

State of the City 2018

Greetings honorable council members, citizens, staff, and guests. As your Mayor it is my pleasure to present to you the 2018 State of the City.

A number of years ago I remember thinking what an awesome city Bryant is and what amazing potential it has. I also recognized that as we were growing so rapidly, there was a lack of needed connections and that we as a city desperately needed to grow our connectivity between one another. This was a growing pain.

We needed to connect with one another in order to realize our shared goals and how to reach them. Our local government needed to better connect with our school district; with our chamber of commerce; and with our state agencies. We needed 21st century technology to connect us to the people we serve and to provide better efficiencies, transparency and accountability.

Our neighborhoods, schools, and parks needed to be better connected for ease of access and improved safety. Our police department needed a strong connection with our school district to keep it safe and in turn keep our city safer. Our parks needed a stronger connection with the numerous volunteer organizations that are vested in our city to provide services that improve quality of life for everyone. Our streets needed more connections in order to reduce traffic congestion and stormwater systems needed better connections in order to protect our property values. Water tanks needed to be connected to pump stations and more water and wastewater lines in order to provide better service to a growing city. Our planning and community development department needed to be better connected to best practices for building an outstanding city, not just the next suburban ring outside of Little Rock. Our fire department needed to be connected through better training and better facilities, including two new fire stations.

It humbles me to look across this room and see so many faces that shared the vision to connect; individuals who rolled up their sleeves and put in the hard work to be rewarded in all of these areas with amazing, unimaginable successes of connecting over the past several years.

We are becoming a city that dreams together about what we can be like when we work together. There's room for more people to plug into the areas that they are most passionate about and make an incredible difference.

Just this year two new organizations, Traxx and Mills Parks Trail Builders stepped forward to make a positive difference by volunteering to build wonderful amenities in our parks for others to enjoy. Currently there is a volunteer group working to build some amazing community gardens and another group working to build a dog park. If you are here tonight with one of the many boards or organizations, city employees, volunteers, interns or students committed to making a positive difference in Bryant, thank you for all that you do.

The State of our City is strong because of YOU!!!!

We are fiscally strong. Our budget is balanced; year after year we are completing and pursuing much needed capital improvement projects across every department. I am very happy to announce tonight that with the completion of a few more stormwater management projects since last spring, we have seen significantly less damage from the big rains we experienced last week.

Every department has grown in their ability to better manage their budgets, to be conservatively creative, plan for the future and for contingencies. As a result of these efforts we have a healthy reserve in place. Next month the city council will have the opportunity to approve another ½ million dollars in one-time projects across numerous departments that will be funded by our reserves.

It's easy to bring you good news, but it is also my responsibility to deliver bad news. Central Arkansas Water has increased our wholesale rates yet again. We are at their mercy without a freshwater source in Bryant. Following our 2017 rate analysis study, which was conducted by an independent firm, it was determined the only rate adjustment needed on the water rates was the pass through from CAW. The firm also determined that the only rate increase needed on the wastewater rates was in relation to the Consent Action Order mandated by ADEQ, and which we negotiated to upgrade our waste water lines. Those lines have been operating below necessary capacity for our growing city.

We live in a country that does not allow cities to dump their waste water into the environment without it being properly treated. If you have ever traveled to a country that doesn't regulate this you would have a greater understanding and appreciation for this aspect of America.

The rate analysis study is available on the city website, please take the time to review this if you have concerns over our water rates. It will also show you that Bryant is no longer even close to the top of most expensive water rates in Arkansas. We are now in the 9th percentile for water rates and 59th percentile for waste water rates. This is a big improvement from years past.

Over the course of the past few years, we have periodically issued a survey to get a clear perspective as to what is most important to you as Bryant residents. Tonight, I want to share with you the results of the survey and the action that has been taken and is being taken as a result of the priorities and vision you set for the City of Bryant.

The Survey showed these five areas to be important or very important to the majority of responders.

- Improved Connectivity
- Establishing Architectural Design Standards
- Creating a Vibrant Town Center
- Parks & Recreation
- Maintaining a Clean City

You have said street connectivity was important in every survey issued over the past few years. The council and I have responded by leading a strong bond campaign which the voters approved by 72% that is allowing us to create a new north/south connector called Bryant Parkway. Currently there is more than thirty-three million dollars in new street construction planned, funded, and soon to be under construction for the City of Bryant, not including the Hwy 5 expansion being completed by the ARDOT and Alcoa widening which will be completed later this spring.

The on/off ramps at exit 124 have already much improved our connectivity. Later this year, those ramps will be connected by Bryant Parkway all the way to Hilltop

and Hilldale near the new Parkway Elementary and south all the way to Shobe road. The most southern connection from Shobe to Reynolds Rd just south of the new Junior High that will open in 2019 is under design and will be under construction by this time next year with an anticipated completion date of late 2019.

There are also plans underway to connect Sheaff through to Prickett. This small connection will make an even greater impact on connectivity than the first section of Sheaff that was opened in 2014. This project will be funded by a State Aid grant.

These connections and others will go a long way toward giving alternate traffic routes. This additional connectivity will alleviate some of the congestion that we are currently experiencing. They will lighten the burden on Reynolds Road and increase the capacity for economic development along this very important commercial corridor.

While we are building new connections, we are also keeping up with our existing street repairs and continue to execute much needed stormwater improvement projects.

Next in the survey, you gave a strong indication by your answers that sidewalks and pedestrian access were important. Just this past March, the city council passed the Walk Bike Drive Bryant Master plan that was made a part of our master street plan. This long term planning document will guide positive growth for all methods of transportation for decades into the future and will become transformative to our city .

