



2020 STATE OF THE CITY
MAYOR DON WALTERS
May 19, 2021

Hello – I am Cuyahoga Falls Mayor Don Walters, and I am coming to you via this video amidst the continuing COVID-19 pandemic to deliver the 2020 State of the City. Though this is certainly not what we are used to and we all miss being together in person, we will make the best of it.

I want to begin by taking a moment to recognize the resiliency and dedication of all of you – our residents, businesses, and city staff members. Saying that this past year was not easy is an understatement. We all had to dig in and make personal sacrifices for the health and well-being of each other, and I want to thank you for all that you continue to do to keep our community safe and well. Our businesses made quick and innovative pivots to continue services to all of us and, because of their ingenuity, were largely able to keep their businesses thriving. Whether it was in person, shopping online, or using carryout services, you all showed up while following health guidelines to support our local small businesses, and I am so incredibly grateful to all of you for your commitment to seeing our city continue to move forward and succeed.

I want to take a minute to recognize both the Cuyahoga Falls and Woodridge School Districts under the leadership of Dr. Todd Nichols and Walter Davis, respectively. To the students, staff members, and parents – though this global pandemic was not what any of us could have foreseen or prevented, I want you to know that I have seen the sacrifices you all have made between in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning. Again, I know this has been incredibly trying. I want to commend each and every one of you for how you have adapted to the most unlikely of circumstances.

Regarding Cuyahoga Falls City Council - we have had many new faces on our council over the last year and a half, and I am energized by the fresh ideas and perspectives that they are bringing to the council floor. We have an incredible team of people representing all parts of our city, and I am proud to work with them collectively as we keep our city on a trajectory of growth and forward movement.

I want to thank my beautiful wife, Stephanie. Being married to an elected official cannot be easy. When I took office, she accepted about 50,000 people into our family, and she has done so with incredible acceptance and grace. Seriously though, I could not ask for a better partner in this life, and I could not love her more for her support.

Our healthcare workers, public health professionals, first responders, grocery store workers, truck drivers, and all who came together and showed up in service to all of us - thank you will never be enough for all that you continue to do.

And finally, I would like to recognize our residents who lost their battle with COVID-19 and send my sincerest condolences to their family members, friends, and neighbors. Though we all continue to sacrifice, I promise you that we will see the other side of this. I urge all of you to keep doing what we know to do: wear your masks, keep your distance, wash your hands, and if you are able, please get the COVID-19 vaccine to help keep our community well.

I want to thank and recognize all of our dedicated city employees and my Senior Cabinet members Law Director Janet Ciotola, Community Development Director Diana Colavecchio,

Neighborhood Excellence, Communication and Community Outreach Director Kelli Crawford-Smith, Finance Director Bryan Hoffman, Parks and Recreation Superintendent Sara Kline, and Service Director Anthony Zumbo. Many thought leaders have written articles and papers on how executives should always surround themselves with advisers who challenge how they think about things or offer different lenses and perspectives to view various issues. I have to tell you, I wholeheartedly believe that our team members are among some of the very best and brightest, and I have endless amounts of gratitude for every one of them for both their insight and for their unwavering dedication to this city.

Despite the pandemic, our city has continued to make incredible progress. Today, I am going to give you an overview of the current state of the city.

Our Finance Department remains committed to strong financial management by implementing best practices and is quick to lean on their innovative talents to deliver accurate and transparent financial reports. The 2020 General Fund ending unencumbered balance was over \$13.6 million, with the cash balance at roughly \$13.9 million. The department spent significant time planning and administering the state and federal COVID-19 grant funding. We very gratefully received \$4.1 and \$1.4 million grants that were used to help offset the wages and benefits of our first responders for their service during the pandemic. The grant dollars provided immense relief to our city finances.

I want to make special mention of our Law Department. Our city attorneys and staff members work incredibly hard to handle all municipal legal inquiries and issues, both civil and criminal. They are an incredible resource to both city staff and our City Council, for whom they research and write legislation. We all know that their jobs are not easy – it is not often that someone will call a lawyer to tell them what a great job they are doing every day. Instead, they handle complex legal inquiries and issues and do so with a sincere dedication to doing what is right and just with outstanding professionalism. I am always proud of our law team.

Our safety forces led by Police Chief Jack Davis and Fire Chief Fred Jackson have continued the honorable work of keeping us all safe. The men and women of our safety forces are some of the bravest among us, and we are grateful for their service to all of us.

Our Police Department unveiled a new, state-of-the-art indoor tactical shooting range and training center on Wyoga Lake Road in 2019 that has proven to be incredibly successful for both the department and the city. Located behind Fire Station 5, the training center has classrooms, an indoor shooting range, and a simulator to help keep our police force well-trained and well-supported. We have been pleased with the number of safety forces in surrounding communities that have been able to utilize this beautiful facility.

