



## 2021 State of the City Address

Good evening members of the Rogers City Council, Honorable City Attorney Andrew Hatfield, Honorable Judge Chris Griffin, the Honorable City Clerk Jessica Rush, City Directors and employees, and my fellow citizens. Thank you for joining us for the 2021 State of the City address.

In a normal year, I would be doing this live from Rogers City Hall. But this year, many aspects of our lives have changed, and I have to adapt as well. So tonight, I'm delivering the first-ever virtual State of the City address without a live, in-person audience.

We invite you to participate in the conversation on social media using #stateofrogers.

Before we begin, I would like to thank my wife, Lisa; our daughters, Emily and Haley; and other family members watching tonight.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on us. We've suffered tremendous loss and trauma in our personal and professional lives. While the distribution of vaccines will help, this plague and its hardships are far from over.

One hundred twenty eight Rogers residents died from COVID-19-related illnesses in 2020. One hundred-twenty eight in our city alone. Let's take a moment to remember those we've lost and pray for their family and friends.

Not only have we lost lives, but many have lost jobs, struggle to make ends meet or are having a tough time finding childcare.

As Mayor, I had to make tough decisions. We were the first municipality in the state to issue a mask mandate, a mandate approved by the Rogers City Council and later adopted state-wide by Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson, validating our efforts to curb the spread in our communities.

We launched the “Keep Rogers Safe” public health campaign, where local businesses could voluntarily pledge to enforce the public health directives and guidelines issued by the Governor and the Arkansas Department of Health.

We transitioned our homes into makeshift offices and school classrooms.

The City of Rogers added WiFi to Maple Park and Tower Park, essentially turning them into 24/7 outdoor computer labs. That wifi can be accessed anytime from park benches, picnic blankets and parking lots.

We’ve allowed our businesses and restaurants to expand into nearby parking spaces to help them keep their doors open while allowing for social distancing. City leaders are working on a plan to establish entertainment districts inside the city, which will allow even more distance among patrons.

In a year of unknowns, the city collected \$20.5 million from the city’s 1% sales tax. Even though the city received more than the budgeted \$19.9M, we normally see an average increase in sales tax around 5% year over year, but in 2020 it was 1.6%.

Unlike many other local governments, the City of Rogers did not shut down, and all business services continued to operate at full capacity.

As a result of good management of taxpayer dollars, we were able to keep all city employees on staff, avoiding any layoffs or furloughs that other local governments endured.

Positive news in job creation was seen in 2020. The December jobs report from the State of Arkansas shows Rogers has a total employment of 35,210. I am pleased to say that over 99% of jobs lost to COVID-19 in our city have been recovered, and 2020 ended with 427 more people employed than when the year started, which is the highest job growth in Benton County. Our current unemployment rate is 2.9%, a significant drop from the 2020 high-water mark of 8.2%. At 2.9%, we are well below the State of Arkansas’ rate of 4.2% and the national rate of 6.7%.

This last year, the City of Rogers acquired the naming rights to the uptown convention center, formerly the John Q. Hammons Center, solidifying uptown Rogers as the downtown of Northwest Arkansas.

The City of Rogers has kept promises made to residents who passed a \$300 million bond in 2018. Despite delays in this unprecedented year, our city leaders, planners and engineers kept these projects moving.

Completion/Progress on 2018 Bond Projects:

- FINISHED:
  - Completion of Railyard Bike Park
  - Completion of the Magnolia Street overpass
  - Completion of Rogers Fire Department Station 8, serving west Rogers
  - Completion of Rogers Fire Department Burn Tower and Training Center Expansion
- IN PROGRES:

- Railyard Park, estimated completion Spring 2021
- Downtown Alleyway Improvements, estimated completion Spring 2021
- Construction began on Mt. Hebron Park, estimated completion end of 2021
- Arkansas Street reconstruction from Oak to Chestnut, estimated completion end of 2021
- Walnut Interchange construction, estimated completion Summer 2021
- Emergency Dispatch Center construction, estimated completion Spring 2021
- Osage Creek Streambank Restoration,

In 2020 a lot went into the rehabilitation of Railyard Bike Park, making it the best of its kind in the nation. Before, weather forced the park to close often; now, we're proud to report Railyard Bike Park has been open nearly every day since reopening in November.

