

Good evening and welcome to the State of the City 2019.

[introduction by Dr. Michael Johnson, President of John Carroll University]

Thank you, Dr. Johnson.

You and I both took on the responsibilities of leading respectively John Carroll University and the City of University Heights this past year.

We did that with an eye to the future, and as strangers to any past grievances between town and gown.

In the coming years I look forward to collaboration and partnership in advancing our mutual interests and achieving our respective goals.

It is only fitting that I report to the residents of this city from the venue of this campus, our city's namesake since 1925.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to make this address from here on campus.

Members of city council, employees of the city, honored guests, and my fellow residents of University Heights.

The most valuable resource this city has is its people. The residents who live here, and the people who serve this community.

I would like to start this evening by honoring and introducing our city council members.

Our Vice Mayor Susan Pardee.

Councilwoman Pamela Cameron.

Councilman Phil Ertel.

Councilman John Rach.

Councilman Steven Sims.

Councilwoman Michele Weiss.

Councilman Mark Wiseman.

All eight of us have taken a collaborative approach, yielding a productive 2018. We will continue to work together to serve this city, face the challenges ahead, and turn obstacles into opportunities to advance and improve this city.

Next, I want to recognize the people who work in city government.

They work diligently to serve this community. I am proud to have them in this administration. Our directors, chiefs, and department heads all understand the goals of the administration, and they have been empowered to use their expertise in service to the city and its residents.

It is often said that in a democracy, people get the government they deserve. Often that is said with irony, or with criticism, or as a scold. But here in University Heights, the people we have working in administration and on city council are working tirelessly to give you their best, because we know you deserve it.

The people who serve this community are the greatest asset the city has. I see it every day in the commitment, the work ethic, the joy of coming to work in a community that values public service. It is an honor to work with them, just as it is an honor to serve this community.

It is because of the combined strength of the people who serve our city, the strength of our residents, our businesses, our schools (public and private), our religious institutions, and John Carroll University, that I can report to you that the State of the City of University Heights is **STRONG**. We have done much this past year, and there is so much still to do, but I know that working together, we will continue to reach new heights.

One of the powers of the office of mayor is the ability to perform marriage ceremonies. Last year, as mayor, I performed 25 marriage ceremonies. In the ceremony I use, I have a short passage, that may not be original, but I always find it poignant.

Love makes burdens lighter because you divide them. It makes joys more intense because you share them. It makes you stronger, so you can be involved with life in ways you dare not risk alone.

Whenever I recite those words at city hall, I think of my wife, Gina. And I'm thinking of her right now.

Gina, I could not do this, I could not be here, without your love and support. Thank you.

When I ran for mayor in 2017, I observed that University Heights is a beautiful, livable community with tremendous unrealized potential. I believed University Heights was missing too many opportunities that are right in front of us.

Everything we proposed is an investment in our city, our community, and our future.

In our first year working together, here is some of what we have done so far.

We have restored our safety services, starting with the fire department. We led off by replacing our fire chief on day one, appointing Bob Perko as our interim fire chief.

Since that appointment, we have covered a lot of ground.

We have restored training, better equipping our first responders to protect us in emergencies.

We have reopened the Fire Prevention & Education Bureau, which is again making fire and safety inspections in this city, in most places the first that have been done in years.

With the unanimous support of council, we are replacing the 26 year old ladder truck, which spends almost as much time being repaired as it does being in active service.

That old ladder truck was not available to us when we had the fire on Tullamore Road in October. We had to wait 18 minutes before a ladder truck from another community was available to join the scene. By then, a woman on the third floor, who could not be reached by our responders, thankfully found the gumption to run down the steps past the fire and out to safety. If she had not done that, and with no ladder truck to rescue her, I don't even want to say what might have happened.

A city like ours must have a ladder truck. Not only for the tall buildings on campus, and at University Square, and at Huntington Green. But in all of our neighborhoods, anywhere you have living space on the third floor of a home – which is commonplace in our city.

Under Chief Perko's leadership, we have established the department's first ever Wellness and Fitness program; we replaced outdated radios; we have secured about \$100k worth of donated equipment, together with approx. \$50k in grants; we have restored and held community CPR classes; we have a new ambulance; the department held its first ever community open house; we now have a residential lockbox program; we held examinations for new hires and for promotions, when the city had no current lists in place as of the beginning of last year; we have made some new hires, and will hire three more firefighters in 2019, to finally achieve minimum staffing.

Looking ahead, with the restoration of the Fire Prevention & Education Bureau, we will again, for the first time in years, conduct fire inspections timely and thoroughly. We will restore the CERT program, the smoke detector program, and the car seat program.

