

State of the City Address 2020

Good evening, everyone. Thank you for being here tonight as I share with you my 2020 State of the City Address. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, “Be sincere. Be brief, Be seated.” That is my intent here tonight. As stated in previous addresses, I don’t believe this night is for me to spew out a bunch of boring numbers, percentages, and statistics. In my opinion, tonight is best characterized by showing you what’s been going on in our great city of Fitzgerald with many pictures and only a few words.

I’m two years into my first term as your Mayor. I continue to wake each day completely humbled by this honor. Being the Mayor of my hometown is something I will never take lightly. Each day is spent trying to make the lives of Fitzgerald’s residents better in some fashion. You may not agree with everything I do as your Mayor, but you will never say that I rested on my laurels and didn’t do anything. I learned very quickly that you can’t please everyone in this position. You just have to make what you feel is the best decision for the City of Fitzgerald as a whole, and move forward.

What a year it’s been! We started construction on the world’s largest topiary chicken. A 62’ foot behemoth that will also house an air BNB which you can rent out for a stay! Yes, you can spend the night in a luxurious hotel room in the world’s largest chicken. Our chicken has garnered quite the interest from all over the world. The world’s largest financial news publication, The Wall Street Journal, did a front page story on Fitzgerald, GA and our topiary chicken. That means that more than 3 million people around the world read about our town that day. We were also featured in USA Today and the Los Angeles Times – as well as countless other news publications literally across the globe. I’ve done radio interviews about our town on stations from Dallas, TX to St. Louis, MS. We’ve even been featured on the ESPN TV/Radio show Mike and Marty. Our chicken hasn’t even been completed yet, and it’s already doing exactly what we intended it to do – garner interest for our town.

The movie and TV industry is alive and growing in Fitzgerald. The entire 2nd season of the TV series *Encounter* was shot here and is now showing on Pureflix.

The feature film, *Breach*, starring among others, Bruce Willis, was shot right here in Fitzgerald. More are coming with even bigger names. Our goal continues to be a viable and sustainable TV/film industry employing local people.

Within hopefully two months, we will open an African Art Museum on Lee Street in the old Masonic Lodge Building. Sue Rochfort and I recently signed an agreement which loans her entire collection of African Art to the City of Fitzgerald for the next five years. We are currently in the process of renovating the building, and discussing corporate sponsorships to make sure this museum is a state of the art first class attraction when the doors open. This museum will house the most extensive African Art collection anywhere in the United States and quite possibly the entire world. For comparison, the Smithsonian Institute has 538 pieces in their African Art collection. The Rochfort collection has over 1000. This very well may be the crown jewel in all that we do for tourism. No exaggeration at all. It's going to be spectacular.

Brandy Elrod and her tourism and marketing team continue to stay busy. From the increasingly popular Wild Chicken Festival (Thank you, Councilman Peavey and Ricky Haggard) to the historic Grand Theatre with its concerts, live shows, and first run movies to our annual Snow Day to the Blue/Gray Museum to the Fitzgerald Skydive Boogie to the Harmony Jubilee to the Arts Council and much, much more, tourism is alive and well in Fitzgerald. This year we plan to add a Christmas tree lighting to our Downtown Christmas celebration. I promise you it's going to get even better. I'd be remiss if I didn't take a moment here to thank Hal Wiley and Todd Damato with Grand Concert Promotions. The concerts they've brought to the Grand Theatre have added a whole new element to our Downtown. Not to mention the annual Rodeo! Just good Fitzgerald people working hard to make Fitzgerald better.

Speaking of working hard to make Fitzgerald better, Jason Dunn, our economic development director, does just that on a daily basis. Jason is one of the hardest working people you will ever meet. He's great at developing relationships. Those relationships bring employers to Fitzgerald, and perhaps even more importantly, those relationships KEEP employers in Fitzgerald. Going into 2020, employment trends continue to increase and unemployment trends continue to decline. Our community ended 2019 with an unemployment rate of 5%. While still above the

state average, it is the lowest level we've experienced since the early 2000's and a 33% drop from where we were in January 2019. As we venture into 2020 we are anticipating continued growth from existing employers, payrolls to increase, and the entry of new employers into our community.

Under the strong leadership of Chief Rusty Seaver, our Fire Department continues to be one of the most well trained and educated groups in the state of Georgia. The Fire Department underwent a much needed facelift this year and looks absolutely stunning.

