

STATE OF THE CITY 2021

Good evening. Welcome to Wyoming City Hall where we are meeting virtually to ensure the safety of all. Thank you for joining us tonight for my annual State of the City Address. I am Jack Poll, and I am honored to serve as Mayor of the great City of Wyoming.

Before I begin, I want to extend my appreciation to those who have joined us this evening.

INTRODUCE DIGNITARIES

- Kent County Treasurer Peter MacGregor
- Representative Tommy Brann

Due to the virtual setting, I may have missed acknowledging some of our honored guests by name. If I have, please know I am grateful for your presence and for all you do for our community.

I also want to take a moment to extend my deep gratitude to my fellow City Council members:

- Mayor Pro-Tem Sam Bolt
- Council Member-at-Large Kent Vanderwood
- First Ward Representative Sheldon DeKryger
- Second Ward Representative Marissa Postler
- Third Ward Representative Rob Postema
- Newly elected Council Member-at-Large John Fitzgerald

I appreciate your commitment and dedication to our community. It's an honor to serve alongside you as we work together for the betterment of Wyoming.

PAUSE

I also want to recognize our dedicated City staff. Led by City Manager Curtis Holt, they have worked incredibly hard throughout the global pandemic in 2020 to deliver the excellent City services our residents have come to expect. Their dedication, flexibility and creativity allowed Wyoming to safely meet the evolving landscape of COVID-19.

Working with our Council, they have addressed challenges and developed both short- and long-term strategies to improve our

community. We appreciate their tremendous efforts during the difficulties of last year.

PAUSE

And finally, I give thanks to my family. Without their love and support, I wouldn't be able to do this work. Thank you to my loving wife and the First Lady of Wyoming, Mary, my three wonderful children and their spouses, and my nine amazing grandchildren. Looking back to my first State of the City Address, I had only one grandchild, and now we are blessed with nine.

PAUSE

Tonight, I am honored to present my 12th State of the City address. I plan to highlight our accomplishments over the year just ended and look forward to what we must address in 2021.

PAUSE

We did not see 2020 coming. No one did.

When the state went into lockdown last March, many businesses closed their doors for what we thought would be two weeks. Employees who were able to work remotely did so. Schools shifted to remote learning. Everyone was encouraged to “stay home.” But cities cannot close – and Wyoming stayed open.

City services are some of the most essential services. City staff make sure you have clean drinking water, plowed streets and working traffic signals. When you call 911, you know a Wyoming firefighter or police officer will respond. We manage elections, provide safe housing and offer justice through our court. And we provide needed green space through our parks and trails, as well as programming to ensure a healthy community.

PAUSE

COVID-19 made delivery of these services far more complicated. Yet without missing a beat, City staff developed a response plan to ensure the safety of our residents, our businesses, our visitors and our team.

This included changing protocols to allow for physical distancing, acquiring personal protective equipment that was in very short supply at the beginning of the pandemic, and performing contact tracing. It also included equipping some team members to work from home, ensuring they had proper technology and IT support while safeguarding the City's information.

Wyoming staff worked with the Kent County Health Department to share up-to-date news on the coronavirus with residents and businesses. We continued to partner with our Kent District Library branches to provide access to information. And we worked closely together with neighboring communities to respond to emergencies.

Due to restrictions on gatherings, many of our concerts, sports leagues and other community enrichment events were at risk of being cancelled. We worked collaboratively to offer virtual events and programs so we could maintain connections with our community and had more than 2,400 participants in these programs. I also want to highlight our Wyoming Senior Center

staff who continued to work with Senior Meals on Wheels to provide over 6,800 senior meals as well as personal care items in a safe, drive-thru format.

PAUSE

If we had a word for 2020, that word would be “collaboration.” Our community stepped up together. I could spend an entire evening highlighting the ways in which we worked collaboratively to overcome challenges and create a brighter future for all who live, work and play here in Wyoming.

Collaboration lies at the heart of our mission as a City: community, safety, stewardship.