Frisco Plaza and Railyard Park are taking on a new, colorful urban look. This spring, we'll be able to enjoy the completed downtown space. The three towers at the "WaterStop" feature designs from world-renowned artists. Soon, when it's safe to gather again, Butterfield Stage at the park's south end will feature live music in the 2021 Concert Series.

The newly imagined Railyard Park is made possible through the Walton Family Foundation Design Excellence Grant.

Railyard Park's improvements are already being noticed, as it was chosen for the "Best of Design Award" in its category by *Architects Newspaper*.

Also downtown, Centennial Park is getting a makeover. You can expect renovations to be finished by the end of the year.

These parks are nestled up to uniquely Rogers restaurants and shopping. Visiting downtown is even easier now. After a restriping project, 244 parking spaces were added to the area.

The stunning new art and future events planned for Railyard Park is thanks to the addition of an Arts and Culture Office. The Rogers Public Art Commission will help steer projects and establish regional partnerships.

Their next project will be to select artists for the Alleyway Activation projects, beautifying allies and making them functional, attractive spaces for downtown businesses.

Ozark Regional Transit now provides on-demand transportation, making it easier to get around the city. Soon, there will be an express route between uptown and downtown. The introduction of an interactive app makes the experience even easier for people to use the system.

Construction at Mt. Hebron park is now underway, providing trails, playgrounds, tennis courts, baseball and soccer fields and so much more on the city's west side. While the project will take some time to complete, the bulk of the work will be done in 2021.

Parks and Recreation forged ahead to reopen parks and find safe ways to keep us active and have the ability to play safely through the pandemic.

The Railyard Bike Park will soon connect to the greater trail system, a system people are using now more than ever as a safe escape from quarantine and isolation. Trail counts were up 60% in 2020, compared to the year before.

Not only are citizens noticing our ever-improving trails, Rogers, the nerve center of Northwest Arkansas' bike trails, is getting national attention and is ranked the sixth best city in the country by *Places for Bikes* in 2020.

The Railyard Loop Trail, constructed to connect the Rogers Activity Center to downtown, earned the top Hard Surface Trail of 2020 by the Arkansas Recreation and Parks Association.

By this spring Rogers will connect to Bentonville through the Bekaert Trail from Easy Street to Water Tower Road.

Our roads remained drivable because of the hard work of our Street Department. The hard-working, gritty staff maintain more than 400 miles of roadways, 400 miles of drainage, 750 miles of sidewalks and at least 102 traffic signals.

Our Street Department made significant progress on many city roads, including the reconstruction of Arapaho Drive and improved drainage alongside it. The department made extensive improvements to Osage Road and Bellview Road as well.

First responders from the Rogers Fire Department do not have the option to work from home. Social distancing is impossible during the care of patients or while fighting a fire. Therefore, our department worked to create a process to track COVID exposures on emergency medical calls and aggressively tested and tracked our personnel to identify potential problems and infections prior to them spreading to our workforce.

Within nine months of the pandemic, our department has cared for more than 582 known COVID-19 patients and had an infection rate of less than two percent impact on our firefighters.

In addition to taking extreme measures to protect themselves in the pandemic, progress was made to better serve the city through our Fire Department.

Fire Station 8 opened in August to serve the city's ever-growing west side. The Fire Department constructed a multi-story burn building and classroom expansion to better educate our fire staff at the training center campus. We also added a new ambulance to Fire Station 5's fleet and five new fire trucks across the city.

Rogers police also faced challenging times in 2020, not only because of the pandemic, but because of an increase in civil unrest. Rogers police worked hard to build a bridge among citizens by listening when people needed to talk and engaging with those who had questions for officers.

Our Police often go above and beyond the call of duty. This Christmas, a very vocal critic of our officers contacted the Fraternal Order of Police. He wasn't able to provide gifts for his family and was asking for help. The "Shop with a Cop" program was wrapped up for the year and the funds for the annual gift drive were already spent. Even though this man was known for his outspoken criticisms, several officers and Police Department staff members gave money out of their own pockets to help put gifts under this man's tree.

