

State2023

Good evening, to the city council and each of you. I thank the council for allowing me to speak at their meeting as I follow the dictates of MS Code 21-8-17, which states that the mayor shall annually report to the council and the public on the work of the previous year and on the condition and the requirements of the municipal government. I bring to you the State of the City of Laurel, MS. I also apologize for being so late, it has been busy, there is a lot going on. I'll try not to bore you long.

Khalil Gibran wrote, I slept and I dreamed that life was all joy. I woke and saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy.

Most of the employees of the city are a very important part of the success of the organization. There are others, and they know who they are, who are here only for the paycheck. Nevertheless, we will again be seeking ways to increase even their pay in the coming year. If it is not accomplished, it won't be because we did not attempt it. We have in our budget the plan to increase the salaries of all our full-time sworn public safety officers by 15.8%. This sizable increase totals \$902,000 and will be funded by a 4.2 mil ad valorem tax increase. This estimated increase on a home valued at \$105,000 will be approximately \$42.55 per year. The reason for the increase is that this amount is not a one-time expenditure, but a perpetual cost. We feel that our public safety officers deserve it. Join me as we examine our departments.

HUMAN RESOURCES:

This department is headed by Nellie Satcher and has four other employees. All full-time city employees and elected officials, are covered by the city's self-insured health coverage, this coverage is paid at 100% by the city. Currently, we are covered by a Blue Cross- Blue-Shield plan. Being self-insured, it is very important to keep a healthy balance in the account to pay claims. We have had balances of nearly \$1 Million, but in the last several months it has fallen drastically. In January of this year the balance was only \$340,000, which means that we had claims with some high dollar amounts, some of these claims are unfortunately for cancer, heart issues and kidney issues. We are not rushing it, and hope we don't have to do it, but it may come to the point where we have to ask employees to contribute to the cost of their health insurance. It is not unheard of in the rest of the job industry. Again, we are not rushing into this, but we want you to be aware of the possibility. I need you to understand that there is not an unlimited amount of money that the city has at its disposal, even though some think that it is. Additionally, as we speak, the state legislature has not come up with a solution to the issues with the Public Employees Retirement System, commonly referred to as PERS. The system is currently paying more out than it is taking in. There will have to be some changes, and we are awaiting to see what those will be. They did reduce the amount that employers were originally required to increase for this year.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:

Jeff Williams and John McGraw keep the IT department up and running; where they are tasked with keeping the 110 computers that we use on a daily basis operating properly. These computers were upgraded in 2022 and in 2025 they are scheduled for another replacement. They have continued to connect the entire Sportsplex through fiber optic cable and are also in the process of replacing and adding security cameras in various places throughout the city. This department is vital, realizing the technological age in which we now live.

INSPECTION:

The Inspection Department is headed by Sandra Hadley. This department issued 1,389 building permits last year. The cost of the permits was \$353,871.00, with the projects for the permits totaling \$49.2 million. The department continues to enforce building codes, and other violations to make Laurel, a place where people want to live, work, play and worship. We are continuing to make changes in the enforcement side of the department. Where we traditionally would bring overgrown properties and others that were in violation to the city council, we have since reconstituted the Environmental Court to hear many of these cases, instead of the council. During this process we hired a judge for this court. Additionally, the Inspection Department has now been empowered to cite properties that need cutting and where the cleaning amount is no more than \$250. The council will not have to be involved, unless the

person disagrees with the finding and wants to appeal the findings, the appeal would go to the council. The council will also continue to hear and make decisions on dilapidated structures that require demolition. The short-term rental business is still thriving in the city, and the process seems to be going smoothly. We have 128 short-term rental locations. This was the first year for renewals and since there was not a process to remind the owners/managers of the renewals, there was a little hiccup, but I think it was ironed out. The ticketing and removal of junk vehicles used to be handled by the Inspection Department, they now must go to Environmental Court for a decision to be made by the judge. I hope eventually you will be able to visually see the progress. The number of things that need to be done are enormous, and people are calling daily to report concerns that they have. Please be patient with them. They also did the inspections on our MS Home Corps grant where there was one complete rebuild and four homes were rehabilitated at a cost of \$455,881. There is a great need for housing funds in the city, but not a lot are available, because of our population. If we had a population of 50,000, or more, we would receive an automatic appropriation from HUD as an Entitlement City, unfortunately we are not.

