

SOC 2024

Good morning,

I would like to thank the council for allowing me to speak at your meeting. In accordance with MS Code 21-8-17, which states that the mayor shall annually report to the council and public on the work of the previous year and on the condition and requirements of the municipal government. I offer to you the state of the city of Laurel, MS for 2024. Sorry that I am later than usual, but I'm involved in this every four-year ritual.

I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom come much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

We continue to have six departments with department heads, these heads are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the council.

As in most years we will begin the budget process, seeking an increase in pay for our full-time employees. It will not be a repeat of last year when the fire and police received a very sizable raise, but we are seeking a raise.

Streets have been and remain a concern to several people. Some are genuinely not aware of the amount of work that has gone into streets, and then, some just want to complain, that's their way of life. During 2024 we continued our work on streets all over the city. (1). The last city-wide paving project that paved streets throughout the city was completed in May, with a cost of \$2.4 Million, and included streets in all seven wards, chosen by that particular councilperson. We did 23 neighborhood streets. (2). The Brown Street Drainage and Access Road project was completed in June in Ward 7 with a price-tag of \$637,000, with funds supplied by Senator Juan Barnett. The access road was designed to allow residents to be able to get out of that section of Brown Street during street flooding, but it has also been useful in allowing the school bus to travel through the area. There were also some drainage improvements in this project. The price tag to remedy the entire area from flooding, is cost-prohibitive without an infusion of funds from some other source, that we have yet to identify, but we continue to seek. (3). In Ward 5 we completed the Spec Wilson Blvd. Pedestrian Improvement Project in September, at a cost of \$1.7 Million. It included reconstruction of curb and gutter, sidewalk, raised median islands, along with crosswalks, storm drainage and landscaping. (4). Also, in Ward 5, we completed the ARPA 3rd Ave project in October, at a cost of \$2.3 Million. This project included reconstruction of water mains and services, sanitary sewer mains and services, stormwater drainage, curb and gutter, pedestrian crossings, the removal of the historic brick

paving and replacement with asphalt paving. (5). In Wards 4 and 5, we are in construction on the Joe Wheeler/Dr. Deborah Hyde Ave. ARPA project, it is expected to be complete in May of 2025. This project came in at \$3.0 Million. It includes reconstruction of water mains and services, sanitary sewer mains and services, stormwater drainage, curb and gutter, pedestrian crossings, and milling and replacement of asphalt paving. (6). In Wards 2 and 6 the 15th Ave ARPA Water, Sewer and Stormwater Improvements, was substantially completed in February of this year. This project was \$3.5 million, and included reconstruction of water mains and services, sanitary sewer mains and services, stormwater drainage, curbs and gutters, pedestrian crossings, and milling and replacement of asphalt pavement. Other capital improvements that were made last year included: (1). Massey and Smyly Grating and Handrail and Replacement Project, construction was completed in July. It was at a cost of \$254,000. It replaced the existing fiberglass grating and handrails with aluminum grating and handrails at the grit chamber and the U. V. chamber at the city's wastewater treatment plants. This project impacted all seven wards. (2). The GIS Water Model at a cost of \$100,000 is ongoing with the network being complete and the model being calibrated. This project inputs all water main locations and connections into the GIS system and creating a water model of the existing system. This will be valuable information going forward. It affects all seven wards. (3). The Massey and Smyly CDBG Blower Improvements Project is expected to be complete in Spring of

this year. The cost is \$1.7 Million and includes upgrades to Massey and Smyly Wastewater Treatment Plants with upgrades to the blower systems. This benefits all seven wards. (4). The Massey Treatment Plant Access Road, at a cost of \$241,000. The project replaced a failing culvert crossing the entrance to the Massey Treatment Plant. It is complete. The following projects have funding but are not complete. (1). Central Avenue Phase II, Roadway and Pedestrian Improvements. This project is at a cost of \$2.8 Million, and starts where the Phase I ended going east to Spec Wilson. It will include the removal of the brick pavers and replace with asphalt, and make pedestrian, drainage, and water line improvements. We accepted bids in our first meeting of the month, and should be starting soon. This is in Ward 5. (2). 12th Street Roadway and Pedestrian Improvements. This project totals \$3.75 Million, and is currently in the design phase, anticipating starting soon. This project includes milling and overlay, striping, and pedestrian improvements on 12th St, from 7th Ave to 16th Ave. This project is in Ward 2. (3). West Drive Roadway and Utility Improvements. This project comes in at \$3.3 Million, and will include milling and overlay, drainage, and replacement of the dilapidated bridge. This project is in Ward 1, and I know Councilman Capers would prefer an earlier date, but having to deal with MDOT it looks like starting around October. (4). 2025 City of Laurel Overlay Project. This project has a total cost of \$3 Million and includes twenty neighborhood streets with paving in all seven wards. We rejected the initial bid and readvertised and will open bids on June 10. (5). RAISE Grant