Currently, Bryant does not rate well with our Walk Scores. However, you can start watching that rating system and over time we will greatly improve in this area as we grow our sidewalk system, trails, bike lanes, and routes. For more information on these plans you can visit the city website.

Next in the survey you told us Attractive Commercial Buildings were important.

In September of 2017, City Council adopted new commercial design standards developed by the Planning Commission and staff. These standards are set out to maintain good civic design and arrangement within the commercial corridors and neighborhoods of the city, thereby ensuring a desired aesthetic thriving economic environment.

We are excited to be building two new fire stations in 2018. A lot of thought has gone into their architectural design, keeping in mind aesthetics and functionality. These buildings are going to be around for at least fifty years and they should be constructed to meet high standards that reflect the quality of our city.

Regarding commercial buildings, in 2017 alone sixty-five new commercial businesses have opened in Bryant. We are working hard to increase your menu choices, and I can assure you those will come.

If someone says to meet me in Bryant where are you going? Where is the center, downtown, mainstreet? A resounding super majority stated in the survey that a Vibrant Town Center was important or very important.

This one is going to take some dreaming, collaborating, long term planning, and visionaries to make it a reality. But I'm up for the task, are you? Later this year we will see a makeover to Reynolds Road in the Heart of Bryant. Immediately following the completion of that construction you will be invited to a Heart of Bryant charrette to share your ideas and inspiration for the best path forward to fulfilling this dream for Bryant.

Parks and Recreation has been a high priority in Bryant since the very first park, Ashley Park was built by volunteers on donated land. We have a wonderful parks system, and it keeps getting better. I'm so excited for the makeover underway at Mills Park. The pool is complete, the new all inclusive playground will be open before summer, and the walking trails will be overlaid this year. There are almost five miles of new mountain bike trails within Mills Park and across the street there will soon be a dog park. The dog park effort is being led by a group of amazing volunteers and will become a reality because of their continued efforts.

At Bishop Park this year, we will see major renovations that will allow us to expand our services to everyone who enjoys this park on a daily basis. You can follow all of these upcoming improvements and their timelines on the city website.

Beautification is important to you according to the survey.

Almost every responder said a Clean City and Neighborhood is important. This is an area where we need substantial improvement. I am so disheartened when I drive through our city and see the amount of litter everywhere. It is one of my greatest pet peeves. If I can call any of you to action to help create a solution for this problem, I welcome you.

We have commercial businesses that on a daily basis have trash bins or cans overflowing right onto the sidewalk, into the parking lot and into our ditches. We have trash haulers that are littering this city from one end to the other. The interstate right of ways coming into our city are covered in litter. We need to be tough on litter, and we need to be proactive. This will take some hard work, political will, and some calling to action. It is my hope that this time next year, we will have changed our litter culture to a clean society. I have ideas, but I would first like to hear what your thoughts regarding a solution.

Lastly, you indicated landscaping along streets, medians and businesses was Very Important and Important. While we are resolving the litter issues in these areas, we are also going to review our landscaping ordinance and our Tree City ordinances to ensure we are doing all that we can towards beautification.

Priorities are for 2018

#1 Keeping bond projects on track

#2 The implementation of the newly passed A&P tax for the greatest benefit for our city. The parks committee and a number of community organizations advocated for the passage of this measure for the purpose of building a stronger tourism industry around youth sports and other events our city can host. Bryant's first A&P Commission will be confirmed later tonight by council.

The commission's decisions will set the course for the success or failure of this endeavor, however each and every one of you are prudent business people with a strong affection for seeing Bryant do its very best. You have my full confidence.

#3 Continuing to mitigate and alleviate stormwater issues across Bryant. I will not waiver on my commitment to resolve our stormwater issues. It can be done, and it is being done!

#4 Activate and implement the 21st century vision for the Heart of Bryant that supports our future and respects our past.

#5 Supporting our #1 asset as a city and that is our amazing city employees.

In 2012, we implemented step and grade for our uniformed officers. Since then we have managed to raise any employee that dropped below the minimum pay scale to minimum each time we adopted the new Jesup study. We have given a maximum of 1% merit based raises each year. Our non-uniform employees have a proportionate number of employees at the bottom of the payscale and without action, are going to stay there. The pay scale for employees should be market rate for the job being performed and follow a bell curve, not skewed to the left or the right. I have directed the department heads and finance director to come up with a solution to raise our merit increases from 1% back to 4%. It is my plan to present this to the council later this year. Also, I am going to ask council next month to approve a longevity bonus program similar to what other comparable cities have done. This bonus system is something the city can afford to start implementing immediately, retroactive to January 1st of this year. It is conservative, but it is something and every full time employee would be included. A person does not work for city government to seek riches. They do it because at their core they are servants for a cause greater than themselves. When you see one of these men or women out there working, please tell them how much you appreciate what they do.

Thank you City Council for your wisdom and guidance over our city budget, ordinances, and policies. But mostly, thank you for your kindness and your friendship.

To the Planning Commission, thank you for having the courage to build the Bryant of our dreams.

To the Water WasteWater committee, thank you for your oversight of our most precious natural resource and all the work you put into long term planning for our growing city.

To our Parks committee, thank you for being so dedicated to Bryant Parks and Recreation, your guidance, your creativity, your advice, your love for nature and your wisdom.

When you leave here tonight and in the coming weeks and months, think about how you are connecting with others. And if you want to become more involved in your community, please come talk to me and tell me what you are interested in as I would love to help you connect.