MUNICIPAL COURT:

The Municipal Court Administrator is Rebecca Clark, who has five deputy court clerks working with her. Last year they processed 10,447 violations, which included 7,078 traffic

violations, 2,991 misdemeanor non-traffic violations, 78 city ordinance violations, 51 Environmental Court violations, and 249 felony charges where bond was set. They collected \$947,000 in fines and \$479,000 of that went into the General Fund. The majority of the rest, went to the State. The Community Service Work Program produced \$46,000 in work credit. Judge Zeke Baucum began conducting Environmental Court on October 11, he has initial appearances on Wednesday afternoons, with trials being scheduled for the last Wednesday of the month.

POLICE DEPARTMENT:

The Laurel Police Department's chief is Tommy Cox. The department ended 2023 with 42 officers on staff and they are budgeted for 53. We were budgeted for 55 last year, but in order to have more bodies on the streets, council agreed to convert two full-time positions into six part-time positions. All of the part-timers were once full-time with the department. Therefore, we are still at least 11 short on sworn officers. It has been difficult to keep a full staff, one of the reasons is that they could make more at other departments and other jobs altogether, not even in law enforcement. We are working to overcome that. The department in 2023 had 27,884 complaints compared to 30,713 the year before. They made 1465 arrests compared to 2122 in 2022. Statistically, complaints and arrests are down. Of the 1465 arrests, there were 21 use of force reports. This was 1.4% of all arrests. Use of force is described as

anything from hard empty-hand to lethal force. During the prior year there were 34 use of force reports. Unfortunately, during 2023 we recorded 5 homicides, in 2022 there were 3, all are being prosecuted. The department continued to work on the Traffic Services Grant and the Impaired Driver Grant, that allows extra officers to be on the streets, to help keep our streets safe. Aside from investigating complaints and making arrests the department also handles other issues during the year. For instance, they participated in the DEA Drug Take Back Program. The DARE program continued at the Middle School, they continued the Domestic Violence Awareness Month, did the Fill-a-Truck for Good Samaritan Center and Salvation Army, spearheaded a drive for the Belzoni hometown of Deputy Chief Earl Reed after a devastating tornado, rang the bell for Salvation Army, continued the Senior Citizen Initiative where they do two monthly checks on 14 seniors, participated in Akeem Davis' AD-47 football camp, continued the Night Out Against Crime. On the discipline side, the department received 6 written complaints from citizens, all six were reviewed and all six were found by command staff to be unfounded. There were 12 disciplinary warnings and four of those resulted in officer suspensions. There were 4 Internal Affairs Investigations, which resulted in two officer suspensions and two where the officers were cleared. I would like to address a constant rumor, and I call it a rumor, because facts do not line up with the rumor. It is the regularity of police checkpoints in certain areas. In 2023 LPD conducted 324 checkpoints. 5% of the checks were done at I-

59 @16th Ave. 40% were conducted in the NW part of the city, which was the area north of Sawmill Rd corridor and 5th Ave and west of 5th Ave. There were 25% conducted in the NE section of town, which would be north of the Sawmill Rd corridor and east of 5th Ave, not including 5th Ave. itself since it is in the NW area. 24% were held in the south area of town, which is south of the Sawmill Rd corridor. 6% were conducted in the Pendorff area. As I have said before, the statistics do not agree with the rumors that most if not all of the checks are in one part of town. Of course, if you never go to another part of town, it is possible that you would have that opinion. This probably won't change any minds, but I feel comfortable with the numbers, and I trust the source of the numbers. If you have any contradictory facts, please share with me, and I will share it with the public. Animal and Pest Control are also under the police department and the supervisor is Yolanda Powe, they handled 1648 complaints, picked up 976 animals on the streets, owners brought 21 animals into the shelter. Animal Control euthanized 886 animals (525 dogs, 359 cats and 2 wild animals), released 32 animals into the wild (raccoons, opossums, snakes, etc.). A total of 54 animals were adopted or given away. They also cleared the streets of 124 dead animals. They also sprayed for mosquitoes from April to October. One animal that they were not able to capture, was a beaver at a home in Ward 4, they are hoping it has relocated. Even with these numbers, I continue to see and receive calls from council and other citizens about stray dogs. Traffic Maintenance is also under the purview

of the police department, and they continue on a daily basis to make sure that our travels are as safe as possible.