from Federal Department of Transportation, at a total of \$25 Million. This project includes milling and overlay, drainage, and pedestrian improvements from Cross Street and Cooks Ave to 16th Ave, including Teresa Street, where the pumps at the underpass will be replaced and hopefully eliminate the flooding issues there; Sawmill Rd and 5th St. it is still in the design phase and is in Wards 5 and 6. Early design calls for two additional roundabouts and the elimination of two other traffic lights. The following projects are not yet funded: (1). Pendorff Water and Sewer Improvements, which has a price tag of \$20 Million. It will include the construction of new water distribution mains and services to increase volume and pressure. Project will also include installation of a sewer system to serve the residents and businesses in the Pendorff area. (2). Arco Lane Bridge, the cost to replace the bridge at this location is approximately \$1 Million. We are hoping that when the Legislature begins assigning funding from their bond bill that we will be included. I know Councilwoman Thomas is catching a lot of heat. As of now the Legislature still has not passed a budget, they anticipate a special session in May or June. Several of our legislators have hinted that the bridge should be included. Laurel has approximately 160 miles of paved roads to maintain and over a twelve-year period, we have paved about 45 ½ miles, while at the same time addressing the water, sewer and drainage issues on the majority of them. The amount spent on just the paving over this same time frame has been \$54,874.874.00. I repeat \$55 Million. So, when someone says we are not spending

enough on streets, tell them we have already spent \$55 Million, and unlike it has been reported by some that this has been all over the city and not on just one “side” of town. There is more to come.

HUMAN RESOURCES:

This department is headed by Nellie Satcher, and there are five employees in the department. There were eight city employees who retired during the year and 56 hired. There were 10 Civil Service exams administered during the year with a total of 60 participants. We are currently revising the Civil Service Handbook, to ensure that all sections are in line with all updated Federal, State and Municipal statutes. Through partnership with South Group Insurance, we reduced our Workers Comp claims from 38 in 2023 to 26 in 2024. The \$38,800 total for this year was the lowest in several years. 8 claims remain open. The Safety Department is under Human Resources and they are in charge of elevators, the one at city hall, the water office, and the two at the police department are all operating efficiently. All fire extinguishers are up to date. All generators are up to date and are serviced on an annual basis. They conduct driver’s license checks every two months to make sure that all employees who drive city vehicles are current. They conduct monthly safety meetings to cut down on accidents and injuries. They also do regular safety checks at all the city playgrounds and parks.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:

Jeff Williams is the IT administrator and his assistant is John McGraw. This past year has marked many advances in the IT department and throughout the city. All of those advances allow the city to provide the most productive and cost-effective services for the city and its residents. In July a project was begun to move the main software that controls our Financial, Human Resources, City Clerk, Inspection and Utility Billing departments. The software was moved from an on-premises server format to a cloud-based format. The project was completed in January of this year. With this online hosting, the information is better protected from ransomware and computer virus attacks. It also defers the cost of expensive hardware needing to be replaced more frequently. IT has continued a project begun in 2024 in conjunction with other departments to upgrade all the security cameras in city buildings where needed. We are participating in a grant program from Homeland Security, where the grant will provide security cameras to the two city owned polling places, those being Fire Station #1 and the Oak Park Alumni Building. There are two major projects planned for the year; since moving to a cloud version of software, the department will begin scheduling the next phase of software development to upgrade the city software to the next version. This process usually takes about twelve months to plan and implement with the host Tyler Technologies. This next version will have many more improvements and benefits. Later in the year, the current computer lease will expire and will be renewed, replacing all

115 of the current desktops with newer models. Technology is rapidly evolving and IT stays up with the latest innovations.

