

2024 State of the City Address

as presented by Mayor G.T. Bynum, November 14, 2024

Thank you for that introduction and to all of you for being here today.

I want to thank the Tulsa Chamber for the strong partnership you've provided during my 16 years at City Hall. I can't tell you how critical the Chamber has been to the success of so much I will highlight today. To Mike and the whole team at the Chamber, thank you for all you do to move Tulsa forward.

Everything in my life starts with my family. I am thankful for the love and support I've received from them throughout my time in this job. I am grateful for the members of our family who could be here today. In particular, I want to single out the light in my life. You will never know how much this city has benefited from her guidance over the last 8 years. She is the smartest person I know, the best strategic thinker I've ever met, my partner in all I do, and the Vice President of the University of Oklahoma at Tulsa: Susan Bynum. (Pause)

As I am sure many of you can relate, I am at a stage in my life where I think about the passage of time first and foremost as a Dad. Susan is one of the people who was there on the day I was sworn into the City Council in April of 2008.

The other was this little guy, our son Robert. Today, Robert is bigger than all the people in that photo. He's a senior in high school, the starting tight end on his football team where he lays waste to any defender that gets in his way, and he will be a freshman at the University of Oklahoma in the Fall. I am grateful he is here today, and so proud to be his Dad. (Pause)

Our daughter Annabel has a particularly close attachment to city government. The week before she was born, Susan and I met with the doctor and she said Susan could be induced that Wednesday or the following Monday. In a moment Susan will never let me live down, I pointed out that I had a perfect attendance record at City Council meetings and the Council at that time met on Wednesdays so it would really be better for me if she waited 5 days and was induced the following Monday. So Annabel's birth was scheduled to accommodate the Tulsa City Council meeting schedule! Annabel is now a freshman in high school, and is both a state all-star lacrosse player and an award-winning author. I am very proud of her, and grateful she is here today. (Pause)

And I am honored to introduce my Mom, Suzie Bynum - the only Tulsan in our history to be the child of one mayor and the parent of another. Mom and I first attended a Tulsa mayor's farewell speech in April of 1978, when my grandad spoke to the City Commission as he left office. I don't really remember it, because I was 8 months old. But apparently I was kind of obnoxious - enough so that my Mom handed me a box of Tic-Tacs to shake in order to distract me. But while 46 years have passed, I think my performance that night may be similar to what you will see and hear today. Yelling.

Crying. Shaking of fists. The big difference is that this time I have a police department at my command to prevent my Mom from intervening. Mom, thank you. (Pause)

I know my colleagues from the Tulsa City Council are here, and our outgoing City Auditor Cathy Carter, as are members of the best team of public servants in any city in America - our City of Tulsa employees. One of the things I've loved most about this job is coming to work every day with this team at the City of Tulsa. They are selfless, courageous, and devoted to our community. I've drawn so much inspiration from working side by side with them, and I will miss that daily interaction greatly. I want to thank each of them for all they do to make Tulsa better. (Pause)

This is my eighth and final time to deliver a State of the City address to you. It has been the honor of my life to serve you as Mayor.

I remember my very first mayoral debate, back in 2016 when I was seeking this job. I said that I didn't want Tulsa competing with Broken Arrow and Owasso and Jenks - I wanted us working WITH them to compete with Austin and Denver and Chicago. And after that debate, a very nice woman came up to me and she said: "You are so sweet... to think that we can compete with those cities."

Well, that was not a minority mindset in Tulsa back in those days. And I think about her every time people ask me what our greatest accomplishment has been during my 8 years as mayor. Because there is no question in my mind. It's the main reason I ran in the first place. Our greatest triumph of the last 8 years is that we have renewed a spirit of high expectations.

Today, we are working together as a metro area and we are winning. Today, Tulsans don't just expect us to compete with great cities around the world - they expect us to win. And I think about my children's generation, which will grow up thinking:

"Of course we have the greatest city park in the world in Tulsa."

"Of course we have a lake in the middle of our city."

"Of course we're home to an Olympic sport."

"Of course we own the greatest collection of American art and history outside of DC."

Think about what their generation will achieve with that bar raised in their minds. That's why I am so optimistic about our future as a city.

8 years ago, the Tulsa City Council and I agreed on our goal: Tulsa should be a globally-competitive world class city. And we defined that in three areas: public safety; equality of opportunity; and the built environment.

When it comes to public safety, we've made great strides.

In both the Police and Fire Departments, we've been through the largest surge in hiring in Tulsa history. A third of sworn firefighters working in the Tulsa Fire Department and almost half of sworn officers working in the Tulsa Police Department have been hired during my mayoral administration.