VEOLIA:

Veolia is our contracted team who handles our water production and distribution. They handle wastewater collection and treatment. They are responsible for the water that comes into your house or other building, and the wastewater that leaves your house or other building and handles it until it is released into the creek. Veolia also handles the meter reading, billing and collection of the water and sewer bills, also included on this bill is the garbage fee. They are responsible for any cash shortage that occurs within these duties. We usually do a 3% increase on the water and sewer rates, although for this fiscal year we did a slightly higher increase to fund a \$20 Million water and sewer project in the recently annexed area of Pendorff. The task that Veolia has is an expensive one, but Laurel can proudly proclaim that we are not currently operating under any sort of consent decree or mandate from EPA, DEQ or any other agency. That is something to be proud of, especially when you look at some of the other cities that are. I commend them for keeping us out of trouble, with these regulatory agencies. In our contract with Veolia, they are responsible for all environmental fines that may occur due to the operation of the plants. They are required under contract to have a staff of 52 employees. There were several promotions within the staff of Veolia, one was Terry Padgett who recently had a building

named for him in the Industrial Park, he was also promoted to Assistant Project Manager for the Laurel Project. Veolia shares in the liability of many of the claims due to sewer backups and vehicle damage that is not the responsibility of Veolia. Since the beginning of the contract in 2006, they have paid over \$700,000 in claims. They also accept liability for any vehicle accident, where a Veolia employee is driving a city vehicle. The Massey and Smyly wastewater treatment plants combined, treated 2.7 billion gallons of waste. Water production produced approximately 2.7 billion gallons. The customer service office collected \$14,440,000. I can assure you that this is not as an enormous amount as it seems because the majority goes toward operation and maintenance. We have to turn down much of their requests for capital equipment every year, because we have to balance the budget, and the needs are not in line with our income into the fund. We don't want to overburden the payers. They completed 10,080 service requests, with the most being 2,816 for disconnection for nonpayment, and 2,502 for unlocking after disconnection. They re-read meters 1,012 times, where customers questioned the readings as being incorrect. We do receive the occasional complaint about persons being treated rudely in the billing office, and we do take that into account, and it is promptly reported to management. The current base fee to Veolia is \$5,041,029. The base fee to Veolia for the next fiscal year was to be \$5,248,517, but through a letter of request, from the mayor to the Veolia home office, the fee was reduced by 5% or

\$10,374, making the annual base fee \$5,238,144. In addition to the annual fee, there are charges for billable overtime, special projects, etc. Again, it is expensive, but we are in compliance, with the regulatory agencies.

PARKS AND RECREATION:

This department is headed by Elvin Ulmer, whom over twenty years ago, Mayor Susan Vincent convinced to leave his cushy job at Comcast Cable, to deal with a struggling recreation department. I think she made a wise choice and he has proven that over the years. He is an asset to this city. He always tells his employees to make sure they take care of the small things, and he makes sure that they do. I am often amazed at the way the department works together as a team, they always seem to have the best interest of the city at heart, they probably get it from their leader. Also, he is not hesitant to give them five days off at home without pay, he says he does not believe in three days, or sometimes letting them go home permanently. There are a lot of things that this department takes care of. Along with maintenance of all of the parks throughout the city, keeping up with all the flowerbeds, taking care of all the antique and historic lighting, maintaining all the ball fields, including the ones at the city schools, all the swimming pools, and making sure all aspects of all the city-owned buildings are functioning properly, and there are several on the list, including City Hall, the police station, all the fire stations, Depot, Cameron Center, L. T. Ellis Center, Oak Park Alumni Building, and The Visitors

Center. In addition, the electricity that is needed during the downtown festivals, along with the Christmas lights in Mason Park and also Day in the Park. They clean overgrown lots, that are generated from the Inspection Department, they also secure structures that also come through Inspection. They remove dead and diseased trees on city right-of-way, they were a part of the facelift at the War Memorial on Leontyne Price Blvd. This department hangs all the Christmas decorations, including the trees at city hall, Pinehurst Park and anywhere else the city has trees and decorations. They install flags and decorations for Veterans Day and Memorial Day. They assist with the Prancer Path that is a fundraiser sponsored to assist the United Way during Christmas. The Ameri-Corps grant is facilitated through the Parks and Recreation Department and has been a great benefit to the city. At the Susan Boone Vincent Sportsplex they hosted various league baseball, softball and soccer tournaments with a combined total of participants at 2,370 and spectators in attendance totaled 23,500. The department additionally hosted separately, 20 baseball and softball tournaments with all fourteen fields being utilized with 598 teams and 7,176 participants with 57,500 in attendance. There is also much tennis played at the Sportsplex for all age groups. The Natatorium is also well used on a daily basis, it is managed by USA Pools. At the Elvin Ulmer Eightplex, Mr. Ulmer had been promising for years that if we built eight new softball fields, he could keep them booked most weekends, it is living up to what he promised. According to Mr. Ulmer the fields are