PARKS AND RECREATION:

Parks and Recreation Department is led by Elvin Ulmer. As far as I know, this is the only department in the city, that has its own slogan. Ask Mr. Ulmer sometimes, what it is. Mr. Ulmer was named Recreation Director by Mayor Susan Vincent, and there were questions at the time, concerning his qualifications, I think those fears have been alleviated, and I believe he is doing an excellent job. Mr. Ulmer began over twenty years ago to find a way to build eight softball fields at the Sportsplex. One effort failed, when the administration at the time attempted to raise ad valorem taxes by four mils to finance the project. The measure passed the council, but faced pushback from several citizens, so it ended up being rescinded by Council and the city had to refund the citizens, the four mils that had been added to their taxes. Then in 2013, the Magee administration began and worked on creative ways to financing, and I am proud to report that during 2024, we finished the last of the eight fields, and the sign has been installed, identifying the Elvin Ulmer Eightplex. We did it without raising taxes. Elvin promised bookings on every available weekend, and last I heard it was booked for the next two years. We also had a recent inquiry, that requested the use of the fields for adult men and adult women travel softball, they wanted the fields from Memorial Day through September. Last week there was a tournament,

where there were forty teams participating. There are a lot of rumors going around that there is nothing for the youth to do in the city. I dispute that fact. The Parks and Recreation Department does so much over the course of a week, it is almost impossible to keep count. They maintain at least thirteen parks in neighborhoods, along with the Sportsplex, with all its amenities, which include tennis, soccer, baseball, softball, splash pad, Natatorium, nature trail, walking track and other offerings. We continue to seek ways to fund a regulation track on this site. I have heard some say that certain children cannot get to the Sportsplex with all the activities it has to offer, but if truth be told, I never hear them say they have a difficult time getting to Walmart, and actually from the intersection at 16th Ave and Hwy 84, you can get to the Sportsplex, faster than you can get to Walmart on 16th, if you don't believe it, try it for yourself? Travelling west on 84, there is one traffic light between 16th Ave and the Sportsplex, versus at least three to Wal Mart from that location. Additionally, when the Tornadoes travel to Hattiesburg to play the Tigers for the Jug, the stands are full of the same children who some people claim, cannot get to the Sportsplex. We as city leaders need to challenge that falsehood, when we hear it. They take care of the Cameron Center itself, along with its park, walking track, skate park, indoor and outdoor basketball, tennis, and the ever-growing sport of pickleball. They also maintain the B. E. Murph Senior Center. Also, they care for the L. T. Ellis Center with its pool, Oak Park Alumni Building, the Oak Park Pool, the Oak Park Field

House, and the newly renovated Visitor's Center in partnership with the Laurel Housing Authority. They maintain all the fields, and all the buildings at all the fields. So, when someone claims that there is nothing to do in Laurel for our youth, please don't let that go unchallenged, ask what more can the city do, not what they can do, but what more can the city do? Some say that the city needs to build a Boy's and Girl's Club, but the fact is that when Boy's and Girl's Club was in the city, it was not financed by the city, it was sponsored by private businesses in the city. It would probably still be here if those in charge had not misappropriated the money, not once but twice. I have first-hand knowledge, because I was volunteering every day, at the center at Brown Circle and also the one when it moved to 13th Ave. It has also been mentioned about placing a Sportsplex in Queensburg, as Mr. Ulmer has opined, "where would it go?" This department maintains all of the city owned buildings, including all the fire stations and the police station. Mr. Ulmer and I have discussed the possibility of naming the splash pad at the Sportsplex after deceased Facility Maintenance Head Dwayne Daniels, listen for further details. There is lots of recreation provided for children in the City of Laurel, I dispute any other claim. For instance, on any given day you can go by Sandy Gavin Park and find it filled with Hispanic youth and adults, and that's a good thing, but the children that supposedly have nothing to do, are nowhere in sight. Many times, the same scene is repeated in Boston Park, and on West Drive and other

areas of the city. There is much to do in the city, if you want to do it, please just be honest.

MUNICIPAL COURT:

The court administrator is Rebecca Clark; and they remained busy again processing 10,197 violations versus 10,447 last year. These included 6468 for traffic violations and 3063 for misdemeanor non-traffic violations. They collected \$1,008,658.00 in fines, versus \$947,000 last year. Of the collected amount this year \$507,000 went to the General Fund compared to \$479,000 last year. The Environmental Court heard 302 of the 370 violations issued by the Inspection Department. The community service program produced \$34,646.00 in work credits.