PAUSE

Let me say that again: Community, safety, stewardship.

We know when the people and businesses who call Wyoming home succeed, we all succeed. And to succeed, we need to work together.

PAUSE

There's no doubt 2020 was one of the most difficult years any of us have ever experienced. The pandemic took a heavy toll on people's lives and livelihoods.

Like so many other communities across Michigan and the nation, we experienced an increase in violent crime this year. We also saw an increase in robberies and an increase in aggravated assault. Our Public Safety Department is dedicated to solving these cases and securing justice for victims.

Wyoming businesses struggled to meet the extra expense of doing business safely. State mandates required many local businesses to shut their doors temporarily. We know some businesses have closed permanently, and we expect more challenges for businesses in the months ahead as we continue to feel the impacts of this vicious pandemic.

The closures have translated into job losses for our residents, putting extra strain on families trying to pay rent or mortgages, put food on the table and pay their bills. Families have been helped by extended unemployment benefits, the moratorium

on evictions and many wonderful nonprofits in our community who have stepped up to lend a hand.

While difficult days are still ahead, the distribution of the vaccine to fight COVID-19 fills me with hope. As a retired pharmacist, I would encourage all residents to be vaccinated as soon as you are able. I know we are all tired of this fight, but we must continue to be vigilant as a community, to wear facial coverings and to practice physical distancing. Most importantly, we must continue to look out for our neighbors.

PAUSE

Despite the challenges of the past year, our City has many success stories. I want to highlight the extraordinary caliber of work and diversity of projects performed by our amazing staff under the direction of City Manager Curtis Holt. He has an excellent leadership team in Kate Balfoort, Andrea Boot, Scott Engerson, Myron Erickson, Pat Firestone, Chief Kim Koster, Kim Oostindie, Rebecca Rynbrandt, Scott Smith, Kelli VandenBerg, and Rebeca Venema. They, in turn, are supported by 353 amazing, full-time and 119 seasonal or part-time staff.

During 2020, Wyoming achieved a great Census count despite trying circumstances. More than 78 percent of our residents self-responded, an increase of nearly 6 percent over the last Census in 2010. Once the in-person follow-up was complete, we counted nearly 100% of Wyoming households. Having an accurate count will ensure Wyoming receives its fair share of federal dollars.

We administered four elections with record turnouts, including the presidential election in November when 65 percent of registered voters in Wyoming cast ballots. More than half of these ballots were voted absentee, which is a 420 percent increase from the last presidential election. COVID required new safety protocols, which prompted us to develop virtual training for the more than 225 election workers who support our elections each year. I want to thank all those election workers who ensure a fair and accurate election.

PAUSE

We upgraded the technology in the City Commission Chambers to improve access to and the quality of our public meetings for our community.

We repaired a major water transmission line in just 9 days to ensure 230,000 people throughout West Michigan continued to have access to clean water.

Despite the pandemic, Wyoming welcomed many public and private improvements throughout the City. In 2020, we issued more than 580 building permits at a value of more than \$105 million in construction.

Over forty projects were reviewed by the Planning Commission in 2020, demonstrating a significant investment in our community. These projects range from a new residential development with multiple buildings and businesses near Burlingame and 60th Street to new residential developments including the addition of single family-family, multi-family and dedicated senior living homes. Just last month the Council also approved a new neighborhood development near 64th Street and Wilson Avenue, which will bring commercial interests to

the area, as well as provide new housing options for our residents.

We continued to invest in our own City facilities, including parks, streets and underground utilities. We restored the Burlingame water tanks to sustain increased demand as our City continues to grow.

We also resurfaced more than 14 miles of streets, repaired more than 40 water main breaks and added more than a mile of new water main in two separate projects.

We invested over \$663,000 in Community Development Block Grant funding in the 2019-2020 grant year. More than \$140,000 of this was spent on housing rehabilitation programs and support services. An additional \$60,000 was spent on code enforcement activities and over \$79,000 was spent on additional public services to prevent homelessness. All of these funds were invested in activities that benefitted low- and moderate-income residents. This was especially important work when we have so many residents struggling to meet their essential housing needs.

