



City of Charleston

John J. Tecklenburg

Mayor

The following State of the City Address was prepared for delivery by Mayor John J. Tecklenburg on January 25, 2022, at 6 p.m.

Mayor Pro Tem Brady, members of City Council, Fellow Citizens and Friends:

It's an honor to join you once again this evening from one of America's most hallowed spaces—our own City Council Chamber in Charleston City Hall. For more than two centuries, this grand old building—raised in the earliest days of the republic under President Thomas Jefferson—has served us faithfully as the seat of our city's government and the site of our city's democracy—Charleston's home of We the People.

Sometimes, when people visit me in my office across the hall, they'll ask what it's like to come to work every day in a place like this—a place so full of history and meaning. And after I tell them it's the greatest honor of my life—which it is—I also tell them something else.

I tell them that the first time you walk up the old marble steps and through these doors, you almost can't help but be bowled over by the enormity of it all—the great people, the great moments, the great debates. But the more time you spend here, the more the essential truth of this people's house and all its long history settles in your bones. We are, in every generation, the keepers of what President Kennedy once called “that first revolution.” And we continue to hold its truths to be self-evident: that we are all created equal, and that our rights come not from the kindness of kings but from the hand of our Creator. Because it's here, in this small, centuries-old pine chamber, that we Charlestonians still come together every other Tuesday night to renew our commitment to the always-revolutionary act of democratic self-rule—trusting our fate, as we always have, to the grace of a loving God, and the common sense and collective wisdom of our fellow citizens.

I begin tonight with that old and honorable American ideal because some these days seem so ready to abandon it. Too often, and in too many places, grace in all its forms is being cast aside by those who would have us believe that half our friends and neighbors are wild-eyed socialists, or that the other half are crazed insurrectionists. And too often, and in too many places, the voice of the common-sense majority is being shouted down by small groups of loud people who think there's only one right way to say or do anything—their way.

Well, I think that's all just nonsense. And I bet you do, too.

Because here in Charleston, we still believe in the power of grace. And we can still hear the voice of the common-sense majority as it rings strong and true across our city and within the walls of this council chamber.

That's why the state of our city tonight is strong.

And it's why City Council and I will spend this year continuing to advance the concerns of our city's common-sense majority: fixing flooding, fighting crime, building affordable housing, and partnering directly with our residents, businesses and other governments to expand opportunity and improve our citizens' quality of life.

First, flooding. For more than 350 years, water has been our greatest asset and our biggest challenge. But with the new reality of rising seas and ever more extreme weather, that challenge has now become existential.

Today, we face a stark choice: keep moving forward with our comprehensive plan to protect the city from flooding, or begin moving away to higher ground. And on that point, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, I did not become the mayor of Charleston in order to sound the retreat from America's most beautiful and historic city.

That's why, this year alone, we're spending more than one-hundred million dollars to move our flooding and drainage plan forward. In West Ashley and on James and Johns islands, we'll be breaking ground on more than a dozen flood-protection projects large and small, including new and improved infrastructure, new parks designed to retain stormwater, improved maintenance and ditch cleaning, and the next phase of our award-winning Forest Acres drainage project. And on the peninsula, we'll be extending the new Low Battery toward King Street, adding drainage capacity with the rehabilitation of our archway tunnels, continuing our work along the Huger Street and Low Line corridors, and kicking off the final phase of the Spring-Fishburne project—which, when complete, will pump more than one million gallons of stormwater off of our streets and away from our homes and businesses every three minutes.

But even more, this year will bring the two most critical decisions our city will make on flooding for years to come—and on both, I believe we must be bold. First, we must continue our work with the Army Corps of Engineers to design and engineer a peninsula-wide perimeter that will protect our citizens from devastating water inundation, be it from storm surge, tides or sea level rise—and in the process, extend the beauty of the iconic Charleston Battery around the peninsula. Second, we must carry through on our commitment to rezone every inch of our city to finally put an end to irresponsible over-development in low-lying areas. And while each of these decisions will require real resolve, I'd respectfully ask that we all remember the stakes: the water is rising, the clock is ticking, and the future of our city is in the balance.

Next, public safety, where I'd like to begin by saluting our police officers and firefighters for their remarkable service over these past two difficult years. On behalf of our citizens, I couldn't be more proud of our police and fire departments—or of the fact that we as a city invest one-hundred percent of our property tax revenues in these critical, life-saving services.

And here, I want to take a moment to tell you about the remarkable recent work of Chief Luther Reynolds and his entire department.

