

Dr. Kent, thank you for the kind introduction and the ongoing support and partnership of both Western Reserve Hospital and Unity Health Network. I greatly appreciate all you do for our City. Thank you.

Thank you to the Chamber for hosting our luncheon and Moe's for the great food. As far as the Chamber goes, I need to commend your leadership team for launching The Gateway this past year. It's an amazing space; if you have yet to visit it, you need to check it out. The Gateway is an innovative shared coworking space with the best location ever, right in our downtown. The flexible working spaces are what is needed for those work-from-home professionals or members who are on the move all day. And to outgoing Executive Director Kamelia Fisher, great job guiding the Cuyahoga Falls business community these past two years. Your leadership during the Chamber's rebranding and move to The Gateway has been very impressive, and I wish you the best.

We have our school superintendents with us today. Cuyahoga Falls Superintendent Dr. Andrea Celico had to hit the ground running when she started last fall with a levy renewal on the ballot and the ongoing 6-12 campus project. And if you haven't been by, the buildings are ready to come out of the ground.

This exciting and much-needed project will continue the City's forward momentum with state-of-the-art facilities that will serve our youngest residents for many years to come. Andrea, you have been a breath of fresh air to the district. Welcome aboard, and thanks for all you do.

As we welcome Andrea, we are preparing to say goodbye to Woodridge Superintendent Wally Davis after 13 years of outstanding service in that role. Thank you for your years of dedication to the children in our community. You will be missed, but the district is in good hands, with Assistant Superintendent N'ecole Ast set to take the reins in August. I would also like to welcome our new Library Director, Andrew Harant, and I am excited to see all that is in store for our wonderful facility. Welcome aboard.

I must commend my amazing staff and the 400 employees of this City for your dedication and long hours; without you, nothing would happen. I know it sounds cliché, but teamwork really does make the dream work.

Arguably, the most important part the speech is thanking my wife, Stephanie, for putting up with all the crazy demands on my time. Sometimes, after a very long week, Sundays are void of events, and I get to finally remember what she looks like. And I'm here to share my secrets, maximize quality time over quantity, leave little messages on post-it notes all over the house, and bring home flowers. You are an angel for all the sacrifices you make. Thank you for always being by my side, and I love you.

I am often asked what my favorite part of being mayor is. The answer is – everything – bringing projects and new businesses to the city, attending 100th birthday parties, officiating weddings, seeing kids play in the splash pad downtown or lined up at Water Works to go down the slide, swearing in new officers and firefighters, and visiting with residents one on one, either in my office or out in the community. I literally wake up excited and go to bed excited with this once-

in-a-lifetime opportunity I have been given. Not a day goes by that I am not in awe of the privilege of serving as the Mayor of Cuyahoga Falls.

Each of you here today, from fellow elected officials and public servants to city council, to our business owners and residents, to community leaders and our nonprofits, school officials, teachers, parents, and students, you all play a part in Cuyahoga Falls being the success that it is. I thank each of you for the support you have shown me, my administration, and our City.

Thank you for coming today to hear the "state of the city". If you haven't noticed, it is an amazing time in Cuyahoga Falls. We like to think that we are the "hot spot" of the region and a city on the move. Cuyahoga Falls is the definition of a live, work and play community and I am thrilled when people ask me to share the secret to our success. It's really quite simple; our success comes from all of us working together with a shared passion. It's easier to steer the ship when everyone is rowing in the same direction.

There are many ways to measure the health of a city, but revenue is one of the most important factors. Like our finances at home, we need revenue to provide a good quality of life for our residents. Due to our continued business growth, we saw a massive increase in revenue in 2022; in fact, our total budget of \$244 million was the highest in the City's history. But even with the amazing growth, we are conservative with our spending; and finished last year with more than 19 million in unspent dollars to have the largest rainy-day fund ever reported, which helps protect us from any possible economic downturn.

This year, nearly \$3.75 million is budgeted for street repairs. Additionally, the State, Seasons, and Wyoga Lake Road intersection is slated for reconfiguration to improve traffic flow in the area. You have probably noticed the long-awaited improvements are underway on West Portage Trail Extension. Due to our strong financial position, we were able to earmark \$16.5 million in American Rescue Plan funds for projects throughout the city to improve infrastructure and safety.

A few of the projects that are happening or coming soon - the redevelopment of South Front Street to match the two blocks to the north, the Merriman Valley Master Plan to enhance our gateway to the national park, rebuilding the scenic boardwalk and adding an upper level "river walk" from Broad to Oakwood, a brand-new fire station at Bath and Northampton Roads, and a state-of-the-art live burn fire training facility at that same location. And that is just a small sampling of what is to come.

Our home is usually the largest investment we make in our lifetime, and obviously, we want our investment to do well. We know that housing values are largely driven by supply and demand, and demand is off the charts in Cuyahoga Falls, driving property values to an all-time high. Agents tell me homes are often selling the same day they are listed, and many buyer's agents have people on a waiting list just waiting for something in the Falls to hit the market. Due to our popularity, you will be hard-pressed to find a home for sale for under \$100,000. In fact, a single-family home was recently built that is valued at \$3.5 million. That is quite a range.

