know that it's going to take even more. Santa Fe College has also joined us in this fight to prevent and stem gun violence as we work to address this public health issue.

We certainly hope to have all of you at the table because truly in this fight, it's going to take us all.

(end video)

Thank you, Commissioner Duncan-Walker.

As you just heard, supporting youth is one piece of our City's continuing effort to reduce violence in the community.

As Commissioner Duncan-Walker said, a little more than a year ago, February 2, 2023, our commission declared gun violence a public health crisis in Gainesville. We convened the City's first Gun Violence Prevention Summit. Held in August, and championed by Commissioner Duncan-Walker and myself, this summit brought together leaders in education, public health, government, community organizations, the judicial system and, of course, law enforcement to seek solutions for Gainesville and Alachua County.

The event drew an estimated 400 people to the UF Hilton Conference Center and those present agreed to continue the dialogue while developing action items for public safety, support services, and policymaking. City and County leaders made a commitment to address the issue further in joint meetings.

Following that summit, the Gainesville Police Department launched a Gun Violence Prevention Initiative, deploying resources while working with the community and other agencies to ensure all neighbors feel safe in our City.

The City also has used funds and best practices from the Biden Administration to create a new staff position. The Gun Violence Prevention and Intervention Program Manager will work across agencies and departments to coordinate data collection, apply research and analyze risk factors with the goal of reducing the proliferation of gun violence in our community. This new city staffer is expected to begin work in just a few weeks.

We are always working to bring City services to neighbors in need of assistance. We are providing program funds to support coordinated efforts with Alachua County and Santa Fe College to further partner with the many stakeholders that make a difference in the overall effort to reduce gun violence.

And in response to last February's resolution passed by myself and my fellow commissioners—declaring this a public health crisis—City Manager Cynthia W. Curry has designated Gainesville Fire Rescue Chief Joe Dixon as Special Advisor to the City Manager on issues of Public Safety focusing on gun violence, homelessness and public health.

In this special assignment position, Chief Dixon is guiding our coordinated efforts as we continue working with stakeholders and highlighting for the community the ongoing City services provided in these areas.

To date, the City of Gainesville has invested more than \$53 million in funding to provide or support gun violence prevention programs and services citywide.

One of our most innovative programs is the national initiative known as One Nation One Project. The goal is to use arts and culture to promote community healing and wellbeing.

The City Commission decided in 2022 to put two-percent of Gainesville's ARPA funds into this effort—that's almost \$650,000. We created a youth steering committee and pulled in community members in the fields of mental health, youth services and the arts.

After providing smaller grants to local organizations in phase one of the program, last year we entered phase two, awarding grants totaling \$200,000 to six area organizations including Aces in Motion, Dream on Purpose, the Hippodrome, and the Willie Mae Stokes Community Center.

We look forward to a final showcase this summer, that will be produced by a nationally-known but also homegrown talent. Artistic Director Marion Caffey, who is the producer of the longest-running talent competition in America, *Amateur Night at the Apollo*, also serves as the Artistic Director of Gainesville's One Nation One Project. We are fortunate to have Mr. Caffey and he will stage this summer's culminating event.

In addition to these efforts that build opportunities and reduce risk to prevent community violence, we have as a city embraced a second major public safety initiative. This one is focused on pedestrian and cyclist safety. In 2018, the City Commission adopted a Vision Zero Policy with the goal of eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries in the City of Gainesville by 2040.

In January of 2023, my fellow commissioners and I joined the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners in declaring a traffic violence crisis—and Gainesville is now implementing solutions to make the situation better.

We all know University Avenue has too many vehicle collisions. This is why last year the City of Gainesville received an \$8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation to plan, design and build improvements that will stretch from the University of Florida to Fred Cone Park. This will turn that portion of University Avenue into a Complete Street. We will lower the speed; add landscaping, islands, bike lanes and walking paths; and we will enable safe access for all our neighbors who use that road.

Because of the work that has already been done, in 2023 collisions causing serious bodily injuries to cyclists and pedestrians were reduced by 22 percent and cyclist and pedestrian deaths were reduced by ten percent. If we have even one cyclist or pedestrian death it is tragic and one too many, but it is important to mark progress where it is made.

I am also happy to report that last year the Florida Department of Transportation completed construction and installation of a pedestrian-activated

signal across East University Avenue between Northeast 26th Terrace and Southeast 26th Terrace. This new safety measure is a collaborative effort between FDOT and the City of Gainesville.

We prioritized this project after the death of four-year-old Dylan Roberts. On October 27, 2021, Dylan was struck by a car while crossing University Avenue on the way home from Fred Cone Park. The crosswalk is a City response to improve pedestrian safety and it is expected to receive the memorial designation “Dylan Roberts Memorial Crosswalk” with suitable markers. I want to especially recognize Dylan’s mother, Megan Durant, who joins us this morning. She has worked tirelessly and courageously to honor her son’s life and promote safety for all pedestrians.