The Wyoming Housing Commission participated in a new venture working with developers to help them complete successful applications to the Michigan State Housing Development Authority. This led to the Housing Commission passing 8 resolutions to help increase affordable housing options in Wyoming. One example to highlight this work is Samarita's recent application approval for the St Joe's Seminary Building, which will include 52 new, affordable senior housing apartments.

PAUSE

Our Department of Public Safety assisted the City of Grand Rapids during several protests. Although several Wyoming police cruisers were destroyed, none of our employees were injured during these events. Our local law enforcement agencies work well together and stand ready to assist one another in times of need.

To enhance the safety of all, we re-opened our drive-up window at City Hall to provide a safe alternative for in-person transactions. Staff served approximately 300 people each week.

During 2020, Wyoming celebrated the grand re-opening of Ideal Park, which features a shelter and new universally accessible playground, among other improvements. We also began construction to improve Jackson Park, which will offer community members a new splashpad and playground, among other upgrades.

The City increased community engagement on social media as part of our commitment to transparency and accountability. This led to a 30 percent increase in Facebook followers and a 75 percent increase in Twitter impressions from 2019. If you don't already do so, be sure to like us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter and Instagram to stay up to date.

PAUSE

In 2020, our police officers responded to more than 28,500 calls for service and our fire fighters responded to approximately 6,500 calls for service. That averages to nearly 100 calls each day requiring our public safety officers to gear up and report out. For fire, this is a 25% increase in calls from 10 years ago.

With more than 5,000 Wyoming residents testing positive for COVID, Public Safety responded to more than 900 calls where there was a confirmed or suspected case. The risk to their own health did not prevent our officers from doing their sworn duty.

PAUSE

I had the opportunity to better understand these risks firsthand during a special job shadow. Each Council member and I were paired with police officers or firefighters for the day. Until you walk in another person's shoes, it is impossible to understand the physical, emotional and mental stresses they encounter.

During my job shadow, I donned 75 pounds of firefighting equipment, entered a smoke-filled room and crawled on my hands and knees in an attempt to drag a practice dummy to safety. I understand why firefighters retire long before 65. The physical stamina required in combination with the mental stress was incredible. And I did this in a training environment – not the real thing. The added strain to know that people are in danger, that you are in danger, is inconceivable to those who haven't experienced it.

PAUSE

Despite COVID restrictions, our firefighters and police officers found ways to engage positively with our community through special events such as the drive-through National Night Out, drive-by birthday parties and Shop with a Cop. This latter event made the Christmas holiday extra special for more than 40 kids in Wyoming.

I want to highlight some of the amazing work of our fire fighters do in response to service calls in 2020. Fire fighters rescued a 12-year-old from the window of a burning home in May. In September, they extricated 5 people from a multi-vehicle crash in time to receive care. While in November, fire fighters saved a man's life after a vehicle struck a home and trapped him under the vehicle.

I am pleased to announce the Wyoming Police Department has successfully implemented a new in-car camera system along with body cameras. Documenting the professional service our Public Safety Department provides every day is a crucial step in

our ongoing effort to be transparent and accountable to our community.

PAUSE

As we prepare for the year ahead, I am encouraged by the accomplishments the City of Wyoming achieved in 2020.

We challenge ourselves, as public servants, as business and organization leaders and as community members to create a sustainable Wyoming for decades to come. A Wyoming with a strong economy. A Wyoming with robust cultural and community activities. A Wyoming where all feel safe and secure.

Today, our City is in a solid financial place, but we cannot rest on those laurels nor rely on this to continue. We have to anticipate our future growth and the corresponding future needs of our community. We must ensure we have the funding in place to deliver the caliber of services our residents and businesses want and demand.