booked for tournaments for the next two years, we have already outgrown our space. By the way, the sign for the Elvin Ulmer Eightplex has finally been installed. We are currently having discussions about how to fund a regulation track at the Sportsplex, which would be the only regulation track in the area, it could be used by all of the area high schools. There is much interest among all the schools. The Melvin Mack Splash Pad was constructed and dedicated and the addition to the skate park in Daphne Park was also completed. The Garden Clubs of Laurel also count on Recreation with the many wonderful projects that they have done and continue to do in our city. They have a great relationship, and I think they appreciate each other. All the city cemeteries are also under the Recreation Department, and they work daily to keep the burial sites of loved ones respectful. As I have said in the past, if the city intends to stay in the cemetery business, we need more land. All of our present cemeteries are essentially full. We would need a minimum of fifteen acres to begin a new cemetery.

FIRE DEPARTMENT:

The Laurel Fire Department is headed by Leo Brown, who is in his thirty-first year with the department. Fire department employees tend to stay with the department a long time; the former chief, whom this present chief replaced, worked over forty years. According to their mission statement, "The Laurel Fire Department is a group of professionally trained men and

women dedicated to saving lives, property, and the environment in the City of Laurel from fires, natural disasters, and life-threatening situations. We will achieve this mission through professional training, fire education and safety while providing first class service to the citizens and businesses in the City of Laurel.” The department fought 38 building fires; these were major structure fires with moderate to heavy loss. This was the same number as last year. Thankfully, the department had no reported fire deaths for the year. They had 28 vehicle fires which was an increase of 4 from last year. Those vehicle fires ranged from light to heavy damage. Motor vehicle accidents with injuries went from 157 to 160 and motor vehicle accidents with no injuries went from 201 in 2022 to 211 in 2023. The Department handled two mutual aid calls, which is where they assist another department, often a volunteer department, both of these were in Calhoun, one being a business and the other a residence. We requested one mutual aid call from Powers Volunteers for a fire in a wooded area. The Department ended the year with 53 of its 63 allotted slots filled. They continue to seek new recruits or even seasoned firefighters to join the ranks. They continue to do job fairs, inside and outside the community, and also have regular civil service testing. They continue to implement new training methods and updating equipment in an attempt to have the best trained crews and to also move closer to achieving that elusive Class 4 rating. They continue to educate citizens and businesses on fire prevention, which is the number one way to

prevent fires in the first place. They did thirty-two outreach programs and taught around 2,705 residents of all ages on fire safety and prevention. Among these were trainings that were done with the residents of Laurel Housing Authority in fire prevention and the proper use of fire extinguishers. They also installed 384 smoke alarms and 128 fire extinguishers in 128 different homes. This was made possible by a partnership between Wal Mart, the Department and the State Fire Marshall's office. State Farm agents Lori Hearn and Brian Ginn teamed again last year to present awards of Firefighter of the Year to Josh Hatten and Fire Officer of the Year, to Kacey Morgan. We thank State Farm for this very generous support of the Department. They received two major grants for the year, one for \$69,000 for specialized training of firefighters and another for \$28,000 to purchase cordless rescue tools. These grants were written and administered by grant writer Whitney Pickering. They were able to do some cosmetic work at the stations and the training center. They continued the calendar program where the calendar company sells ads to businesses in the community and a portion of the proceeds go back to the Department. They assisted the Salvation Army in their Halloween Carnival and also the distribution of toys and food baskets during Christmas. One of their main goals is to achieve the Class 4 Fire Rating that the city so much deserves, which in turn will benefit homeowners and business owners by saving on their property insurance.

PUBLIC WORKS:

The department is headed by Tyrome Russell, and the majority of the everyday duties are handled by H2O Innovation who has been the city's contractual public works entity since August 2021. The city still employs a few workers, who had over fifteen years of service, and were allowed to remain in the employ of the city, so they could have the possibility to retire under the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS). These are mainly in the maintenance shop and sanitation. For the most part the Public Works Department and H2O are operating very efficiently, as evidenced by the inspections by the Public Works Director and the Independent evaluation surveys. In the Streets and Drainage Maintenance, the survey revealed an overall customer satisfaction rate of 96.86%; Quality of work-92.3%; Completion percentage of requests-99.3%; Response/Production Time-100%; and Routine Maintenance-100%. In 2022 the overall performance rate was 96.0% and in 2023 it was 97.7%. There will continue to be dissatisfied citizens with the Public Works Department, but the majority of those are citizens desiring work to be done by the city, that should be the owner's responsibility. As the data shows, the department is operating at almost peak efficiency. In a further breakdown of data, with 177 citizens responding and with the survey questions including; whether the problem was resolved? If the employees were courteous? If the job was completed timely? If the area was cleaned up? If the employee had to return and rework the task? With a rating from each ward, the results of overall satisfaction were Ward 1- 98%. Ward 2-98%. Ward 3-

98%. Ward 4-100%. Ward 5-98%. Ward 6-100% and Ward 7-86%. Which gave us the average score throughout the city of 97%. Thank you to the Public Works Department and H2O Innovation for a job well done.