Turning now to our police department, 2018 saw the retirement of Chief Steven Hammett, a respected and beloved chief, not only within this city, but throughout the state of Ohio. With the appointment of Dustin Rogers as our new Police Chief, we saw many changes, including the creation of the Office of Community Policing, which led to numerous community engagement opportunities, such as the Coffee with a Cop program (we're having one this Sunday at the library at 2:00pm), and with the first local observance of the National Night Out event. We have procured three new police vehicles, and have begun a major update to the department policy manual.

Like the fire department, the police department did not have a current hiring list at the beginning of 2018. This administration will not allow that to happen again. Due to retirements and officers on medical leave, we were not able to rehire promptly, which created a staffing problem and at times meant fewer officers on our streets.

Oh, we got complaints last year, that cars were not stopping at stop signs, of speeding, of the underenforcement of moving violations. Our ticket revenue was the lowest in years. We did not want it to become common knowledge that traffic enforcement was lax in our city. We worked together to schedule a civil service examination and hire new officers. And on January 2 of this year, we swore in two new police officers to our city. So, watch your speed and bring your cars to a complete stop.

Both Chief Rogers and Chief Perko addressed the city at the Community Safety Meeting last August, together with our law director Luke McConville, and new city prosecutor, Michael Astrab. Previously, the fire department was left out of safety presentations. As your safety director, I found it imperative to present a more complete picture of our safety services by including both police and fire. Many of our residents met our then interim chiefs for the very first time. And it was after the presentations that they made, that I knew that our city had found its chiefs to lead our safety services for years to come. Shortly thereafter, we formalized their appointments. Chief Rogers, Chief Perko, on behalf of the residents of University Heights, I thank you once again for your service and commitment to the safety of our community.

Turning now to our building and housing departments, we have passed or implemented a series of initiatives all designed to improve our housing stock.

On day one, we passed legislation requiring banks foreclosing on houses to bring the exteriors of those houses up to code.

In the first month, we brought in a new prosecutor, former common pleas judge Michael Astrab, and gave him a new and expanded mandate. Previously, our city prosecutor did not appear in housing court, leaving our inspectors to serve as both their own witnesses and their own advocates. Prosecutor Astrab not only appears in housing court now, but helps our inspectors succeed in enforcing our codes. Prosecutor Astrab has obtained administrative search warrants, allowing us to enter vacant homes and structures to evaluate them for further action, including restoration or demolition. We have begun using the courts to clean up our housing stock.

We offered last year, and will again offer on April 3rd, the Heritage Home Program in partnership with the Cleveland Restoration Society. If your home is over 50 years old, you are eligible for free advice on home improvement projects, and may apply for low interest equity loans to pay for them.

Late last year, the state approved our application to make all of University Heights a Community Reinvestment Area, or CRA. The CRA is a tax incentive to encourage current residents and prospective residents to invest in their homes. Qualifying applicants will receive a tax abatement on the increase in value of their home due to their investment for up to 15 years. Already, homeowners in this city are planning additions or substantial renovations, rather than looking for new homes in other communities. The CRA will allow people to make the home they want in the community they already love.

Other quality of life home programs include the rain barrel workshop, the solar panel program, the backyard composting program, and the licensing and regulation of backyard chicken coops. We have reconstituted our Fair Housing Commission, and are reviewing our fair housing laws to ensure that unlawful discrimination in housing finds no home in University Heights.

Late in 2018, we divided our housing department from our building department. In dividing Housing from Building we have also effectively merged our Community Development department into Housing. Thus our city's Community Development Coordinator, Patrick Grogan-Myers, is now also our city's Housing Director. This rearrangement also frees up our building department, led by our Building Commissioner James McReynolds, to work on commercial properties, construction, and all the matters incidental to new development and redevelopment, because we're going to be seeing a lot more of that now, and we have hired two additional inspectors with state certifications that our department previously lacked. Dividing into two departments focuses our

housing department on housing violations, the exterior maintenance program, the point of sale inspection program, and the rental registration program.

Now, no one likes receiving a notice in the mail for exterior code violations. And point of sale inspections do add one more obligation to the process of buying and selling a home. But everyone likes living in a neighborhood with well kept homes. The benefits outweigh the hassles. And the reward is better housing for us all, now and in the future.

The overhaul of the rental registration program continues. We will be strengthening the program to increase inspections at rentals where code compliance is a problem, reward landlords who consistently comply with the code, require landlords to keep current tenant lists on file with the city, require landlords to designate a local agent or property manager who is an actual person living in the area and not an anonymous LLC, and require that insurance be maintained with proof of same filed with the city. The fee for rental registration will be going up, and it may be more than some cities charge, but it will be no more than it costs to administer the program.