This past year, our Fire Department opened the new Fire Station 3 on Portage Trail. The original station opened back in 1959 and served the citizens of Cuyahoga Falls for 50 years. The 3,000 square foot building includes a classroom, exercise room for crews, EMS room for treatment of patients that arrive at the station, a state-of-the-art incident alerting system, modern facilities utilized in cancer prevention in the fire service, and much more. The department kept incredibly busy last year as their jobs pivoted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our firefighters and police officers serve our community and surrounding communities through mutual aid, and I could not be prouder of the job they do. Our safety forces continue to help all of us when we are at our most vulnerable, and they do so with incredible strength and dignity, but especially so through this pandemic, and I want to commend them for their service. Many of you know that Fire Chief Fred Jackson will be retiring at the end of next month. I want to thank him for his years of incredible dedication to the city and his leadership – especially during this last year as we navigated COVID-19. I wish him well in his retirement and want to take this opportunity to let you all know that our next Fire Chief is Chris Martin, and we are looking forward to seeing all that he will accomplish in his new role.

I often feel like our Service Department does not always get the credit they deserve for the outstanding services they provide to our residents and businesses. The work that they do day in and day out most directly impacts our quality of life, such as ensuring that we have clean water, picking up our trash and recyclables, making sure our lights turn on, that our potholes are addressed, and that our snow and leaves are taken away. We owe the entire service team a significant amount of gratitude for the level of service that they provide to all of us. As you know, investments in infrastructure have always been and remain one of the highest priorities of my administration. In 2020, the City expended over \$3 million for street improvements, which was roughly a 28% increase over 2019. These improvements included the paving of 44 streets consisting of over 25 lane miles of roadway. The 2021 budget prioritizes infrastructure improvements, with an additional half a million dollars being added for asphalt street paving to bring the total to \$3.5 million and an additional \$500,000 for concrete street repairs. The city's aging infrastructure will also get a boost. The budget includes continued consistency in the water line replacement schedule, numerous storm water projects, and electric infrastructure upgrades. Though the pandemic changed how services were delivered this past year, residents and businesses in Cuyahoga Falls continued to receive the top-notch city services and programs that they know and deserve. I am always proud to hear that our roads are consistently clearer than surrounding municipalities during snow events, which is a true testament to our team.

Our Parks and Recreation Department weathered many challenges and hardships that directly resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health orders required the shutdown of many of our parks and recreation facilities and the cancellation of community events to keep our residents and visitors safe. Despite it all, our Parks and Recreation Department worked to adjust programming to provide virtual events and fitness classes, videos, and at-home projects to keep the community entertained, active, and engaged.

The Natatorium, Quirk Cultural Center, Brookledge Golf Course, and Downview Family Center were forced to abruptly close last March. I want to commend every employee that works in these facilities for their ability to quickly adapt their job duties and expectations to address public health orders and safety measures to ensure that individuals could safely return to their favorite fitness activities and programming in our facilities. One of the most innovative responses to the pandemic came by way of Mobile Rec. Though they were unable to produce the traditional Mobile Rec Summer Program, they instead designed and distributed over 1700 Rec2Go Bags with delivery in mid-summer with bags containing pre-packaged toys, crafts, and activities that kids could do at home. In August, they distributed over 500 “Back to School” Bags containing

crafts and school supplies. Arguably, the most outstanding contribution that was made to the community by the Parks and Recreation Department last year was the incredibly successful drive-through trick-or-treat event that happened at our parks facilities and municipal buildings to provide physically distant Halloween fun for all of our residents and visitors. We handed out over 30,000 bags of candy during the event. For one day, during a pandemic, we were able to come together in the name of community and fun – even if from a distance.

Additionally, we were thrilled to see the completion and presentation of our continuous improvement plan for our parks system that includes a comprehensive study of our city parks, recreational facilities, and programs. The purpose of the Plan was to inventory our current facilities and programs, provide guidance to my administration, and generate a sustainable and implementable action plan to better serve the recreational needs of residents and visitors. Our Parks and Recreation team is committed to executing some of the best and, bar none, most inclusive programming that you will find almost anywhere.

Front Street was reopened only three years ago and has done precisely what was predicted through the many market and feasibility studies done before the road's opening. I could not be prouder or more energized every time I am downtown and see the entire area activated with residents and visitors taking advantage of all that our local businesses have to offer. Downtown Cuyahoga Falls has been brought back to life and has blossomed into more than we ever could have imagined. I am proud to share that just last year, 18 new businesses joined us on Front Street with an estimated total investment of over \$3 Million and created 76 new jobs. Even amidst a pandemic and economic uncertainty, businesses have continued to choose to locate here and invest in our city because they know, as we all have always known, that we are a city on the move.