GARBAGE:

Waste Pro is our contracted garbage collection company. There have been some challenges, but for the most part, they are accomplishing the task, and most weeks the garbage is picked up on time. It is difficult to keep employees hopping up and down on the back of a garbage truck, in temperatures ranging from 20 degrees to 100 degrees. They have 6,608 hand pick-ups per week. They average 38.9 pounds of garbage at each stop. The city charges our customers \$19.10 per month for sanitation and Waste Pro charges the city \$9.67, next year it will increase to \$9.94. The remainder of the \$19.10 is used to maintain city-owned sanitation trucks and also to pay city sanitation employees who pick up limbs, leaves along with other debris that goes to the Randy-Dandy Landfill, and also to pay the fee to dump at Randy-Dandy.

GRANTS:

A great deal of the work that we are able to accomplish couldn't be done without grants, and we wouldn't be able to receive the grants were it not for our capable in-house grant writer Mrs. Whitney Pickering. Through Mrs. Pickering we applied for \$1,113,381 in grants and were awarded \$525,353, for the year. Total for grants received by the city for the year totaled

\$2,018,197. These were outside the scope of our MDOT grants and also outside appropriations provided through our elected representatives.

CITY CLERK/FINANCE:

The City Clerk's office was led by Mary Ann Hess for the past twenty-two years, being appointed by Mayor Susan Vincent. She left the employ of the city on May 10 to take a position in Brandon. We wish her the best in her new endeavor. She has been replaced by Kristal Jones who has worked in the department for the last sixteen years and has a total of nineteen years with the city. I have confidence that Kristal will be able to capably fill the role. There will be some changes in personnel in the department as we get everyone operating in their new positions. Some of the highlights from the year in the department: (1). We collected \$11.1 million in sales tax, which was the largest amount ever received in a year, by the city of Laurel. I continue to stress that this is not \$11 million in new money, but an increase over last year of \$501,451, or 4.5%. It should also be noted that the City of Laurel relies heavily on sales tax, more so, than many cities, seeing that approximately 65% of our General Fund budget comes from sales tax. (2). Over \$2.3 million was collected from the Recreation Tourism Tax, which was again the largest amount ever. An increase of 5.3%. (3). The new 3% Tourism tax brought in \$350,000 in its first year, this was the first year collecting it, so it was an increase of 100%. These funds are in a separate account and are used only

for purposes of tourism and promotion of the city. The newly appointed tourism committee has chosen to offer sponsorship grants up to \$2500 for helping to fund events that bring people to the city, and preferably who spend at least one night. The amount of the grant is based on how many people will attend and how many nights they will stay. (4). Road and Bridge funds that the county is required to remit to the city annually has for the third year in a row topped \$1 million. (5). We received \$2 million in the MS Infrastructure Modernization Act Funds in its fourth year. These are derived from Laurel's share of taxes from Internet sales. (6). We received over \$2 million in revenue from sixteen State and Federal Grants. (7). Over \$15.3 million was spent on capital projects. Over \$15.3 million was spent on capital projects. (8). Kristal Jones and Lauren Stewart received their Master Municipal Clerk Certifications. (9). There was a total of 189 business privilege licenses applied for. (10). We approved ad valorem tax exemptions on \$24.3 million, NOT FOR \$24.3 million as some claim. In the coming year we have plans to revisit our tax-exempt structure. In 2016 the city passed an order removing 9.42 mils from any requested ad valorem exemption, where before the exemption would be for a total of 100%. Later we added industrial abatements and central business district incentives. We will examine the 9.42 mils this year to look at the possibility of raising that protected amount. The city remains committed to economic development and job creation, we remain committed to our local businesses, but at the same time we also have a responsibility to provide