In the Tulsa Police Department, we've made what officers tell me is the biggest advancement since radios were installed in squad cars: the creation of the Real Time Information Center. The Real Time Information Center brings modern technology and deploys it for officers in the field to do their jobs more effectively and safely – averaging 40 calls for service a day from officers in the field. Since we established it in August of last year it has been used to solve multiple homicides, locate missing elderly Tulsans suffering from Alzheimer's, and recover over \$3 million dollars in stolen property.

In the Tulsa Fire Department, we opened a new station in East Tulsa serving one of the most in-demand areas and are modernizing our truck fleet after a decade of deferrals. These capital improvements coupled with our surge in staffing have added up to the Tulsa Fire Department being rated an ISO1 fire service: the highest rating a fire department can receive. So when I say we have one of the best fire departments in America, it isn't just mayoral pride – we have independent verification.

And public safety isn't just the domain of our Police and Fire Departments. In the 1970s, Tulsa was named the most flood-prone city in America. We have now been named by FEMA as having a flood rating of 1, making Tulsa one of only two cities in the entire country to reach this flood protection standard. Thanks to decades of commitment by voters and city officials, we have gone from one of the worst to one of the best when it comes to flood protection.

And this generation of Tulsans has proven that it can hang with any prior generation when it comes to enduring and even thriving amidst disasters. My dear friend City Councilor Jeannie Cue once told me the 8 years I've been mayor are the worst 8 years Tulsa ever had! She has since clarified that she meant disasters, and I don't think she's far off. We've managed our way through tornados, flooding, tornados while it was flooding, a polar vortex, a derecho, the largest cyber attack on any city in Oklahoma history, an economic collapse, a riot, civil unrest, the murder of a beloved police sergeant, a mass shooting at our city's foremost center of healing, and the greatest public health crisis in Tulsa history. And we made our way through each of those and emerged stronger by watching out for one another each step of the way.

So today, in 2024, we are a safer city than we were 8 years ago.

Our drive to create equality of opportunity has been both challenging and historic. We want Tulsa to be a city where every kid has an equal opportunity for a great life.

If we want to achieve this, we have to recognize that there are many in Tulsa who historically have not had the same opportunities. Over the last 8 years, we have worked hard to change that.

We established the Resilient Tulsa Strategy – Tulsa’s first-ever strategic plan to reduce racial disparities in our city. We created the Mayor’s Office of Resilience and Equity, a team of people who come to work every day focused on executing that strategy. And we established the Tulsa Equality Indicators, an annual independent audit of inequality in our city – because you can’t truly improve something if you’re not measuring it.

We recognize that one of the best vehicles for eliminating racial disparities in Tulsa is economic development, and so we’ve worked with the Tulsa Regional Chamber to recruit over a billion dollars of investment into North Tulsa during the last 8 years. We also systematized this focus by merging half a dozen City offices and authorities into the Tulsa Authority for Economic Opportunity – also known as Partner Tulsa, our economic development authority that is chartered with the mission of using economic development to create equality of opportunity.

This generation of Tulsans has also had to take responsibility for doing things that were not done before. A good example of this is the search for unmarked graves of Tulsa Race Massacre victims. We have convened some of the best archaeologists and forensic anthropologists in America for the last five years to search for those victims. Using DNA and genealogical technology never before deployed, we were able this year to positively identify the first victim.

C.L. Daniel served our country honorably in World War I. He was on a train from the West Coast headed home to Georgia when he stopped in Tulsa and was murdered in the Race Massacre. For 103 years his family never knew where his body was, until we called to tell them this year. That investigation continues, with the remains of many more people being analyzed in the hope of making similar reunifications. I am grateful that you as Tulsans have stuck with this search so we can do right by the victims’ families.

Speaking of doing right by the families of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre victims, we launched this year the Beyond Apology Commission with the goal of developing proposals for reparations benefiting victims’ families. For too long we have allowed this issue to be monopolized by trial lawyers when it should be a community discussion among neighbors. What I’ve learned is that the term reparations means different things to different people. It often never gets past debate over one form of reparations: levying a tax to make cash payments. But that is only one option, as a report issued earlier this year showed. The reality is that economic development opportunities, educational scholarships, affordable housing opportunities, and many more options are also considered reparations.

So instead of getting hung up on that one word - reparations - I would ask that we think about it as this: what can we as Tulsans do out of compassion to show our support and consideration for the descendants of our neighbors who were the victims of the worst thing that ever happened to our city? That is the goal of this commission, and I am eager to see what they recommend.

Our focus on creating equality of opportunity has also been very much focused on our immigrant community. We want Tulsa to be the best city in America for immigrants, and we do this through the New Tulsans Initiative. I've hosted 1,427 new Americans from 99 different countries at City Hall citizenship ceremonies we began in 2019, and every single time I am inspired that Tulsa and Oklahoma and America remain beacons of freedom and opportunity for people all around the world.