Before the end of 2019, we will see a new rental registration program; we will see midblock crossings and bike lanes on Warrensville Center Road; we will see the implementation of the Citizenserve software program to expedite building permits, the processes of issuing housing notices, and even the ordering of special pickups. Dare we dream to pay for special pickups and other payments by credit card? At long last it is all in the works. *If Geraci's can finally accept credit cards, so can your city government.*

Our efforts at rebuilding our city are not limited to the new separate Housing and Building Departments.

2018 saw the creation of our city's first Economic Development Department.

For the first time, our city is treating Economic Development as something we seek, plan, and make happen every day.

Since just September of 2018, our new Economic Development Director, Susan Drucker, has begun an active outreach program to our city businesses.

By the end of 2018, she visited over 55 businesses in our city to speak with them about their businesses, and what our city can do for them to assist them in their success.

Mrs. Drucker orchestrated our city's first participation in Small Business Saturday, in which 30 University Heights businesses participated.

She has updated our local business directory, compiled a list of available commercial space for incoming businesses, and has been the point of contact for businesses looking to locate in University Heights.

With the new year, we'll be starting a storefront renovation program, revising our zoning code, and working on larger projects here in the city, such as improving Cedar-Taylor. And University Square.

University Square continues to be confounding to this community. Ill conceived from the start and mismanaged for years, the fact that our Target and Macy's do as well as they do is a testament to the strength of the consumer base in this community. It represents an opportunity for the right developer to make something not only productive, but special and worthy of this community. Taking out the vacancies at University Square, the commercial vacancy rate in UH is now under 5%. This is a reflection of not only our strong consumer base, but the fact that our community supports local businesses. The ongoing vacancies at the site are due, at least in part, to the present owners keeping the site clear for redevelopment. Those same present owners are entering Year Five of their 18 to 24 month plan to turnaround and redevelop University Square. To their credit, I know their lack of results are not for lack of effort. I know this because this administration has been in constant contact with them, my first meeting with them being in the month before I even took office. Our city remains ready and willing to repeal the special assessments on the property to clear the way for redevelopment, once the owners have a developer in place with a plan worthy of the site and worthy of this city.

Look. I know. Your patience is running thin. Mine too. But also know that *now* in University Heights, economic development is no longer something we wait to *have* happen. It is now something we actively seek and *make* happen. And we will make this happen. This city now works at this every day.

Our city has a story to tell. We can do all these great things, but people also need to know about them. In listening to the concerns of residents, our community had been – or at least felt – underserved. Communication was lacking. Engagement was wanting. Resident concerns often went unanswered.

At my request, city council created the position of Communications and Civic Engagement Coordinator.

We filled it with Mike Cook, an experienced hand, with media savvy, pop culture sensibility, a mastery of constituent service, and an old dad-joke sense of humor.

We have endeavored to go to where the people are. You will find us now on social media, on Facebook, on NextDoor, on Instagram.

We are emailing more residents than ever. We listened to the concerns over the litter caused by the Trash Tribune/Garbage Gazette/Rubbish Reader, and we now produce a professional newsletter that we both email and mail – a print edition is mailed to seniors and anyone else who signs up for one. We also stock them at local businesses.

We have begun a city magazine, the University Heights Mosaic, the first issue is scheduled to hit mailboxes on February 25. The magazine is supported by ads taken out by local and regional businesses. We plan on three issues this year.

We have revamped and redesigned the city's website. The new universityheights.com launched earlier today.

Overall we have upped our game in communications. This city hall returns phone calls and emails. This city hall reads Facebook, and answers questions.

We have made a concerted effort to change the tone. Up beat, positive, optimistic, humorous at times, but not frivolous. And overall, informative.

You have questions, we have answers. You have concerns, they become our concerns. This city hall engages with the community.

The rebirth of the Civic Awards was a major accomplishment of this administration and of our new Communications and Civic Engagement Department. Over 160 attended the event. The ceremony was entertaining, the recipients were happy to be recognized, and the event promoted and renewed our sense of community.

The event tied in successfully with the launch of our rebrand. In December 2017, we met with Guide Studio, and brought them on board last year to help us unearth our brand.

We surveyed residents and stakeholders, and reduced to the essence what it means to live in University Heights, to be in University Heights.

The mosaic logo is a celebration of our diversity, ethnically and religiously. People come from around the world and choose to live here because it offers a place to thrive and plant roots. We are well situated, with cultural institutions and attractions both within our city and within close proximity of our community.