infrastructure and municipal services at a reasonable cost to our local businesses as well as residents. (11). We also approved Freeport Warehouse exemptions on \$1.6 million. The policy mentioned previously on the 9.42 mils does not apply to Freeport Warehouse exemptions, which were created by Sec. 27-31-51 of the MS Code. (12). For FY 2023, the city had an increase in its assessed valuation of 5.3%. from \$217.4 million in FY 2023 to \$229.1 million for FY 2024. (13). The value of a mil increased by \$11,686, from \$207,497 in FY 2023 to \$219,183 for FY 2024. (14). The School District also had an increase in its value by 9.4%, or \$14.5 million from \$225.4 million for FY 2023 to \$239.9 million in FY 2024. (15). We collected \$24,495,975.00 in ad valorem tax; of that amount \$14,329,554.00 was remitted to the Laurel School District and the city kept \$10,166,421. Having a successful school system plays an important role in having a successful city. You cannot have a completely successful city without also having a successful school system. From recruiting doctors to come to the hospital, to attracting individuals to work in our firms and businesses to recruiting educators, to lure people to move into our city, the schools play a huge part. You can never put too much emphasis on having a successful school system. If there is anything that you can personally offer to assist the system in being better, please do it. On the school board during the year, we replaced the late Nancy Breland with Keith Ridgeway, and also replaced Dr. James Hill with Dr. Louis Wilford. (16). Laurel is one of sixteen cities that still participate in the old "Municipal Fire and Police

Retirement System”, this was the system when you could work twenty years and retire, this was before the current PERS began to operate. There are still several employees whom we have to fund the retirement for. We fund this system with 2.60 mils set aside in its own fund for that purpose. Out of the sixteen cities still involved Laurel had the highest 4-year average increase in assessed value; those included cities such as Biloxi, Gulfport, Hattiesburg, Jackson, Meridian, Tupelo and Vicksburg. (17). We increased water and sewer rates by 3% last year, we did not require an increase in sanitation rates last year, but we will be forced to increase fees in the near future. (18). We were able to give employees a 5% pay increase after PERS held off initiating the large employer increase that they had planned. The Legislature got involved after much pressure from several municipalities, counties and school districts and the MML. Instead of the 5% increase for employers, beginning with a 2% increase on last year, they are now mandating a 1.5% increase for four years. The discussion is not over, because something still has to happen with PERS over the long haul. (19). We were able to pay off a \$750,000 5-year note, that had been used to pay for vehicles for the various departments. We took out another to pay for a new line of vehicles for several departments, including police cars. Since COVID, the problem remains availability of vehicles from the dealers. (20). The FY 2022 audit was a successful and clean audit. (21). As of September 30, 2023, the City of Laurel had a cash balance in all of its funds of \$27.6 million up from \$25.6 million in September

30, 2022. Over the year a total of \$897,028 was earned in interest on all our excess funds. Depending on which fund these monies originated (i.e. General, Recreation or Public Utility) the interest is credited back to the appropriate fund. (22). The additional mils that were levied especially for street repair is in its fifth year of collection. For 2023, a total of \$838,597 was collected from these four mils and were used on the recent citywide overlay project. In addition to the four mils, we had Road and Bridge Funds from the county in the amount of \$1,090,484 and from the MS Infrastructure Modernization Act, which produced \$1,994,350. I applaud the Legislature for working out a plan for the cities to be able to recoup some of the sales tax from internet sales. There are a lot of sales from Amazon, generated in Laurel. These three funds totaled \$3.9 million, with which we paved twenty-three neighborhood streets. If funds come in near this amount, we are hoping to begin another neighborhood street project for 2024. Additionally, all the money in these three accounts cannot be used to pave streets; some of it is used for matches on projects like 12th St, West Drive, Central Ave Phase II, and other street projects that need matching funds. In the City Clerk/Finance department, measuring by sales tax growth, tourism tax growth, assessed valuation growth, increase in the value of a mil, ad valorem tax collections increase, the data proves that there is strong financial growth in the City Beautiful.

CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS 2023:

I run into certain people, and the first thing out of their mouth is, “when are y’all gonna fix these streets?” I’ll ask, which one? And when they say, all of them, I keep walking, because if someone asks that question, they don’t have a clue about what’s going on in this city. And if they don’t know about the streets, they definitely won’t know about the rest. (1). The final phase of the Elvin Ulmer Eightplex at the Susan Boone Vincent Sportsplex was completed in November at a cost of \$4.9 million. No, we could not have used those funds to pave streets, it was a bond that is being paid back out of the Recreational Tourism Tax. Ward 1. (2). The 2023 Overlay Project valued at \$3.5 million was completed in November. We completed twenty-three neighborhood streets in all seven wards. All wards. (3). The Brown Street Drainage and Access Road Project is under construction, and should be completed in June. This project had a price tag of \$686,710 and was from State funding obtained by Sen. Juan Barnett. There was a new road in this project, connecting Brown St with DonCurt, to allow access out of the area in the event of flooding. It is to be named for W. C. Jones who was active with youth. Update, it is complete. Ward 7. (4). We do many things that are not readily visible to the public. One of those is a GIS Water Model, that is funded at \$100,000. This model includes inputting water main locations and all components into the GIS system. All wards. (5). The Spec Wilson Blvd Pedestrian Improvements is pretty much completed except for a small portion in the railroad right-of-way, that we are waiting on the railroad to give the go-ahead.