Both state Sen. Keith Perry and Rep. Yvonne Hayes Hinson have sponsored a local bill that asks the Florida Department of Transportation to name the crosswalk and this is currently moving through the Florida Legislature—for which we are very grateful.

We now hear from At-Large Commissioner Reina Saco, who explains the way Vision Zero works as a building block for safety citywide.

(Commissioner Saco – start video)

I'm excited that we were able to win federal grant dollars to help redesign University Avenue East and West and all of 13th Street, north and south for several blocks. Beginning with this

redesign, we'll be able to make these streets safer for our cars, our busses, our pedestrians and our cyclists, making sure that our streets are accessible and walkable for everyone.

I'm excited to see all of the new changes we can bring forward for the city with our Streets, Stations and Strong Foundations dollars. Because of this tax that you guys voted for, we get to change so much of the face of Gainesville for the better, and those changes will ensure that Gainesville is stronger and better for the future.

(end video)

Thank you, Commissioner Saco.

Thanks to our incredible first responders, we have the foundation we need to continue building toward Vision Zero. I am talking about the police officers, and firefighters, and EMTs and paramedics who support and protect all of us on our roads and sidewalks, in our neighborhoods, businesses and homes.

Please join me in thanking Gainesville Police Department Officer of the Year Officer Emma Spaulding, GPD Civilian of the Year John Holt and Gainesville Fire Rescue's Reginald Kinsey III for being there, front and center. Driver Operator Kinsey, on November 26 of last year, rescued two people from a terrifying vehicle fire—while on his personal time, off duty. Our deepest gratitude goes out to all responders in the essential work they do for our city.

To help our first responders better protect the safety of our neighbors, in November 2023 we ratified changes to the City's three-year contracts with Gainesville Fire Rescue public safety employees, changing the agency to a unique 24/72 staffing model. This will permit our GFR firefighters and emergency medical technicians to work a 24-hour shift followed by three consecutive days off. It is expected to improve the work-life balance for current first responders and help us recruit more firefighters to the City of Gainesville.

It should go without saying that my fellow commissioners and I agree with the email from Lea Todaro, expressing support for our first responders and the essential work they do.

Because we value our firefighters, police officers, teachers, small business owners and others working to make our community special, safe and strong, we are placing high

priority on the need for new and innovative approaches to resolving the issue of affordable housing in Gainesville.

And we are making progress.

Exactly what does the City of Gainesville consider affordable housing? This was one of those questions that came in an email. The answer—that the City generally uses as its definition “housing or services that are connected to affordable housing programs or policies”—is admittedly bureaucratic. But what we are doing to provide affordable housing is very real.

Like our entire city commission, District Three Commissioner Casey Willits is a strong proponent of affordable housing and assistance for renters, buyers and homeowners. His district in southwest Gainesville includes more apartments than any other district.

(Commissioner Willits – take video)

Gainesville is continuing our commitment to making sure that our neighbors can find their home in the city, no matter what stage of life they're in somewhere. Our Department of Housing and Community Development completed the rehabilitation or replacement of 31 homes and assisted 20 neighbors with down payment assistance. This year, we conducted and concluded the application process to award over \$7 million of federal funds to help provide affordable housing in our community. Eventually, over 200 units of affordable housing will come to our community through this effort.

This year, our first example of voluntary inclusionary zoning will open where affordable units will be placed in mixed income developments. Heartwood has come to life with over a dozen neighbors moving into homes in Gainesville's mixed income neighborhood we developed in Southeast Gainesville.

With state and federal resources and housing partners like Gainesville Housing Authority, we are making sure that Gainesville is a place where everyone can call home.

(end video)

Thank you, Commissioner Willits.

We are proud that last year the Gainesville Housing Authority and the City of Gainesville were awarded a \$500,000 Choice Neighborhood Planning Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The joint application was one of only 14 chosen nationwide during a highly competitive process, and included a “transformation plan” to support the

revitalization of the Housing Authority's Pine Meadows and Lake Terrace properties in east Gainesville near Fred Cone Park.

As Gainesville Housing Authority CEO Pamela Davis said, this grant represents a golden opportunity to uplift our community and bring about lasting positive change. The strategic partnership between the GHA and the City marks a significant step toward this area of east Gainesville into a thriving, inclusive and vibrant place for residents.

And last year, City staff created an online interactive housing map. It's easy to find on the City's website. By accessing a user-friendly dashboard, visitors can review an enormous amount of information collected from a wide variety of development projects with start dates going back two years through the present day.

The map provides a dynamic view of current developments, funded housing programs, and other resources that play a pivotal role in Gainesville's housing market.