In addition to the hot market for single-family homes, we have seen huge demand for high-end maintenance-free living. It has always been normal for grandma and grandpa to move into a condo to avoid cutting grass and shoveling snow, well, that still holds true, but now many young professionals demand that same product. There is a dual demand, and we must provide that option.

We must also offer all the recreational amenities that young professionals seek since they are often free to live anywhere in the country while working from home. We need to compete with all the cool cities like Austin, Denver, or Seattle.

We know that attracting and retaining talent is vital to our future, as some companies will now relocate to tap into a known talent pool. So, fittingly 172 new homes or condos were built in 2022, and many more are being constructed as we speak. Growth is good for our future, in fact, it is necessary.

We all know that public and private collaboration and investment are essential to revitalizing a business district successfully. I am proud to announce that we are developing design master plans for both the South State Road and Bailey/Northmoreland corridors. These plans will assist us in making smart improvements to these business districts in our city and give them a boost.

Our Community Development Department is in touch with our businesses daily, from the largest employers to our small businesses, who are the backbone of our community. Business is booming in Cuyahoga Falls. In 2022, we saw the creation of 198 new jobs, welcomed over 20 new businesses, and saw the completion of more than \$21 million dollars of private investment into our City. To further assist business investment and job creation, we recently launched a revolving loan program to provide gap financing with \$2 million in funding. Qualifying businesses are now eligible for low-interest loans to help fill the gap of traditional financing. Kudos to our Finance and Community Development departments for collaborating on this forward-thinking project.

Businesses and jobs within the corporate limits are what fund the City, so being business-friendly is essential to growth, and without growth, there is stagnation. We love all our surrounding cities, but the reality is that we are in competition with them to entice people to open businesses, buy homes, and spend money here. If we are not constantly moving forward, we are essentially falling behind

So, to aid in workforce attraction, our Community Development has partnered with Rise Together, which is a program to match international newcomers with available jobs in the city. This is a true win-win for businesses and residents.

2023 marks the 5th Anniversary of the reopening of Front Street. It is almost hard to remember what Front Street was like just a few short years ago - empty storefronts, buildings needing repair, outdated infrastructure, and, except for a few events during the summer – no people. It was pretty much a ghost town.

Removing the failed 40-year-old pedestrian mall was a significant investment, and we did exhaustive research. We visited other communities in the Midwest that had reclaimed their downtown by converting their failed pedestrian malls back into thriving main streets.

We hired industry leaders to help design the project and to advise us on bringing retail to our transformed downtown, and most importantly, we engaged with you – the stakeholders – on your vision for our beloved Front Street. We met with residents, festival promoters, and business and property owners countless times throughout the process. I think we can all agree that the Downtown Transformation has been a success! I always smile when I drive or walk downtown and see bustling activity seven days a week. And it only gets better.

In the past five years, we have seen tens of millions of dollars of private investment in our downtown, and there is much more to come.

By the end of the summer, Front Street will be home to more than 30 ultra-luxury apartments in a mixed-use building at the corner of Front Street and Broad Boulevard. Collectively, we have built amazing momentum, but I am never satisfied with the status quo and will continue to push forward.

To commemorate the 5th Anniversary of the Downtown Transformation, we will host a weeklong birthday celebration the second week of August. So make sure to mark your calendars.

We often hear from residents and visitors that one of their favorite things about Cuyahoga Falls is the strong sense of community that we have here. From events downtown and in our parks to one-on-one interactions with neighbors, the heart of Cuyahoga Falls is our residents – all 51,114. I like to say we are a big small town. That means we are big enough to offer all the amenities of a large city and small enough that we see each other at the grocery store—the best of both worlds.

Our Neighborhood Ambassadors help to strengthen those connections every day. As volunteer leaders at the street block level, ambassadors organize block parties and dessert nights and share important city information with neighbors. Our ambassadors have also opened their front yards and porches to host Front Yard Interaction, or FYI, meetings.

These informal early evening get-togethers bring City Hall and me into our neighborhoods, and I show up to connect with neighbors one-on-one and enjoy some great iced tea and lemonade.

On a larger scale, I am proud to see the impact of the family-friendly community events we hold throughout the year. As I mentioned earlier, this year marks the 5th Anniversary of the reopening of Front Street. We look forward to a summer full of family-friendly fun with Flicks on the Falls, the Falls Fire Showdown, Irish Fest, Festa Italiana, Oktoberfest, and eight Falls Downtown Fridays. These events unite our community and raise much-needed funds for local nonprofits serving our residents.

Through the generous support of sponsors, including our friends at Western Reserve Hospital and Unity Health Network, Falls Downtown Fridays events have raised more than \$130,000 for

local charities over five seasons. Thank you to all our sponsors, partners, and vendors for making these events happen.

As you have seen, 2022 was a big year for public art in Cuyahoga Falls, with three major installations. In the fall, community members assisted national artist Stacy Levy with installing a topo swale, which captures and cleanses water runoff while enhancing the corner of a city-owned parking lot on South Front Street. We also welcomed the River Trade sculpture by indigenous artist Peter Jones to Levinson Lane, right between City Hall and the fountain.