This project was \$1.7 million. Update, we have paved on the railroad right-of-way. Ward 5. (6). 3rd Avenue ARPA Water, Sewer and Stormwater Improvement, is in the Construction Phase and should be completed in September, this project has a price tag of \$2.8 Million. Ward 5. (7). The Joe Wheeler (Deborrah Hyde Avenue) ARPA Water, Sewer and Stormwater Improvement is also under construction at a cost of \$3 million, and is anticipated to be complete in March 2025. Wards 4 and 5. (8). The 15th Avenue Water, Sewer and Stormwater ARPA Project is under construction and is to be completed in March of 2025, with a total cost of \$3.5 million. Wards 2 and 6. (9). Another project that the public cannot see is the Massey and Smyly CDBG Blower Improvement Project, which is currently under construction and has a cost of \$1.7 million and is scheduled to be completed in December 2024. It upgrades the blower systems at the Massey and Smyly treatment plants, and should result in substantial savings in the power bill for the plants. All wards. (10). Another treatment plant project is the Massey and Smyly Grating and Handrail Replacement. It is costing \$254,000 and is to be completed in June of 2024. All wards. (11). The 12th Street Roadway and Pedestrian Improvements Project is in the Design Phase and has a total project cost of \$3.75 million. This project will include sidewalks, milling overlay, striping and pedestrian improvement at the high school, it will go from 7th Ave to 16th Ave. Ward 2. (12). The RAISE grant in the amount of \$24.9 million is in the design phase. This project will begin at Cooks Avenue/ Cross Street and

go through downtown and end at Hwy 15 N. It is in Wards 5 and 6. (13). We completed the Laurel/Jones County Visitor's Center on Leontyne Price Blvd. The cost was \$2.3 million and cost was shared between the city, county and the Housing Authority.

Ward 6. (14). The Laurel Anaerobic Lagoons Biogas Utilization Project, is in the Proposal Phase. It will capture and process biogas from our lagoons to produce renewable natural gas, with the aim of marketing it to consumers. All wards. (15). The 2024 TAP, Central Avenue Phase II, has been funded by MDOT at a total cost of \$2.3 million. This project will begin where the first phase of Central Avenue ended and continue to Spec Wilson.

Ward 5. (16). Massey Treatment Plant access road, is seeking funding at a cost of \$350,000. This project will replace a deteriorated culvert that crosses the entrance to the Massey Treatment Plant. All wards. (17). We applied for funding to improve West Drive, from Grandview Drive to Airport Drive. We were awarded \$2 million for this project, and I know the residents and the Senior Citizen facilities will be glad about this effort. We thank our federal representatives, Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith and Congressman Mike Ezell. It is in Ward 1. (18). We are currently seeking funding from the State Revolving Loan Fund and CBDG to fund the \$20 million Water and Sewer Project in the Pendorff Community. This project will include the installation of new water distribution services and also the installation of a wastewater collection system to serve the residents and businesses, in Pendorff. Ward 7. (19). We continue to seek funding for the replacement of the bridge on

Arco Lane. The cost is in excess of \$1 million. We have applied every year since it has been closed. Unfortunately, we have not been able to secure the funds. Ward 5. (20). On a more positive note, we were informed that we did receive partial funding to replace the bridge on West Drive. The estimate came in at \$1 million and I received word from our State delegation of Sen. Robin Robinson and Rep. Donnie Scoggin, that we had been approved for \$800,000. Ward 1. I regret that they did not fund both projects, I know it does not please the Ward 5 councilperson, since that bridge was out first, but we are not going to turn down the one that was funded. We will apply again next year. (21). We painted the exterior of our beautiful and well-maintained 110-year-old city hall at a cost \$45,250. (22). It has been a pretty productive year as far as projects. We have funding and are in construction for \$58.8 million which includes the massive RAISE grant, but without including RAISE we still have over \$34 million in projects that are active. We continue to seek funding for over \$21 million, aside from the \$20 million for Pendorff. (23). The voluntary annexation in the Calhoun community, for the Southern Bone and Joint Clinic was approved by the Court, and a groundbreaking is anticipated soon. I think these are pretty good numbers. Look for more to come.