LAUREL FIRE DEPARTMENT:

The Laurel Fire Department chief is Leo Brown, who came up through the ranks. They are a group of professionally trained men and women dedicated to saving lives, property, and the environment in the City of Laurel from fires, natural disasters, and life-threatening situations. We will achieve this mission through professional training, fire education and safety while providing first class service to the citizens and businesses in the City of Laurel, says the department. The department responded to eighteen structure fires across the year, which is a 50% decrease from the year before. These are major fires with medium to heavy fire loss. This reduction is most likely attributable to the regular fire safety and prevention efforts

being put forth by the department. Thankfully, there were no civilian fire deaths during the year. Again, this is due in my opinion, to increased training and prevention within the community. The thirteen vehicle fires that occurred was a 55% decrease from 2023. There were no reported vehicle fire fatalities across the year. The department worked one hundred twenty-two vehicle accidents with injuries, which was a decrease of 23% from last year. Again, there were no reported vehicle accident deaths inside the city limits. The department's most run calls were the 578 vehicle accidents or emergency medical incidents, which was a decrease of 7% from last year.

The department had a total of 204 false alarms; this was an increase of 10% over last year. In that most were accidental alarm set-offs, more people are probably installing alarm systems. False alarms are the second most run category. They only had one mutual aid call, where another department calls us for assistance. This was a call from Calhoun VFD to assist with a fire on Fant Dr. Grief gripped the department, in February, when for the first time in its history, the department lost an active firefighter in Arthur Logan III. We continue to keep the family in our prayers. Attributed to the raise granted by the Council, the applications for employment with the department increased by 500%. The Chief is quoted as stating that he wanted to extend his sincere gratitude to the Mayor and City Council for granting the department this pay raise. The department was able to reach 3,095 residents with their fire safety and prevention message. Along with the Red Cross and

their Sound the Alarm event, they were able to install hundreds of free smoke alarms to residents of the Pendorff community. With cooperation from the State Fire Commission, they installed 80 smoke alarms in 28 homes throughout the city. We had four firefighters retire during the year, which opened the door for several promotions, including Battalion Chief, Captains and Lieutenants. The department assisted several non-profits throughout the year including Salvation Army, United Way, Main Street and others. We need to build four new stations, especially #6 Station at the airport. The main focus will be again to obtain a Class 4 rating, to lower it from a Class 5. The paperwork has been forwarded to the State Fire Rating Bureau, and we are hoping for a positive finding. Update, we received word on Wednesday, April 23 that we had been awarded that elusive Class 4 rating. Next up, Class 3.

LAUREL POLICE DEPARTMENT:

This department is headed by Tommy Cox. This is probably the second most disliked department, only behind Inspection. It's one of those departments that you are either loved or hated, no in-between. They received several grants throughout the year; including the Traffic Enforcement, the DUI Enforcement, Bulletproof Vest, to aid in purchasing K-9's, to purchase narcotic equipment, and to fund the Victim's Advocate's program. They participated with several non-profits. During discipline there were 5 written complaints, all were reviewed by command staff and were determined to be unfounded. There were 8

disciplinary warnings with 5 resulting in suspensions. All were initiated from within the department. There were 3 Internal Affairs Investigations, which resulted in 2 officer suspensions and one officer being cleared. All were initiated from within the department. Animal Control/Pest Control is under the auspices of the department. They addressed 1428 complaints from January 1 through December 31. They removed 713 animals from the streets, while owners brought in 18 more. In their commitment to public safety, they euthanized 620 animals (405 dogs and 215 cats) and released 27 animals back into the wild (including raccoon, opossums, snakes, and ducks).

Unfortunately, 21 animals succumbed to parvovirus and other diseases while in our care. They report that 59 animals were adopted or returned to their owners. Additionally, we efficiently cleared city streets of 131 dead animals. From April 15 through October 18, we sprayed for mosquitoes all across city streets, alleys, parks and ball fields. This is the tenth year in a row that we have not had one case of West Nile Virus affecting any citizen of the city. They assisted the county with 3 complaints and the city of Ellisville with 4. One of the biggest complaints received about animals is that there are too many dogs loose without leashes, and also just stray dogs running loose. Traffic Maintenance is also under the Police Department.

