



State of the City Address 2022

Good evening members of the Rogers City Council, Honorable City Attorney Andrew Hatfield, Honorable Judge Chris Griffin, Honorable City Clerk Jessica Rush, City Directors and employees, and my fellow citizens. Thank you for joining us for the 2022 State of the City address.

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

This year will be another that history remembers as significantly impacted by the COVID 19 pandemic.

As 2020 turned to 2021, the community's efforts to combat the virus evolved. Vaccines became more widely available, and it was clear that maximizing vaccine rates and continuing other safe health practices, like wearing a mask when appropriate and practicing good hygiene were and are the necessary path forward.

Rogers has been proactive in supporting public health throughout this time. The city's mask ordinance was lifted at the end of May this last year as the Arkansas Public Health Emergency ended. I am proud of our city staff for shifting with the tides of the pandemic to offer services to residents through the use of technology and updated policies that allow work to be accomplished while ensuring safety.

To support vaccine efforts, we partnered with the Community Clinic to offer 16 mobile COVID 19 vaccine clinics this year throughout the city. We also provided \$70,000 of American Rescue Plan Act funds to the Northwest Arkansas Council, specifically to support regional vaccine efforts. As Mayor, I will continue to do what I can to promote good public health. Please get vaccinated and wear your mask when appropriate.

Even as we continue to work through this pandemic, growth and economic development in Rogers are strong. The 2020 US Census numbers came in, showing Rogers with a population just below 70,000. This is a 20% population increase over the last decade. The current labor force is at a record 38,321 with over 2600 jobs created in the last year. Rogers has the second

lowest unemployment rate of any city in the state at 1.3%, which has dropped from 3.4% a year ago. Sales tax numbers for 2021 broke another record at \$23.7 million. This is \$3.2 million increase over the record setting collections in 2020.

As an organization, we added 14 new positions in 2021 and another 13 were added to the 2022 budget. Currently, the city has 574 positions. Around 100 additional seasonal positions are hired throughout the year, mostly for the Aquatic Center. Since becoming Mayor, I have made financial health and integrity a priority.

Growth is not slowing down any time soon. City planners, engineers and inspectors are managing 67 large scale projects in development with a combined valuation of over \$83 million. Our Community Development department manages 34 active projects, which range from road and infrastructure to parks, trails and beautification.

Major projects that we will see finished this year include the Pleasant Grove Rd. connection to Hwy 112, which will be a major East/West connector in Rogers, and Mt. Hebron Park. Mt. Hebron Park, a 75 acre community center in Southwest Rogers will be a major addition to this side of town. The park will have baseball and soccer fields, pickle ball courts, a splash pad, dog park, an accessible playground, trails, and a large meeting hall. I invite you to come and enjoy this new feature of our great city when it opens this year. This project is made possible by the \$300 million Bond Measure that residents passed in 2018.

Rogers is leading the way for green energy in Arkansas. In November, the City Council approved an energy audit for city facilities which includes the addition of solar panels. This \$12 million investment will make Rogers among the frontrunners in the state to be heading into the future with a major source of renewable energy in place. As Mayor, I am proud of our city for taking proactive steps to care for the environment and protect the needs of future generations.

Residents and businesses will soon find it easier to complete their needed transactions and interactions with the city. Our administrative staff from multiple departments have been working behind the scenes on a new citizen engagement portal that will make permitting, licensing and electronic payments available and more streamlined. Also to be expected this year, is a new map-based system to report potholes, broken traffic lights and other concerns. This will replace our current "report a concern" feature on our website and will make it easier to report concerns and get them resolved.

There are multiple projects and accomplishments from 2021 that stand out as reminders that the city of Rogers is “Where Possible Lives”. An \$8 million Emergency Dispatch Center, also part of the 2018 Bond Measure, was completed at the Rogers Police Department. This 14,767 square foot building allows Rogers PD to provide better public safety by expanding dispatch services and have expanded space for training, which will include hosting several regional classes for neighboring agencies in 2022.

Railyard Park was completed in May and has been a major contribution to the revitalization of Downtown Rogers. The park has received multiple awards including the 2021 New York Design Silver Award for Architecture, the 2021 Downtown Vitality Award by the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce and the 2021 Cooper Hewett National Design Award for Architecture and Interior Design. The iconic water towers serve as a central feature to not only Railyard Park, but to Downtown Rogers as a whole. I am thrilled to see families enjoying the playground and splash pad and to see groups using Frisco Plaza for outdoor dining and other gatherings.