Under the stellar leadership of Chief William Smallwood, the Fitzgerald Police Department continues to be a shining beacon in the City of Fitzgerald. These men and women put their lives at risk on a daily basis, and for that we can never say thank you enough. They are getting a new building! Hopefully, our PD will be moving into the old bank building at the corner of Grant and Central in a few short weeks. Renovations are in full swing, and soon the police department will be back downtown where it belongs.

David Walker and his Public Works department are often the unsung heroes of the City. They each perform often thankless jobs day after day after day. No one usually recognizes them until something goes wrong. I, along with the entire Council, want each of them to know how valuable they are to the City of Fitzgerald. We recognize the job you do each day, and we thank you for it.

This year saw the retirement of Larry Hall from the DLS. His replacement, Harvey Taylor, has huge shoes to fill. But under the leadership of Director Keith Morris, the DLS will continue to provide opportunities for our youth to grow and compete. The job they do for our youth on a daily basis is invaluable.

The Fitzgerald Ben Hill County Humane Society, under the direction of Todd Fields, has had an incredible year. From a beautiful new paint scheme to increasing donations to new and valuable partnerships with rescue organizations, their work each day to take care of homeless animals is immeasurable.

From Neal Poole at the Landfill and Will Hammond at the airport to the ladies who work in our newly located Municipal Court, from City Clerk Cristina Evans (whose job includes keeping me straight and on track – not easy) to Chief Financial Officer Christina Justice to our wonderful city attorneys, from all of the

hard working and truly dedicated ladies who work at City Hall to the hardworking men who pick up your trash each week, the 122 employees of the City of Fitzgerald are special people. They work their tails off each day to keep this great city running smoothly. Each one is just as important as the other.

I'd like to publicly thank my Council Members. Your willingness to serve is to be commended. Together we will continue working to make Fitzgerald a better place for everyone.

Ben Hill County Commission Chairman Steve Taylor and I continue to work together for Ben Hill County and the City of Fitzgerald. We knew that our relationship would sometimes call for some tough decisions and tough conversations. We knew we would not always agree. But we have both vowed to "get it right" - for the citizens of Fitzgerald and Ben Hill County. I promise you now that we will continue to work together for your betterment.

We also have an excellent working relationship with Superintendent Dr. Shaun Haralson and School Board Chairman Gary Smith of Fitzgerald Ben Hill County schools. We are working together to insure the overall success of the construction of our new high school along with putting our heads together to make sure the existing high school site is used and rehabilitated as it should be after the students move to the new school.

Philip Jay, although our political views rarely align, considers himself as the unofficial chairman of my "Behind the Kitchen" cabinet. Where we do align is that we both want great things for the people and City of Fitzgerald. Thank you, Philip. I honestly appreciate your opinions and feedback more than you know.

Also, a big thank you to our local Chamber of Commerce. Chamber Director Neesa Williams and her faithful sidekick Jessica Griner do an amazing job of promoting all things Fitzgerald. As does our Development Authority Board Chairman Mr. Ron Paulk.

I could never talk about the 'state' of this great city without mentioning my two Deputy Administrators, Kathy Young and Cam Jordan. They are responsible for the day to day operations of the City of Fitzgerald. They are invaluable to me. They keep me sane and out of jail. Their dedication and loyalty to me and to the

City of Fitzgerald is unwavering. Thank you both from the bottom of my heart. I couldn't do this without you.

I also have to thank my beautiful wife Joanna and our children Hannah and Luke. They are my rock when I need that support. When I can't publicly vent my frustrations, they are the sounding boards to whom I often turn. Joanna is also my social media monitor – sometimes I listen to her and sometimes, foolishly, I do not. They all have to deal with a lot because of me, and I just want them to know how much I appreciate them.

Finally, the State of the City of Fitzgerald is PHENOMENAL! As with any small rural city in South Georgia, we have our challenges. But we have special people here. People who aren't afraid to step up to those challenges and tackle them head on. It takes all of us to be a success. I promise you, as always, to be visible and accessible to everyone. I promise to never take this position lightly, and I promise to work hard each day to make Fitzgerald a place you can be proud to call home.

Thank you again for being here. God bless you. God bless Fitzgerald, GA. And God Bless the greatest Country in the world, the United States of America.