We all know that affordable housing was one of the hot-button issues that generated attention and news coverage over the past year. One of our first actions as a commission was to restore single-family zoning. We also changed our public works plans to save the oak tree outside Harry's and—in an improvement with costs largely covered by the Tree Mitigation Fund—we are building a more accessible streetscape.

That was a project where we listened to our neighbors. We heard from so many of you who wanted us to recognize that trees are part of our community's character, and I believe by reversing course we have shown Dr. Ken Dodd—whose email called into doubt our commitment to nature—that trees will continue to fit into the long-term future of Gainesville.

Here is the truth. While we all agree progress can mean construction and development, it can also mean correction or preservation.

For instance, the City Commission considered closing Ironwood Golf Course to help balance the City's Fiscal Year 2024 budget. But after hearing from its many supporters, we chose to maintain the golf course and study its future more carefully.

We listened to neighbors concerned about the partial restoration of the Thelma Boltin Center, which now will be repaired so we can stabilize the building and then look at the plans again.

We also spent months going back and forth on the City's open container ordinance because we wanted to improve public safety while supporting our neighbors who own and operate downtown restaurants and bars.

The solution came in two parts. We restored the pre-pandemic open container rules across the City—except in certain areas. District Four Commissioner Bryan Eastman shaped the concept of the City's first “Arts, Culture and Entertainment Districts.”

(Commissioner Eastman – start video)

On January 1st, our city created two arts, culture and entertainment districts, one in downtown and one in Grove Street.

During the pandemic, the city temporarily allowed drinking on public right of way to support our small businesses and give residents a safe way to go out with friends and family. And what we didn't expect is this small change had a huge impact on our arts and culture. Immediately, we saw outdoor concerts taking place, pop up markets, dance groups and restaurants using little use streets and trails to create exciting, walkable events that were uniquely Gainesville.

To keep these going, we now have a downtown ACE district and a Grove Street ACE District. You can see it for yourself on a Friday night: some of Gainesville great music in front of The Bull on our Streatery or a How Bazaar pop-up market on a Saturday or the Grove Street farmer's market on Monday.

These districts are helping to highlight the great arts and culture that we have in our community. They're helping grown our small businesses and frankly are just downright cool to go and see.

(end video)

Thank you, Commissioner Eastman.

These new districts were created with careful thought, after listening to many community members, over the course of months.

This is how we move forward. With my fellow commissioners, I worked over the past year to understand the issues and make wise decisions. We heard from neighbors, staff and experts in each field—and each of the examples mentioned is proof that several times in 2023 we changed direction when the situation called for a change.

That is not a sign of failure. Listening, and following through with action, is a sign of strength. And I think everyone who has taken time to share a fact or opinion with the commission—whether that's at City Hall, in an email, or at the grocery store.

Of course, much of last year was shaped by our visits with the Florida Legislature's Joint Legislative Auditing Committee—or JLAC. The year was shaped by House Bill 1645 that separated Gainesville Regional Utilities from City government.

And it was shaped by our hard work to reduce spending and balance the budget for Fiscal Year 2024.

Last budget season, in response to the concerns of JLAC members that Gainesville's General Government has been taking too much money from GRU, the City Commission adopted a formula for the Government Services Contribution—formerly called the General Fund Transfer. This reduced the transfer from GRU by \$19 million dollars, a reduction of 55-percent. As a result, our City's new budget reduced spending in 13 of 20 General Government departments.

Those budget reductions led to difficult choices in 2023. We elected to close the Reichert House Youth Academy in May at the end of the school year. The valuable services it offered are being transitioned to the community so this work can continue.

We eliminated 125-and-a-half full-time equivalent positions. We created new efficiencies, moving Traffic Operations from our Transportation Department and back into Public Works, where it is a very good fit. But the changes will not end there.

The effects of this separation from GRU—and the budget reductions that will likely continue—will drive our city's budget process as we work toward fiscal year 2025.

The City Commission and staff have worked very hard during this process to preserve the things that matter. Our parks and special events fit into that category. Sparks in the Park still happened. The Hoggetowne Medieval Faire still happened. This is due to our outstanding team in Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs who, in 2023, earned a perfect 100-percent score in all 154 reaccreditation standards set by the Commission for Accreditation of Park and Recreation Agencies and the National Recreation and Park Association.

We are proud of that achievement. This department oversees 90 parks that span 3,268 acres across the City of Gainesville, including historic sites and wetlands filled with alligators and other wildlife.

Our nature parks also include creeks and tributaries. Places like Hogtown Creek and Rattlesnake Creek need special protection. For that reason, today I make an appeal to all neighbors and visitors to stand with us against illegal fossil hunting. This form of tourism is not lawful on our public land and—unless permission is granted—constitutes trespassing when done on private property.