When you live in University Heights, you live ten minutes away from the medical, scientific and cultural hub of Northeastern Ohio. And you live ten minutes away from I-271. We are right in the middle of everything, and that makes University Heights, everything.

The city logo reflects all of this.

The colors represent nature and education.

The U is implied in the shield, and the H within.

The shield implies the safety of living in our community.

The design itself is inspired by our street grid, a neighborhood representative to our decades old moniker, The City of Beautiful Homes.

Over the course of this next year, we will continue to deploy the new brand. Any sign, any form, any place where you see the old doorknocker, you will see the new mosaic.

And you will see it a few more places as well. When you ride around our city, you can't always tell whether you are in University Heights or one of our neighboring communities. We are working now on wayfinding and signage that will better designate and celebrate our great city.

While we are updating our signage, and while every community has a park, our community park needs a name, one that honors community and community service.

Which is why I am announcing tonight the administration's intention to rename our new park, in honor of the only individual to have served this community under the last four mayors and dozens of city council members, and to have done so in an exemplary and inspirational fashion.

Mr. Stinson, would you please stand up?

Our community park will now be known as Walter Stinson Community Park. Walter, you are an inspiration to us all.

In 2019, Walter Stinson Community Park will be the new home of the University Heights Summer Concert Series, and of at least one summer movie night.

"The Walt" will serve as the new starting and ending location for the 33rd annual B'nai B'rith Health Run in July, as well as the city's new inaugural City Beautiful 5K, to be held in September, and of the city's new Fall Fest, to be held in October.

And while I haven't mentioned the Memorial Day Parade till now, last year's parade was the largest in recent memory, with participants from not only all over greater Cleveland, but also our first Air Force flyover. It continues to be our single largest event in the city, as well as our official kickoff of the summer season. This event, and all the others just mentioned will be among the special projects of our new Special Projects Coordinator Rachel Mullen. Ms. Mullen is here to help us step up our game, and work in concert with our staff and community to plan and execute every special event.

That all said, for a lot of people who live in University Heights, busy people who leave here early in the morning and return late at night, their engagement with our community might be limited to little more than trash pickup and snow removal by our service department, led by Service Director Jeff Pokorny.

So, by the numbers, in 2018:

The city collected and disposed of 4540 tons of residential solid waste with tipping fees of \$185,000. Included in this total are 1,651 Special Pick-ups.

The city collected and recycled 292 tons of mixed recyclables and approximately 20 tons of mixed paper and cardboard.

The city collected and recycled approximately 2300 tons of yard waste.

The city conducted two household hazardous waste collection events with paper shredding.

In the 2017-2018 winter season the Service Department used 2845 tons of road salt at a cost of just under \$86k. Last year we implemented a modified sensible salting program, to help ensure the safety of not only motorists, but pedestrians who use our streets, especially those walking in observance of their faith.

In the area of Urban Forestry: we had 585 trees pruned, 34 trees removed, and 252 trees planted. For a total cost of just over \$109k. Because of efforts like these, the City of University Heights has been a Tree City USA for forty straight years.

During the leaf pickup season, we incurred over \$39,000 in overtime doing weekend pickup from late November through the first weekend of January, and paid around \$18,000 to temp workers brought in for that effort. This was due in large part to late summery temperatures into October, causing so many trees to drop their leaves late, followed by an early snow season, burying all these leaves in the snow.

We replaced a 30 year old garbage truck,
a 20 year old dump truck,
a 30 year old leaf vac,
a 39 year old air compressor trailer,
and 33 year old sidewalk plow, along with
two 25 year old leaf collection boxes,
and a 13 year old Kubota scooter,
all with new equipment, for a total of just over \$479k.

We got a new street sweeper through a grant. And we spent about \$432k in
Sewer maintenance and repairs.

We are fortunate to have favorable contracts for solid waste disposal and
recycling. But out of full disclosure, come June 2020, we expect the costs for
solid waste disposal and recycling to rise for us dramatically. The cost of landfill
space is going up, and recycling costs are going way up.

We are already seeing our neighboring communities forced to face this. One
nearby suburban city ended curbside recycling last month, because it became
too expensive, and they found it cheaper just to throw things away. Another
nearby inner ring suburb, which uses a private contractor to pick up trash and
recycling, is struggling with how to pay for the cost of waste removal going
forward.

We must begin the conversation now about how we want to handle waste
disposal, and how we are going to pay for it. Mayor Irving Konigsberg
established backyard pickup in our city in 1966. We are one of three
communities in the county that still does it this way. However we do our trash
going forward, whether we continue to invest in the current system, or make a
major investment to switch to other equipment to handle it another way, we're
going to have to expect to pay a lot more for trash pickup and waste disposal.