Butterfield Stage at the Railyard Park is the perfect space for downtown shows and is home to the Railyard Live concert series. Railyard Live adds a new dynamic, filling downtown with live music each weekend, free and open to the public. The inaugural season of Railyard Live in 2021 included 50 artists and had over 15,000 attendees to the venue. The Railyard Entertainment District was also added to downtown this past year. This designation allows adult beverages sold from participating restaurants to be enjoyed within the district boundaries. All of these improvements have reshaped the culture in downtown, revitalizing businesses and the downtown atmosphere.

Of course, Uptown Rogers continues to develop as well, creating a center of music, dining and nightlife. The Walmart AMP brings in world class artists and the Rogers Convention Center hosts many conferences and events. A rising downtown and vibrant uptown lay an excellent framework for drawing events, like Bikes, Blues and BBQ, a regional event that recently moved their hub to Rogers because of these accommodations. As Mayor, it is exciting to see Rogers be the place where all can enjoy life and have the best opportunity to succeed.

Rogers Community Development Department received the 2021 Watershed Guardian Award from Beaver Watershed Alliance. Notable accomplishments in water management this year include low impact development features at Railyard Park and Lake Atalanta as well as community education opportunities. We also continue to update our drainage manual to ensure the highest levels of water quality management. This award is extremely meaningful

because the city works hard to address stormwater proactively, protecting the region's water supply, residents' property, and the natural beauty that makes this area so special.

Bicycle and pedestrian connectivity and trail accessibility in Rogers are always a high priority. Community Development acquired \$3.35 million in grant funds for trail improvements at Lake Atalanta and construction of bicycle and pedestrian improvements along Poplar St. and 13th St. Mountain bike enthusiasts of all levels will appreciate the work at Lake Atalanta, to be completed later this year, which will reconfigure the soft-surface trails to create better connectivity and trails for all levels.

The Railyard Bike Park was re-engineered with paved trails to remain open in all weather and resist damage from heavy rains. For its design, the park was awarded the American Council of Engineering Companies, Arkansas Excellence Award this year. The bike park only continues to draw more attention and visitors to the area. This year's trail count at the Railyard Bike Park was up a staggering 417%.

Parks and Recreation had many other achievements this past year as well. The yearly trail count usage was just under 1.8 million. Foxfire Park earned the distinction of 2021 Outdoor Facility of the Year Under \$200,000 from the Arkansas Recreation & Parks Association. New playground equipment was installed at the park that was a first of its kind in the US. After a season of being closed, the Rogers Aquatic Center safely welcomed over 60,000 visitors in 2021. Volunteers donated 730 hours to clean parks and trails, and give away trees to residents.

Up and coming for Parks and Recreation is beginning the renovation of Northwest Park. The oldest park in Rogers, thousands of games are played annually at this facility. The new design includes youth baseball and softball fields, concessions, pavilions, an indoor batting cage, playground and trails. The renovations will allow this cherished park to continue to serve the citizens of Rogers for years to come.

After the recent additions of Fire Station 8 and the expansion of the Training Center, Rogers Fire Department made some needed improvements to their fleet this year. RFD placed a new ambulance in service at Fire Station 1 and a new Brush Pumper into service at Fire Station 8. This smaller, lightweight vehicle is equipped for rural fires by going where larger trucks can't, and spraying pressurized water great distances. We also added two additional rescue boats to the city that are housed at Stations 3 and 5. These rescue boats are used to assist residents in water-based emergencies and flash floods like we saw this past April.

There is now a safe and anonymous way for mothers to surrender an infant in Rogers after Rogers Fire Department added two baby boxes at Station 5 and 7. Rogers Fire Department also completed reaccreditation from the Center for Public Safety Excellence, a distinction that we have held since 2011. There are fewer than a dozen departments nationwide to be dual accredited with this accreditation as well as the lowest level of insurance rating.