The unquestionable success of our downtown has also driven tourism in our city and, notably, on our river. I think we can all agree that one of the greatest highlights of the year has been our very own Cuyahoga River being named by USA TODAY as the number one urban kayaking spot in North America. Whether fishing, kayaking, canoeing, or tubing, our river has recreational activities for all people. We are uniquely positioned to be a destination for anyone who is looking to take advantage of our outdoor recreational activities. Beyond the river, hikers, runners, and bicyclists are also coming from all over to visit the many breathtaking trails of our Summit Metro Parks and Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

We were most proud to celebrate the grand reopening of the former Falls Theater when The Workz opened its doors last year. The Theater, long ago slated for demolition, was resurrected and renovated and has been an incredible driver of visitors to our downtown. The Workz is the result of a \$1.6 Million investment that has created roughly 30 jobs in our city. The Workz provides family entertainment, restaurant and bar selections, arcade games, duckpin bowling, virtual reality, and a 1920's themed speakeasy. We are thrilled to see this building back in business.

Summit DD is in the process of relocating its headquarters to our downtown, and we just held a groundbreaking ceremony to celebrate that they have chosen Cuyahoga Falls as their home. This will result in over 100 additional jobs at the facility. Our development team continues to work to

ensure economic prosperity and growth throughout the city. They have tracked a total investment in our city, outside of the downtown footprint, of over \$45 million and created an additional 78 jobs. Prospective businesses who want to call Cuyahoga Falls home contact our Community Development Department daily, and we cannot wait to welcome every one of them with open arms.

Our housing market continues to grow and flourish, offering something for everyone. Sales of homes throughout the city continue to be on the rise, with many selling within a day of being listed on the market. With all that we have to offer for older adults, families, and young professionals, we could not be prouder that so many people are actively seeking out Cuyahoga Falls to make their home.

Regarding our existing housing stock, our Housing and Code Enforcement Division personnel oversaw over 2,000 cases. It is important to note their work because the Division administers our housing and property maintenance codes to ensure that properties throughout the City remain safe and free of deterioration and help maintain our property values. These inspectors work hard to ensure that Cuyahoga Falls will remain a beautiful city well into the future, and we are grateful for the work they do.

Our Community Development team works every day to ensure that we are known for being one of the most business-friendly communities out there – one with a group of professionals who is always willing to work with businesses big and small to help them transition or open in Cuyahoga Falls.

The Neighborhood Excellence, Communication and Community Outreach Department continues its efforts to increase communications with residents and businesses, strengthen neighborhood relationships and involvement, and build stronger relationships and community outreach efforts throughout the city. They played a pivotal role, especially in the earliest days of the pandemic, reading and understanding research and ever-evolving guidelines from the CDC and our public health organizations and then organizing, writing, and disseminating the information to the community as a whole. They organized community resources and created webpages for our community members and businesses to quickly access public and mental health information, financial assistance, and relief grants, and compiled lists of resources such as services our grocery stores and restaurants were offering.

They also started Cuyahoga Falls Cares and pulled volunteers in the community together to help out those who needed assistance, whether that be picking up prescriptions or groceries for neighbors who were immunocompromised and couldn't get out of their homes, to checking in on neighbors who had contracted COVID to make sure that they never felt alone and had what they needed. The response from our community was nothing short of overwhelming, and we were grateful for the incredible kindness and compassion of our community members. I was also thrilled with the level of fun and community participation that resulted from our first annual Downtown Parking Meter Holiday Decorating Contest. Our local businesses, community leaders, and residents brought their top-notch creativity and generosity to our downtown by sponsoring and decorating our parking meters and I want to thank them for all of their hard work.

There has already been a lot of buzz from our participants about what they are already planning for next year and I fully expect that each of them will bring even bigger and better ideas in the years to come.

Though we were unable to meet in person, we held the Front Yard Interaction meetings on Zoom to continue to bring neighbors together to stay connected. It is important to note that we were a National Finalist this year for the Best Neighborhood Program Award by Neighborhoods USA for our FYI meetings. And finally, one of the projects that I am most proud of is partnering with United Way of Summit County to bring Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion training, specifically implicit bias training, to all of our city employees.

The City of Cuyahoga Falls is booming. Even in the face of a global pandemic, you have heard a lot about the forward movement of our great city and all that we, collectively as a community, have been doing to put Cuyahoga Falls on the map. Our city is in a continued state of revitalization, redevelopment, and in the midst of an ever-growing housing market with increased property values. We proudly boast a locally-centric small business community who are putting their hearts and souls into their thriving businesses and a city filled, from corp line to corp line, with citizens who dedicate their valuable time and resources to make their neighborhoods stronger. Our state of the city has never been so forward-thinking, welcoming, and action-oriented. I have never been more proud to lead this city.

It is the honor of my life to continue to serve as your Mayor, and I cannot thank you enough for your support of me, my administration, and this beautiful community that we are all so fortunate to call home. Thank you.