We are proud to be home to one of Don Drumm's latest and largest creations, Peace and Joy, at High Bridge Glens Park. There is no question that public art enriches our lives and our community, and we are proud to be home to these pieces and look forward to expanding public art in Cuyahoga Falls in the future.

One of the hallmarks of Cuyahoga Falls is our fantastic local parks system, including 26 neighborhood parks, Water Works Water Park, Brookledge Golf Course, Downview, and the Natatorium. Our Parks department also offers 100s of programs for residents of all ages and abilities.

I need to recognize our Parks and Recreation team for winning an Award of Excellence from the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association. They were recognized for the Adaptive Program Expansion with their All-Abilities Summer Camp. This award highlights our City's commitment to creating lasting changes that shape a strong, healthy, resilient community. We cater to all.

Recently, I devised a fun, unique program that will be starting next month. Gear Up University is an educational program allowing residents to peek behind the curtain to learn the inner workings of city departments, including Water, Sewer, Park and Rec, Electric, Street, Sanitation, Police, Dispatch, and the Fire Department. Gear Up will be offered both in person or online. Residents attending the in-person sessions or viewing the online tutorials and completing quizzes will become "Certified City Scholars" and be invited to a reception following the program's completion.

The Cuyahoga Falls Police Department marked 100 years of service in 2022. I could not be prouder of the men and women in blue for their outstanding service to our community. They put their lives on the line daily and serve us with compassion and professionalism. The motto "to protect and serve" is quite fitting, as they respond to everything from serious crimes to barking dogs, keys locked in cars, and everything in between. In fact, our dedicated men and women responded to or initiated - 37,764 calls for service in 2022. We track statistics monthly and yearly, and major crimes continue to drop.

I was proud to welcome nine new officers to our ranks in 2022, raising our total numbers to the highest level in 12 years. While some departments are struggling to hire, we are able to attract only the best due to the department's leadership, state-of-the-art equipment, excellent training, and the overwhelming support of our community.

Last year, we added virtual reality technology for state-of-the-art situational training for our officers. I was able to try it out and could not believe how "real" the scenario felt. Making split-second decisions must be practiced, and now we can. The department also added body-worn cameras with integrated dashboard cams to enable our officers to document their high quality of service to our residents. Most importantly, the collaboration between our police department and our schools has resulted in detailed, in-depth safety plans for every school building in our city.

The Cuyahoga Falls Fire Department also celebrated a major milestone in 2022 – 185 years of service and dedication to our community. I was proud to welcome five new firefighters to the fire family last year and also preside over three promotions. I call it the fire family because they work, eat, and live together for 24 hours straight.

To help recruit the highest caliber of candidates, the department has devised its own in-depth training course for individuals interested in a fire service career - The Forge. I look forward to welcoming future Forge graduates to the Cuyahoga Falls Fire Department.

As you can imagine, hands-on training is invaluable to our firefighters. Thanks to generous donations by Woodridge Local Schools, Cuyahoga Falls City Schools, Testa Companies, and The Summit County Land Bank, our crews were able to set donated houses on fire and go in. They logged more than 300 hours of live fire training in several different situations, including, ventilation techniques, forcible entry, and firefighter entrapment scenarios. I was even able to suit up to experience what they go through. Our training will continue to expand as we build a permanent fire training facility and new fire station at the corner of Northampton and Bath roads.

And I'm happy to announce that The Cuyahoga Falls Firefighter Memorial Foundation is scheduled to break ground May 3rd on its memorial on Front Street to honor all who have served. It will be right next to Station 1.

So far, I have outlined the live and work part of being a live, work and play community. Now, it is time to focus on play.

Recreational tourism continues to make Cuyahoga Falls a destination for those looking to explore the outdoors. As you know, we are a gateway to the Cuyahoga Valley National Park and the Summit Metro Parks, which host millions of visitors each year to bike, hike, and climb. In addition, we welcome thousands of outdoor enthusiasts to the Cuyahoga River to fish, paddle, and tube each summer and look forward to additional recreational opportunities in the future as the plans to remove the Gorge Dam move forward in the coming years. And, yes, it is finally going to happen.

In case you missed it, Travel Lens named the Cuyahoga Valley National Park the second-best national park, just behind the Great Smokey Mountains. We have over 3,000 acres of the national park within our city limits and look forward to welcoming more visitors each year. But, not to be outdone by the national park's second-place ranking, the Cuyahoga River was recently named the country's number-one location for urban kayaking. But, of course, that is something you don't need to tell our local river enthusiasts.

Paddlers from across the country will return this weekend for Cuyahoga Falls Fest, where expert kayakers will take on the Class 4 and 5 rapids right in our downtown. This event is not for the novice paddler.

I could not be prouder of all that we accomplished in 2022 and all we planned for 2023. The state of the city is not only strong; but stronger than ever. I encourage every resident to be a true stakeholder and join me in advocating for Cuyahoga Falls in your daily travels and on social media. We are indeed a city on the move, momentum is building, and the sky is the limit. As I have said many times before, I won't rest until there are only two groups of people, those that live in Cuyahoga Falls; and those that wish they did. Thank you for all of your support.