As we look carefully at our budget, staffing and services, I am concerned about the sustainability of our current funding. I hear regularly from residents and business owners who are concerned about traffic issues such as speeding cars, distracted drivers, as well as an increase in vehicle thefts and property crimes. Our Public Safety Department works to address these concerns through traffic stops, property safety checks and other initiatives. Yet we simply do not have the staffing to be as proactive as we need to be.

Public Safety remains the largest single item in our annual budget, accounting for more than 67% percent. It enables us to hire 31 firefighters and 88 police officers to serve our community of more than 75,000. However, I can't help but recognize the significant understaffing of our police and fire services, not only when compared with other similar sized communities but also as it relates to workload and the ability of our Public Safety personnel to be proactive in addressing community needs.

We must begin to think how to address these community needs now and into the future. The Council and I will be working with City staff to evaluate financial options we hope to bring to residents for review in the coming months.

PAUSE

There is much to look forward to in a brighter 2021. I am excited about the recruitment of our next Deputy City Manager. This person will help guide our City in economic development, communication and cultural competency. Hiring the right person is key to propelling Wyoming into being a more welcoming and inclusive community with strong ties to local government and a firm focus on economic development.

I look forward to partnering with local developers and entrepreneurs to ensure Wyoming continues to be a great place to live, work and play. We continue to work to identify the right tenant for Site 36, which lies close to the heart of our City and has tremendous potential to have a game-changing use.

We expect to see additional retail development along 28 West, and we welcome nearly 400 new residential units on the site of the former Studio 28. Remember when 28 West was just an idea? We heard a fair bit of skepticism at that time, but developers had the vision to see beyond what was in front of them, and our community is now the better for it.

PAUSE

In the coming months, City Council will vote on a new Master Plan, called Wyoming [re]imagined that will help shape our community over the next 20 years. This document will address zoning changes, including changes to better align our planned unit development, or PUD, zoning. This plan provides a framework for future growth and reinvestment. It informs planning decisions regarding land use and development; infrastructure; transportation and mobility, parks, open space, and recreation; streetscape character and beautification; and community services and facilities.

At the heart of this master plan is our community. I am proud of the number of people we have involved in this process who helped create the vision for our successful future.

We have been collaborating with the Cities of Grand Rapids and Kentwood, and our partner The Rapid, on a federally funded transportation study for Division Avenue. This project is a coordinated effort to examine previous and future Silver Line investments. With the help of community members and our partners, we are working to deliver a new vision and goals for the corridor that will help provide a sustainable and equitable growth plan for Division Avenue.

PAUSE

My fellow Council members, City staff and I regularly hear “you work for us” from community members. You are correct – we do work for you. It can be challenging to find consensus within our diverse community. Without your active and regular

engagement, it makes it extremely difficult to know your priorities and develop the right solutions.

We need residents to come alongside us and examine the facts, provide input, review opportunities and settle on a solution.

We need residents and business owners who will partners with us on the process of community building.

So that we can be successful as a community, I want to ask you to do three things:

First, follow our City Council and Planning Commission meetings broadcast live from our wonderful partner, WKTV.

The meeting agendas are available online and you can contact us whenever you have questions.

Second, consider joining one of our Boards or Commissions. We have openings in development, community enrichment and others. You can complete an online application on our website.

Third, reach out to us personally. Email or call me or one of my fellow Council members when you see something in a

neighboring community you think may be good for Wyoming or have an issue that needs to be resolved.

We have an amazing team at the City of Wyoming. Our staff has a wealth of knowledge and expertise. However, in order for our staff to find solutions, they need input from our community and our City Council. If we all commit to sharing ideas and to working together, we can make sure Wyoming remains an exceptional place to live, work and play.

As your Mayor, I strongly believe anything we ask of our residents will be supported if it is clearly shown to be the best for our community. I appreciate the trust you have placed in me over the past 11 years as your Mayor.

Thank you for joining us tonight. Please continue to do so in the year ahead. Let's make 2021 a year where we all commit to be involved and be informed.