Aside from the completion of the new Emergency Dispatch Center, Rogers Police Department promoted 14 officers of the ranks from Corporal to Captain. The highest promotion was received by the new Chief of Police Jonathan Best. I look forward to his future leadership in this role. The department is also looking forward to reengaging with Rogers residents in a non-enforcement capacity after restrictions that were placed due to COVID 19 were lifted. A building project set for this year at the police department is part of the city-wide energy audit and solar panel project. It will build covered parking at the police department, which will not only house solar panels, but will also protect our police fleet.

The pandemic has had an affect not only on the lives of people, but pets have been impacted as well, shown by the number of animals coming into our shelter this year. Though the number of dogs entering the shelter has increased by 50%, Rogers Animal Services ended the year with another 100% live save rate. I am very proud our staff at Rogers Animal Services for always being innovative to raise awareness for the animals in their care.

Rogers Recycling Center did its part in 2021 to help residents make greener choices with their waste. Over 2000 tons of material were recycled at the Rogers Recycling Center this past year. This includes 28 tons of Styrofoam, a commodity that no other city in the area recycles. Our partnership with Benton County and the Benton County Solid Waste District continued, keeping the Special Waste Drop off site open through 2021, where citizens can dispose of household hazardous waste, electronic waste and more. This year, the Recycle Center will be upgrading its baler equipment to allow for faster and more efficient operations.

The Adult Wellness Center began 2021 with its doors closed due to the pandemic. I felt, along with all the Wellness Center staff that the health and safety of the patrons was of the highest priority. Online classes were increased, repairs were made to the center and the staff worked hard on preparations for a safe reopening. Much time and research has been put into providing layers of best products, practices and policies to create the safest environment possible.

The Adult Wellness Center celebrated its 15th anniversary this year, as well. Though we closed during the pandemic, attendance is still strong after reopening. Since reopening in June, we have had close to 4,000 people renew memberships and attendance is over 600 individuals a day. The Adult Wellness Center is making strides in aiding our members in gaining back their strength both mentally and physically, and improving their overall health and wellness.

The Rogers Historical Museum had another great year of preserving and celebrating the local history of Rogers. This year marked the 140th anniversary of Rogers. Two special exhibits were on display at the museum this year to honor the 140 years of history. Rogers Founding Families and Rogers Through the Eye of the Lens: 140 Years of History in Photographs allowed visitors to embrace the rich heritage of our city. Also commemorating this milestone, the Rogers Historical Museum asked residents to submit items to a time capsule. The time capsule will be opened in 2081 for the city's bicentennial, to allow future residents of Rogers to look back at what life was like in 2021.

Valuable volunteers of the Rogers Historical Museum donated 1300 hours this year. To increase availability and to document exhibits, the museum has added virtual tours this year and plans to continue extending technological accessibility into the future.

A new chapter of the Rogers Public Library is underway as Hannah Norris Milligan became the new Director in July of this past year. Like much of the rest of the world, the Rogers Public Library has been wrestling with pandemic policies and the safest way to provide services while keeping staff and patrons safe. While reservations and curbside service were a continual option, regular open door hours began again in April of this year. Curbside pickup remains a permanent service and the library provided 5,570 curbside pickups in 2021.

An American Rescue Act grant provided funds to significantly increase the downloadable e-book and audiobook collections as well as other needed technological purchases and upgrades. In a step towards inclusion, the Rogers Public Library formed the LatinX Advisory Committee to perceive obstacles of library use and make suggestions for improvement of library services to the Hispanic community. 2022 will be a year for the Rogers Public Library to continue increasing interactive, diverse and enriching programs, safely and creatively for all ages.

As you can see, 2021 was another challenging year for the city and the region as we navigated the residual effects of the pandemic. Like always, we remain committed to doing the people's business as we have over the last two years, never fully closing city hall or other essential services due to COVID 19.

Rogers continues to excel in all ways imaginable, and I have even more optimism heading into this year. It is an honor to serve alongside of our City Council, department heads and entire city staff. This group of public servants are among the best I have ever had the privilege to serve with and they are deeply committed to delivering a high level of service and professionalism.

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.

As a final reminder, even recently, we are reminded that COVID 19 infection numbers can increase quickly. I pray for those who have experienced loss of any kind as a result of the pandemic. Please be vigilant and safe. Get vaccinated, wear your mask and socially distance so we can all move forward.

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