And as mayor I have placed a particular emphasis on gender equality. When I was sworn into this job, there were two men for every woman on city authorities and boards. Today, women make up 51% of City board seats - the same percentage as our overall population. We instituted an annual pay audit of City employees to make sure members of our team are receiving equal pay for equal work - and we allocated hundreds of thousands of dollars in the first year to correct inequalities that existed. With the Tulsa Women's Commission, we instituted the Mayor's Pay Equity Pledge for local employers to show they support equal pay for equal work and today we have 47 employers signed on.

So today, in 2024, we are a city of greater opportunity for more people than ever before.

Our work to build the city we want to leave to future generations is easily the most visible change over the last 8 years. We are living through the greatest period of investment in Tulsa in our history. And I would love to tell you about every transformational project, but Mayor Nichols would be sworn into office on December 2nd before I was finished. So instead, I am going to utilize the belief that a picture says a thousand words and show you just a few before-and-after shots from our city over the last 8 years.

We took a field and turned it into the campus of the Greenheck Group - one of Tulsa's fastest-growing employers.

We turned sand bars into Zink Lake.

We turned a gravel parking lot into Tulsa's children's museum, the Discovery Lab.

We turned our riverfront into the great city park in America, the Gathering Place.

We took a vacant restaurant and turned it into the beautiful 222 N. Detroit office tower.

We turned an abandoned industrial site into the home of an Olympic sport: USA BMX.

We are turning our moldy, rusty Police-Courts Building into a Public Safety Center that reflects the reverence Tulsans have for our first responders.

We turned an empty field into Amazon, one of the largest new employers in our history.

We turned an old playground into Hope Playground, a playground for children of all physical abilities that is now a national model.

We turned an empty field in East Tulsa into Tulsa Fire Station 33.

We turned vacant land in North Tulsa into the Peoria-Mohawk Business Park.

We turned a shuttered rec center at McClure Park into the home of the Tulsa Glassblowing School.

We are building a Veterans Medical Center and a home for the greatest collection of American art and history at Gilcrease Museum.

And we built beautiful affordable housing in West Tulsa, while also building a center for the history of Black Wall Street at Greenwood Rising.

We turned an empty field into Costco, a vacant arena into a convention center ballroom, an underutilized park into the best public BMX track in Oklahoma, and a vacant mall into the Oilers Ice Center.

We built the Langston University Nursing Center and Scheels and the TCC Student Success Center and Santa Fe Square.

We are turning an abandoned hospital into the Greenwood Entrepreneurship Initiative at Moton.

We built a simulator training facility for the Oklahoma Air National Guard.

The historic Swan Lake Fountain will run for the first time in decades, and Route 66 Village is now a must-see stop for international tourists driving down the Mother Road.

We put a new face on this convention center, modernized the Tulsa Zoo experience, transformed public transportation with bus rapid transit, and completed the most expensive street project in city history: Yale between 81st and 91st.

And I could go on! The scale of physical transformation we have achieved in the last 8 years is historic.

And so today, in 2024, we have built - and continue to build - a city that we will be proud to leave to future generations of Tulsans.

But just in the interest of full disclosure, not everything has improved during my time at City Hall. So I will include one more:

We turned that beautiful, dense head of hair into this horrifying land rush of baldness between the front and back of my head!

I love, by the way, the look on the face of the dude in the background. He's like: "The mayor should not be leaning forward with a hairline like that!" It reminds me of a story about George Washington, when he was delivering a speech to an angry audience in 1783 and he tried to start reading it but stumbled, and while taking out his spectacles said: "You will have to pardon me, but I have grown blind in service to my country." Everyone began weeping in gratitude, and their anger subsided. I hope when you see my bald spot, you too will weep with gratitude.

But leaving the topic of my personal vanity...

I'm also proud of the way we've managed the City government - something that occupies most of my time but which you rarely see. We have paved more miles of road than any mayoral administration in Tulsa history. We have made the Tulsa city government an international model for the use of data in decision making and performance improvement. Every budget we've passed with the City Council has been balanced. Every budget we've passed with the City Council was unanimously adopted because we worked together closely to create it. Having inherited a multi-million-dollar deficit, we leave with a budget surplus. Having inherited total cash reserves of approximately \$19 million, we leave with them over \$50 million - a 165% increase that protects our ability to keep providing critical services in the event of an economic downturn. Our Rainy Day Fund alone is up over 1000%.