Fossil hunting and collecting is prohibited because it is harmful. The damage done to creek beds leads to erosion. The digging and removal of fossils or artifacts exploits our natural history and violates the environmental protections passed by the State of Florida, Alachua County and the City of Gainesville.

We ask you not to do this, not to support businesses that promote this, and report this behavior to the Gainesville Police Department when you see it.

We love our creeks.

In fact, we love them so much that last year we dedicated a special effort to making one of them even better.

District Two Commissioner Ed Book spent a good part of 2023 coordinating with Keep Alachua County Beautiful and other community partners on the Downtown Refresh, an effort to clean Sweetwater Branch and prioritize the environmental health of our downtown.

(Commissioner Book – start video)

2023 was a challenging year for the city of Gainesville. I'm going to focus on just a few of our successes. One of those was the GNV downtown refresh. What was it? It was a cleanup, a beautification, litter cleanup, working to take trash out of the creek.

We cleaned up over 15,000 pounds of trash with over 100 volunteer and with those 100 volunteers, amongst them was our city staff, Rotary Clubs, Keep Alachua County Beautiful and the Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce. We worked on this in November and December, and this is ways that we make a difference in partnership with both private and corporate and business partners.

(end video)

Thank you, Commissioner Book.

2023 also was the year the City of Gainesville appointed its first Chief Climate Officer, who now is working with stakeholders to develop a climate action plan designed to meet our citywide goal of net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045.

So when Ruth Lewis asked in her email about Gainesville's residential food waste composting program, the answer is closely tied to the climate work done across departments—from Public Works to Sustainable Development. To date, households taking part in that composting program have contributed to the diversion of more

than 58 tons of food waste from area landfills. This has reduced greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 37 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent.

For Ruth—and anyone else who may be interested—program information is available online at GainesvilleFL.gov/FoodWaste.

We want you to know that much of what we do for the community can be found online. That's because of the City of Gainesville website. Our website, worked on by our Office of Communications along with key staff in other City departments, was named both the 2023 Website of the Year and the People's Choice Winner of the 13th Annual Digital Government Awards. These honors were given by Granicus, a leading provider of government experience software services and solutions.

This team also is responsible for the “On the Move with the City of Gainesville” booklet you found in your chairs along with our State of the City publication. And with help from one of our talented tech experts specializing in GIS, you also can scan the QR code right inside the front cover and visit these interactive maps online.

“On the Move” outlines all of the exciting projects happening here in the City of Gainesville, in all four districts. These are roads, parks, crosswalks, transformational economic improvements—our growth and our promise are right there on those pages.

It's Gainesville's very own, very current story of technology, progress, teamwork and innovation.

I believe that is a suitable note on which to begin closing. As I mentioned at the beginning of this speech—exactly 125 years ago, newspaper reporters were watching the snow come down and waiting to get the story into print. Today, that information would be shared online ... instantly. You would find it on our website—our award-winning website—and on social media. You'd be outside taking pictures with your phone and posting them to the Insta. You would get continuous updates from our partners at TV20, the Gainesville Sun, WUFT, the Independent Florida Alligator, Mainstreet Daily News, and the rest of the region's media outlets.

If the snow kept you from attending our regular City Commission meeting, you would see it broadcast on Channel 12. That meeting would very possibly begin with an invocation given by our good friend, Dr. Saeed Khan—a frequent collaborator at Gainesville cultural events who we are grateful to also have with us today.

And if there was snow on a day like today—with our modern technology—you would hear from meteorologists. You would Google for instant access to internet archives

containing data about the science of cold snaps in Florida. Our City of Gainesville Emergency Operations Center would be activated in advance, and our first responders, public works crews and other City staff would be standing by, ready to get Gainesville back up and running even as the last snowflake fell.

And afterwards, many of you would send us emails—telling us what we did well and what we need to dig in deeper on. Always, we learn and listen. We are making progress. Email just makes it feel more immediate.

So, yes, as we look back at 2023 I can tell you we are moving forward. We are improving our technology, sustainability, equitable development, access to the arts and economic opportunity. We are working to enhance traffic safety and prevent gun violence. Despite typically not being a winter wonderland, we host—every year—a day of seasonal celebration each December. And that day now includes a Very GNV Holiday Parade.

My fellow commissioners and I know, whether you appreciate our efforts or want to fire off one of those emails, you agree with us that Gainesville is worth the effort. I'm so glad that you are part of the Gainesville story and that Gainesville is part of your story.

Let me close by saying this to every person working for our city, our police officers, our administrative assistants, our firefighters, our lifeguards, our bus drivers, every single one of you: We are all in this together, and none of what we have accomplished ... or have in us to accomplish is without you. I know that in the coming year there will be challenges. I know that “The water may rise ... again ... but we shall set sail.”

No matter how the wind blows, the sun will shine on the City of Gainesville.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this time with you. May God bless you, and may God bless our city on the move.