Protecting our citizens from crime—all our citizens, on every street and in every neighborhood of our city—is the first and most important job of local government. And because we Charlestonians see that fundamental truth so clearly, we’ve been able to avoid the mistakes of some other cities around our country.

We’ve increased, not decreased, our police budget every year this Council and I have been together—increases that add up to almost ten million additional dollars per year. We’ve invested in recruitment and retention to put our department on a path to full employment for the first time in more than a decade. We’ve worked in partnership with our officers to make enforcement more fair, more accountable and more effective for all our residents, regardless of race or walk of life. And we’ve done all that while increasing police patrols and improving community relations in the areas of our city where our officers are needed most.

Thanks to these efforts and more by our police department and the citizens and neighborhoods they work with every day, the national crime increases that touched our city in 2020 were stopped in their tracks in 2021—and our violent crime rate is currently almost twenty percent below the statewide average.

Now, on the strong recommendation of Chief Reynolds and his command staff, we’ll be taking two major steps to make our city safer in 2022.

First, over the next few weeks, I’ll be asking Council to set aside one million dollars of our federal relief funds to finance a new police department program to expand and improve camera coverage throughout the city.

And second, due to the high number of crimes being committed by offenders our police have already arrested, often repeatedly, for serious crimes, members of this Council and I will be personally lobbying our state legislature for the bail and sentencing reform bill we so desperately need to begin to close the revolving door at our jailhouse.

Equally important is our next priority for 2022—housing that all our citizens, from teachers and firefighters to servers and retail workers, can actually afford to live in.

Over the past six years, our city has embarked on the most ambitious municipal affordable housing initiative in state history, with the designation of more than fifty million dollars in affordable housing funds, and tough new laws requiring every large development, including hotels, to provide affordable housing or contribute an equivalent dollar amount to our housing fund. As a result, there are already thousands of new affordable homes and apartments in the pipeline—with more being planned every day.

And this year, we’ll be able to see the results of those efforts across the city, with groundbreakings for major new affordable housing projects, such as the Archer School, the

James Lewis Homes, and a new apartment complex from One80 Place to help those transitioning from homelessness. Perhaps most exciting, our Housing Authority is set to begin work at 275 Huger Street, where twelve units of old, rundown public housing will be replaced by 72 modern apartments for people at every affordable and workforce price range. And over the next decade, this work will continue at every public housing facility in the city, until every Housing Authority apartment is clean, modern and safe, and fifteen hundred to two thousand new affordable homes have been added to the city's inventory.

Finally, this evening, I'd like to tell you about just a few of the valuable partnerships that will help us expand opportunity and improve our citizens' quality of life over the next twelve months.

First, to alleviate traffic and improve safety on our streets, we'll be working directly with federal, state and regional governments to break ground on the widening of the Glenn McConnell Parkway in West Ashley, the construction of the Northern Pitchfork on Johns Island, and the replacement of the Beresford Creek Bridge on Daniel Island. And thanks to those same partnerships, the Ashley River Bike and Pedestrian Bridge will go out to bid before the year is out.

Second, to expand opportunity, we'll continue our work with the CLIMB Fund to ensure that capital is available for our local small businesses, and we're partnering with the Metro Chamber of Commerce to intentionally support the work of minority and women owned businesses. And on Saturday, February 5th, we'll bring together a coalition of nonprofits that support mentoring for a major, city-sponsored event to connect young people in need with adults who are ready and willing to help them prepare for success. I ask our citizens to consider mentoring a youth this year, because our goal isn't just to leave a better world for our children, but also to leave better children for our world.

Last, to improve our citizens' quality of life in 2022 and beyond, we'll be expanding our Keep Charleston Beautiful program with Operation Neighborhood and Adopt-A-Block, two new initiatives that will partner directly with willing citizens to help keep our neighborhoods clean—citizens like Teresa Tidestrom, who recently stepped forward to create the resident-led Keep West Ashley Beautiful. And to make sure we're doing our part as the city of Charleston, I'll be asking City Council to appropriate an additional million dollars from our federal relief funds to build new and repair existing sidewalks in residential areas throughout the city.

Which brings us back to the place we started tonight—this historic people's house, where, thanks to our citizens, the power of grace and the will of the common-sense majority still stand strong. And with that in mind, I'd like to leave you with this thought: Never before in all our 352 year history has our city been as prosperous, as resilient, as equitable or as strong as it is today. Never before has our future been brighter. And while we know there will always be challenges, we also know that as long as we remain true to the ideals that brought us to this point, there will never be a problem we can't overcome together—and our best days will always still be ahead.

Thank you, God bless you, and may God continue to bless and keep this great city of Charleston.