I've been asked by friends if I have any regrets as I leave office. Of course! I would love to be leaving the Mayor's Office with every problem solved so Mayor Nichols can charge forward with his agenda and have nothing holding him back. In the last few weeks, I realized I am grinding my teeth through the day out of frustration because I see what needs to be addressed but I don't have the time to fix it.

The reality is that no mayor leaves office with every problem solved. We have only scratched the surface on addressing homelessness. In some important respects, we remain in a legal limbo when it comes to our relationship with tribal governments following the McGirt Supreme Court decision. And we must find ways to recruit more Tulsa Police officers. Cities will always have challenges to address, and we as a community have a lot of work to do in addressing these.

But when you look at where Tulsa has come in the last 8 years: Tulsa is safer. Tulsa has more people enjoying greater opportunity. And Tulsa is physically transformed for the better, in a way that makes us a model for cities around the world. The state of our city is strong.

But just as important as what we've done is how we've done it. We accomplished all of this by returning to our greatest strength: when we work as a community of neighbors to help one another, rather than allowing the focus of division to distract us.

To all of you who were willing to work in that effort as Tulsans rather than as Republicans or Democrats or Independents, you have my thanks. We did it. We made a difference. We showed there is a better way. We renewed that spirit of high expectations. We left things better than we found them.

For myself, I am excited about the opportunity to start the next phase of my public service career, working in service to a different team of heroes who save lives every day in our city: the Saint Francis Health System.

And for this city I love so much, I look to the future with great optimism. I am excited for Mayor Nichols to take office on December 2nd. I first met Mayor Nichols when I was elected to the City Council 16 years ago and he was a mayoral aide to Kathy Taylor. He has been my friend ever since. We've served together. We've campaigned together. We've raised our boys together. But during the course of his campaign, I had some of our mutual friends reach out and ask me how I was taking his assertion that things are going to be so much better after I leave and he takes office! (Pause and smile)

Well, my response to them was the same as what I will tell you now: I love it! I want a mayor who will challenge us to be better and aim higher. I want a mayor who expects us to be the best, who isn't satisfied with today. Cities only grow or decline – there is no status quo. And I am grateful that Mayor Nichols shares that spirit of high expectations and continuous improvement which allowed us to make so much progress over the last 8 years. Tulsa's best days are yet to come.

For all of you here today, I do have one request as I leave. Don't let up! Keep aiming high. Keep expecting Tulsa to be one of the best cities in the world. Keep putting Tulsa ahead of partisanship. Keep that spirit of high expectations alive. The bickering and infighting which plagued Tulsa for so long takes a front seat when we aren't striving hard enough toward big goals. Regardless of who you voted for last week, support our new mayor as he charts a bold course for our future.

For the last 8 years, we have pursued big goals and met them. And I would never pretend to have done this alone. I am so grateful to have assembled a team in the Mayor's Office that came from all over the political spectrum. Yet what united them was greater than what divided them: they are all razor smart, they all have a fierce work ethic, and they LOVE Tulsa. I want to ask the people who served on my Mayor's

Office team and are here today to come up here with me to close this out in the same way we've led for the last 8 years: together.

(Pause)

In closing, a friend recently asked me if there is a photograph that captures what it is like to be mayor. I immediately thought of this one, which I have kept in a frame on my desk all 2,920 days I've served as mayor. It is from our victory party on election night in 2016, and it captures what has driven me during my time as mayor. I've never thought of being mayor as a political job - maybe to my detriment. To me it is a chance to serve, motivated by love.

First, love and gratitude for those who came before us and strove to make Tulsa the best it could be for us. No one typifies this more to me than my grandad, Bob LaFortune. We owe those who came before us so much, and the best way we can honor that is by carrying their spirit of high expectations forward.

And second, love and gratitude for those who believe in what Tulsa can be - and are building their lives and pursuing their dreams right here and right now in our city. And there's no one with whom I've spent more time pursuing dreams than my wife Susan. Those of you who believe, who don't listen to the little voices of doubt that question every big idea, you are building the city you want to leave to future generations - and I have given all I have to help it to live up to those hopes.

This is what's motivated me in the 8 years you gave me to serve you as mayor and the 8 years I served on the City Council. And I couldn't help but think about this when a group of us attended the premiere of "The Outsiders" on Broadway earlier this year. Based on a novel written about Tulsa by our fellow Tulsan, S.E. Hinton, it went on to win the Tony Award for Best Musical this year. And in it, my favorite song is "Stay Gold". As the lyrics go:

*"Sixteen years
Look at all we've done
Wouldn't trade it for the world
Can't you see that we're the lucky ones.
I have known a love that many never know
And our love lives on no matter where I go.
My friend, stay gold."*

And those will be my closing words to you today: My friends, Stay Gold. Thank you.