LAUREL MAIN STREET:

The organization Laurel Main Street is playing a major role in assisting with the visitors downtown. We are all aware that the

Hometown show is the leading force in this resurgence, it is a great thing, in that the show brings people to town, we are grateful every day for the impact that the show has on Laurel, it would not be happening without Ben and Erin and the team. After Hometown gets them here Main Street aids them in finding things to do. Whether it is Craw Fest, Chili Cookoff, Laurel Leap, Loblolly Festival, Dodgeball, Wine Down or any number of other activities that they sponsor. Other times when there are no festivals or events, Main Street is still working to serve those who come downtown. We want to thank them for all they do to contribute to the success of downtown and the city pledges to continue to assist them as much as we possibly can. Thank you, Caroline Burke and your team. Truth be told, downtown is not the only beneficiary of the Hometown show and Main Street, but other areas of the city benefit as well.

BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS:

The City of Laurel employs almost three hundred employees, and most of them are great employees. We have another large group that serves this city, on a pretty much volunteer basis, and there is no way we could operate without them. I would like to take a moment to recognize them for their service to the city: (A). Board of Adjustments and Appeals: Jeffery Stewart, Richy Seals, Mac Foster, Randy Cook, Keith Ridgeway and DeWayne Walters. (B). Pine Belt Airport: William Green. (C). Laurel Airport Authority: Dick West, William Horne, Mike Chancellor/ John Thaxton, Elvin Ulmer and Susan Vincent. (D).

Civil Service Commission: Charlotte Cook, Lew Yoder, Bo Asmar, Clinton Drummer, Richard Dantzler, Tensie Wheeler and Barbara Brumfield-Pruitt. (E). EDA: Jimmy Walker, Whitney Pickering, and Chris Wilson. (F). Election Commission: Jacqueline Evans, Laura Howze and Ernest Hollingsworth. (G). Historic Preservation Commission: Ryan Hearn, Ebonee Johnikin, Michael Mc Kinnon, Marva Posey, Matie McLaurin, Faye Jackson, Josh Nowell, Dr. John Wallace and Nancy Guice. (H). Laurel Housing Authority: Rev. George Barnes, Sandy Holifield, George Carter, Shelly Allen and Tensie Wheeler. (I). Laurel-Jones County Library: Bill Nunley, Jason Johnson, Clifton Nicholson, Josh Nowell, Willie Evans. (J). Pine Belt Solid Waste Authority: Susan Vincent and Keith Ridgeway. (K). Planning Commission: Patricia Jordan Cook, Brad Kent, Fran Casey, Susan Vincent, Chloe Davis, Lisa Cochran, Dr. John Wallace, Zane Lambert, Satish Amin, Lew Yoder, Cecil Ashford, Shelly Allen from EDA and Caroline Burke from Main Street. (L). Laurel Separate School District: Sandy Holifield, Dr. Louis Wilford, Doncella Milton, Keith Ridgeway and Dr. Read Diket. (M). South MS Fair Commission: Rev. Vernon Graves, Lee Donaldson, Jerlean Nobles, Sandra Bateman, and Georgette Pollard. (N). Tree Board: Sandra Bateman, Cathy Padgett, Thomas Shows, Cathy Shanks, Cynthia Rahaim, Carolyn Owens, Kathy Posey, Terri Knight and Sandy Holifield. (O). Laurel Tourism Committee: Malik Davis, Terri Knight, Ben Winpigler, Wanda Benson, George Bassi, Jim Rasberry, and a representative from Main Street and the EDA. Thank you for your volunteer service to our great city,

we couldn't be successful without you. Please give them an applause of thanks.

We continue to have too much litter, and too much illegal dumping as we strive to make our city truly the City Beautiful.

We have too many drivers who don't respect the Handicapped Parking spots, shame on you. We need to enforce this more, especially at city facilities.

We continue to have many visitors come to our city, and they are spending lots of their money, but some of our businesses need to give their employees some pointers on customer service. It cuts me like a knife when I hand a cashier my money or I swipe my card, and they look at me and as my mother used to say, and "they didn't open their mouth." That is not acceptable. It's not good to treat home folks like that but it is deplorable if they are doing it to our guests. We need to do better.

Those of us who plan to seek to remain in office, there will be an election next year. One good thing about it is that you have a good four years of accomplishments to point to. You have a good track record, I think we have worked well together, and got a lot of good things accomplished.

As I conclude, it is clearly evident that the state of the City of Laurel is vibrant, it is improving, it is stable, it is growing and it is sound financially, culturally, in quality of life, in service, in

maintenance, in foresight and in numerous other measurable ways.

I leave you with another word from Khalil Gibran, “We are limited, not by our ability, but by our vision.”

Thank You.