WATER AND WASTEWATER:

Our water and wastewater operations are managed by Veolia. They are the largest water company in the world, with over \$50

Billion in revenue, and over 218,000 employees. It traces its' history back to 1853 and in the U. S. since 1972. They have thousands of clients around the world, serving 113 million people with drinking water and 103 million connected to 3,222 wastewater systems. Even with their impressive resume, I am mainly concerned with the \$5 Million that we in the city of Laurel pay them on an annual basis. In the Laurel water system, they maintain 16 water wells, three water treatment plants with a 9 million gallon per day capacity, also seven storage tanks and 76 miles of water mains. For wastewater. Veolia operates two treatment plants-Massey and Smyly, using advanced oxidation ditch and ultraviolet disinfection to process 6.8 million gallons of sewage per day. They maintain 54 sewer pump stations and 200 miles of sewers. So, you can see that the 76 miles of water mains brings the water into your home or business and then the 200 miles of sewers takes it away and transfers it to one of the wastewater treatment plants. That is a monumental task. Veolia handles customer service, including meter reading and billing and collections. Veolia is responsible for any cash shortage that occurs within the management and operation of the City of Laurel's Customer Service Department. Veolia is responsible for any and all environmental fines that may occur due to the operations of the plants. With the goal of being a partner with the city, Veolia accepts or shares the liability in many claims due to sewer backups and vehicle damage that are not the responsibility of Veolia. Since the beginning of the contract with Veolia in 2006, Veolia has paid

out more than \$700,000 in claims. They accept responsibility for any vehicle accident in which a Veolia employee is driving a city vehicle. This comment was made in 2024 and it bears repeating, in 2025. The City of Laurel can proudly proclaim that we are not currently operating under any sort of consent decree or mandate from EPA, DEQ nor any other regulatory agency. That is something to be proud of, especially when you look at some of the cities that are under scrutiny. I commend them for keeping us out of trouble. Along that same line, the Smyly Wastewater Treatment Plant was chosen as the 2024 Wastewater Treatment Plant of the Year, presented by the Mississippi Water Environment Association. Along with the operations of the plant, maintenance and equipment upkeep were also key factors. The staff's diligence in keeping all systems in top condition contributed significantly to the overall performance of the facility. The installation of three new blowers—one at Smyly and two at Massey—further enhanced the plants' operational capabilities. Additionally, the plant's immaculate housekeeping and well-maintained grounds impressed the awards committee, reflecting the pride the team takes in their workplace. The Smyly Treatment Plant processed 1,367,866,000 gallons of wastewater; Massey processed 1,274,880,000 gallons. Together they treated a total of 2.6 billion gallons of sewer. There were 2.38 billion gallons of water produced. If you notice there was more sewage treated than the amount of water produced. This is mainly due to rainwater that has to be treated, after it gets into the sewer system. The

city collected \$15,629,969.00. The annual base fee to Veolia is \$5,238,144. That leaves a balance of \$10,391,825 to take care of everything else that happens; including overtime, equipment, vehicles, materials and outside contractors. This Public Utility must be self-sufficient, meaning that all of the charges must come from water and sewer payments from the users. This is one reason that we urge a slight increase annually. Terry Padgett, who recently had a building in the Industrial Park was promoted from Assistant Project Manager to Site Leader. A Veolia employee had a truck that had an electrical malfunction, and the accelerator stuck or something and it ended up in a pond, with the employee trapped in the submerged truck. Terry, without thought of his own safety immediately dove into the pond and rescued his fellow employee. He doesn't wear a cape, but he is a hero. He keeps, "living the dream." Let's give him a hand. Taja Hunter was promoted from Senior Administrative Assistant to the Administrative Manager. This took place, when after having served for 30 years, Margo Hodge retired. Let's give her a round of applause. Veolia is in an ongoing transition phase with retirements, resignations, replacements, etc., but they assure us that we are still in good hands.