To help manage and process the weight of the badge, the police department established a peer support group to help officers cope.

The police department was re-accredited by CALEA in 2020 after an intense review of policies, practices and past performance.

In 2021, Police Chief Hayes Minor hopes to expand our community engagement, something incredibly valuable that has been hindered by COVID-19. As the pandemic lessens in the months and years to come, officers are looking forward to going out and interacting with the great people of Rogers in non-enforcement type settings.

The Adult Wellness Center's leadership and staff have taken steps to protect senior citizens in Rogers, who are among the most vulnerable in the pandemic. They jumped into finding creative new ways to serve their beloved members. Because the Center's members are those most at risk for COVID-19, they were the first department to close due the pandemic and will likely be one of the last to resume normal operations.

While AWC's doors have been temporarily closed, they continued to provide free online exercise classes and provide resources to help their members.

Though many Adult Wellness Center members miss the daily interactions with their friends and staff members, they appreciate the outreach. Members often call the center to curb loneliness from isolation or help find a service, like food and grocery assistance. The staff was able to make referrals to programs so our seniors would not go hungry.

When the center opens again, you will notice obvious updates. The center has been open now for 14 years and has suffered wear and tear from the 1,500 members who use the facility daily. During the temporary closure, instead of leading yoga classes or art programs, the center's staff rolled up their sleeves to clean, paint and organize renovations.

CARES Act funds were used to purchase sanitation technology and supplies to make the center extra safe when it does reopen.

The Rogers Historical Museum was forced to close for six months during the pandemic, but is now back open for businesses in a limited capacity. New director Serena Barnet and her staff used that down time to better the museum. They worked behind closed doors to update galleries, rethink the way they operate, and find creative ways to meet their mission of enriching lives through education, experience and exploration of our heritage.

This included engaging with nearly 360,000 people through virtual education programs, a new virtual database with thousands of viewable records, plus posting snapshots of Rogers history on social media.

Looking into 2021, museum staff are planning the 140th Anniversary of the City of Rogers with a celebration and time capsule.

Rogers Executive Airport also kept moving forward. Unabated by the pandemic, our strategic expansion plan continued to accommodate the region's growth.

We have \$3.8 million secured to update our aged and deteriorated taxiway and have utilities ready for further growth. A bulk of the major construction should be done by fall.

In 2020, Animal Services had a 100% live save rate. Animal services put 221 animals into their forever homes, many of them families who adopted a pet while staying home through the pandemic. Three hundred twenty nine lost pets were returned back to their owners.

The James R. Welch Recycling Center has worked hard this year to adapt to regional and global changes in recycling. With even tighter restrictions to material processing, the RRC was able to keep over 1,800 tons of recyclable material from our landfill, nearly 400 tons more than last year. The recycling center has also started working with other local cities, with recycling programs that were going to be cut, to allow them to continue recycling at no cost to Rogers.

In partnership with Benton County, the Benton County Solid Waste District and Rogers, we were able to keep the Rogers Convenience Center, now known as the Special Waste Drop Off site, open throughout 2020. The Convenience Center helps to keep hazardous material like household hazardous waste, tires and other household items from entering our landfill and curb illegal dumping in our community. With a new partnership between these entities and the other cities in NWA, it will remain open through 2021.

As you can see, despite the many challenges in 2020, some of which follow us into 2021, we have remained strong as a city and are in many ways stronger in the commitment to doing the people's business.

I have maintained steadfast in the strategy of keeping our foot on the accelerator as I believe once we get past the pandemic, there will be unforeseen opportunities, and we want to be in a position of strength.

I am so very proud of our city council, department heads, and the entire city staff. All of these men and women should make you feel a sense of pride too; they are among the best I've ever had the pleasure to serve with, and they are deeply committed to delivering a high level of service and professionalism while always keeping one eye on how we can do it better.

On behalf of all of us, I want you to know what a privilege it is to carry out the business of the city on your behalf.

While 2021 is looking positive for the battle against COVID-19, we are not out of the woods yet. We must, as a people, abide by public health orders. Wear a mask, wash your hands and social distance.

We pray for those who have suffered and we look forward to better days.

God bless the City of Rogers and God Bless the United States of America.