CITY CLERK/FINANCE DEPARTMENT

In early 2024, Mary Ann Hess who was city clerk for over twenty years resigned to take a position in Brandon. Krystal Jones was confirmed as the new City Clerk/Finance Director by

council on May 7, 2024, and had the entire town of Heidelberg in attendance at her swearing-in. The office now consists of Kristal, Chief Deputy City Clerk Katira Banks, Deputy City Clerk Ann Brown, Accountant Lauren Stewart and currently a vacant position of Assistant Account. A few expressions that Mrs. Jones tells the ladies in the office, “always greet customers with kindness-be honest and truthful-if you are unsure, ask questions-make sure work is completed in a timely manner and correctly-we are a team. Sales tax was down from the previous year by \$197,269 or -1.8%. Last year’s collection was \$11,141,740 and 2024 was \$10,944,471. The Recreation Tourism Tax was \$2,382,483, which was an increase from the previous year of \$55,000 or 2.3%. The new hotel tourism tax had an increase from last year of 19.1% or \$82,868 for a total of \$432,933. The funds from this account are only used for tourism and promotion of the city. During 2024 the department continued to meet its cash flow obligations at our local bank, First State Bank. All of our checking accounts are at First State. As of September 30, 2024, the City of Laurel had a cash balance in all its funds of \$30,802,153 up from \$27,340,969, the previous year. If there are any funds left from the payment of all the bills, that excess is transferred from our checking account to the investment firm of Trinity Capital and deposited into our savings account at Trustmark National Bank. These funds are then invested into government approved interest-bearing securities. Over the past year, a total of \$783,930 was earned on all our excess funds. Depending on what fund they

originated, the excess goes back into that fund. The brilliant idea from Mayor Magee to allocate an additional four mils specifically for street repair is in its sixth year of collection. A total of \$894,796 was collected last year and was used to complete the 2023 Paving Project. Once again over a million dollars was collected in Road and Bridge funds from the County. The actual amount was \$1,168,899. This has not always been the case, owing in part to our Council President who was the past attorney for the Board of Supervisors, knowing that we were not receiving our fair share, helped to facilitate this. Another source of street funds from the State of Mississippi Infrastructure Modernization Act, which are sales tax received from Internet sales. In its fifth year of collections, over \$2 Million was received in 2024. These funds were budgeted for engineering and construction costs related to the Spec Wilson project and the 2023 Paving Project, along with emergency cave-ins and drainage projects throughout the year. In the first year of collection in 2020 the total collection was around \$250,000. Our grant writers Whitney Pickering, who specializes in all type grants and Jason Hicks who is our CDBG expert teamed together to deliver to the city sixteen different grants totaling \$3,151,215.00. The tax valuation for the City of Laurel for 2024 was 229,126,277 and for 2025 it was 263,104,434 or a difference of 20,218,155. The Laurel School District valuation for 2024 was 239,933,636 compared to 263,104,434 which was a positive increase of 23,170,798. In 2024 a mil was valued at \$219,182 compared to 2025 at \$239,324, which was an

increase of \$20,142. The mil for the School District last year was \$230,451, and for this year it is \$253,553 which is an increase of \$23,102. During 2024 we expended \$10,314,176 in projects. This year Mrs. Jones will have her first election to oversee, it is a difficult task, but one they are prepared to handle.

INSPECTION:

The Inspection Department is headed up by Sandra Hadley. This is still a very disliked department, even though it is vastly different in operations over the past year. We began to rely more heavily on the Environmental Court, and you can visibly see the differences in enforcement. The process has become more time consuming, with continuances and rescheduling of court dates, etc., and less results being produced, that the citizens desire. We no longer tow dilapidated vehicles and vehicles parked on grass, but we continue to do the best we can. Some councilmembers call to report items, and expect almost instant results as in the past, the process has definitely slowed down. With the continued growth of the city, we need to make certain we stay on top of the things that may stunt our growth. We issued 1,299 permits during the year with a total project value of \$43,760,714, which was an increase of over \$ 1 Million over last year. There were 732 inspections performed, and 101 Stop Work Orders issued for having no permit. Most of the stop work orders are not for not knowing that they needed a permit, but for intentionally not pulling a permit, because they don't have licensed contractors, and some landlords

simply don't want to pay the small fee. We received 1640 property maintenance complaints, which was the highest number of complaints since we began to keep records. With all the difficulties, 98% of the complaints were resolved and only 26 were carried over into 2025. One significant change in the nature of complaints is of an increase of homeless individuals occupying vacant houses and tents on vacant properties, resulting in house fires, trash accumulation and discarded clothing. We had 108 Short-Term rentals for the year, also had 57 demolitions, with 24 done by the city and 33 done by the owners. Inspection states, "we are working diligently every day to protect the biggest investments of citizen's lives-their properties. By enforcing building, housing, property maintenance, and other Municipal and State codes, we make City of Laurel properties where we live, work, play, worship and learn, safer. That is the bottom-line goal.

PUBLIC WORKS:

This department is led by Tyrome Russell, who was appointed by the mayor and confirmed by council in September of 2021. The majority of the day-to-day duties are performed by H2O Innovation, who began as the city's contractual public works entity in August 2021. Besides Mr. Russell there are a few cities employees who were allowed to remain in the employ of the city. These are the ones who had over fifteen years longevity and who were on the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS), they were given the opportunity to remain on the

system until retirement age. They are mainly in the maintenance shop and sanitation. Overall, the Public Works Department and H2O are operating efficiently, as evidenced by inspections by the Public Works director and the City Works system that keeps track of work orders. Public Works, in conjunction with the county paved seven streets in Beat 5 during the interim service of Beat 5 Supervisor Tommy Posey. Of the 645 work orders received, there was a 99% completion rate. Public Works laid over 2,000 tons of asphalt, that is not including the over 2500 tons, which we paved that was purchased by Mr. Posey. Drainage Maintenance had 736 work orders and they completed 99% of them. They also cut over 37 miles of grass, while installing 880 feet of culverts, using 210 bags of Quick-Crete, 530 yards of limestone, 411 cubic yards of fill dirt and 357 cubic yards of topsoil. Sanitation had also had a 99% completion of 3320 work orders. The Director responded to 32 unsatisfied citizen and all were resolved within a week, after being reported. This department is operating at a high level of proficiency, and strives to improve on that.

CONCLUSION:

I would be remiss to not mention the many, many individuals who volunteer their time and talent to the great number of non-paid positions, we would not have enough in the budget to afford to pay them. I would like to thank these people who help the operation of the city run smoother. The members of the Board of Appeals and Adjustment. The Laurel Airport Authority.

The Civil Service Commission. The EDA. The Election Commission. The Historic Preservation Commission. The Laurel Housing Authority Board of Commissioners. The Laurel-Jones County Library Board. The Pine Belt Airport. The Pine Belt Regional Solid Waste Authority. The Planning Commission. The Laurel Separate School Trustees. The South MS Fair Commission. The Tree Board. The Laurel Tourism Committee and the Site Plan Review Committee. I would like to offer all of them a heartfelt thanks for their dedication to the city.

Downtown Laurel has made significant strides over the last fifteen or twenty years. There was a time when traffic was almost nonexistent, but fast forward to 2024, where Laurel Main Street has recently publicized that over \$2.8 million in private investment had been made into downtown during 2024 alone. I think the key word in that announcement is that this was private investment. Contrary to urban legend, the city has had no buildings that were sold to anyone for \$1.00. Some of the buildings were purchased from individual owners, some were purchased from the State through tax sales, some are being leased, but the city was not involved in any of the transactions. The city did sell one building over fifteen years ago, when Mayor Mack was in office, the Elegant Evenings building. It was not \$1, but it was the fair market value. Main Street does a marvelous job in helping downtown Laurel, and keep in mind that Main Street's focus from the local to the state to the national level is all about downtowns. It is a group that is made up and operates almost exclusively by volunteers. We

thank them for all they do downtown. The HGTV show Hometown, has had an enormous and positive impact on Laurel and a lot of the impact is downtown. There are actually people who are disappointed that downtown is successful because of Ben and Erin's success on the show. I hear people who really should know better state that we are spending all the money downtown. The funds for downtown are similar to the 2% tax used for recreation. The majority of the work downtown has come from MDOT, TAP grants which are Traffic Alternative Program grants. These funds cannot be used in some other areas of the city, because of the criteria of the grant. The competitive grant focuses on intermodal transportation, which is more than just one form of transportation. A. The project must enhance transportation and tourism; the majority of the tourism is in downtown. B. Project must benefit a relatively large percentage of the local, regional or state population. C. Project that clearly improve non-driver access to public transportation and enhance mobility of existing or new transportation facilities. D. Bike paths, street-scapes and historic preservation of transportation facilities. Our engineers who are versed in this type grant, consults with MDOT to ensure our best chances of being successful in our application.

I would like to thank Ben and Erin and the Hometown show, for the positive impact that it has had and continues to have on our community.

Thank you for listening to this truncated version of the State of the City. The State of the City of Laurel, is fit, sound and continuing to grow and improve. The momentum is just getting cranked up.