I don't like having to report that, but the community needs to know.

Likewise the community needs to know about our outdated municipal facilities.

When our city hall was built in 1925, we were a village of less than 2000 people. Sure, the people who planned our village expected us to grow. But we have long since outgrown the 94 year old town hall.

We recently and indefinitely moved all city council meetings to the board of education offices because our city hall is not accessible to people with mobility issues. Our wheelchair lift is no longer reliable. Replacing it with another chair lift is not only costly, around \$70,000, but there is a legitimate design concern that a new lift may not be meaningfully more reliable than the existing lift, especially in the long term.

On the other hand, a traditional elevator may cost \$600,000 or more, consume an undue amount of the already limited office space that exists at city hall, and constitute a major investment in a facility still outdated in so many ways.

And city hall floods from time to time – including a flood last spring that again destroyed all the carpeting in the clerk of council office and the conference room. Carpeting that we didn't bother to replace this time.

Our building department and housing department are not even in city hall. Instead, they are located inside a house on Silsby adjacent to the city hall parking lot. Building on the first floor, Housing on the second floor.

Our fire prevention bureau and economic development department are located at 2245 Warrensville, in office space we rented in 2018. A converted insurance office. Some of our committee meetings have been held in that space, because it is accessible.

Meanwhile our firehouse was built in 1941. We recently ordered a new ladder truck. Of all the ladder trucks manufactured today in the United States, only two are small enough to fit inside the garage of our firehouse. The one we ordered just barely fits, clearing the garage doorway by mere inches.

The firehouse kitchen continues to suffer water damage, despite repairs made a couple years ago. The showers in the firehouse are water damaged to the point of structural concern.

By comparison, our police station is modern, as it was built in 1953. It was built for a police department with 12 employees. We now have 30 employees and are budgeted for 32. There is no room in the police station for the detective bureau; that is located in a house on Saybrook Road.

The jail in our police station was shut down by the state of Ohio in 2017, as it is no longer fit for use. Anyone arrested in University Heights is sent to Solon for booking and holding. While the county also has jail facilities that it offers, given the recent revelations of deplorable and dangerous conditions there, I absolutely will not send people arrested in our city to county jail facilities.

The service department facilities are similarly obsolete. There are not enough garages to hold all of our equipment. Garbage trucks and dumptrucks and snowplows are all stored outside year round. In the winter, our city mechanic starts their engines a full half hour before our employees begin work, in order to warm up the trucks and bring them to operating temperatures.

Residents often ask if there is a city room they can reserve or rent for a party or a reception or a meeting. The city has none. There is no community room, much less a community center. Or senior center. Or recreation center. There is no public auditorium, no ice rink, no indoor pool or track, no dog park, and no splash pad.

Now, we don't have to have all of these things. But we do need a city hall that is accessible. All administrative departments ought to be under one roof. There ought to be a new firehouse, a new police station (one large enough to hold all of our officers), new service buildings. In our climate, city equipment ought to be stored in heated garages to better care and promote longevity of the equipment.

And something our city has never had before, we ought to have a community center for our residents to use.

As we make investments in the future of our city, we must begin work on replacing the municipal facilities.

We need these to better serve you.

We need these to compete with other cities that have these amenities, as people looking to make a home in a community look for these amenities.

And you should want these amenities for you and your family as well.

We know it will be a big ask, but it is one that will allow us to better serve you, one that will allow our city to expand its offerings to you, and make this an even more attractive community to live, work, and raise a family.

Let's talk about other challenges facing our city.

One year and six weeks ago, I assumed the office of mayor amid a time of crises.

Over the course of the first three months of 2018, we learned the crises were deeper, and more extensive.

The first sign of this was on Day One of this new administration, when we took over in the middle of an Information Technology meltdown.

City Hall's firewall had been breached, the password did not work, the installer could not be identified or found, and we soon learned that the city's IT had been handled on an ad hoc a la carte basis, with no apparent planning or care, or consistency, or dedicated IT person or company. With that, there was no file server, no meaningful backing up or archiving, and the network was down and had been down.

And on that very first day, it was uncertain whether we would even be able to print agendas and materials for that night's city council meeting.

We called in an outside consultant on an emergency basis and paid emergency rates for service, there being no service plan for the city.

Looking back now, that day was emblematic of the many crises we would discover over and over during the course of this past year.

The problems we inherited, all the things that we found that were broken and that we had fix, we would work on while simultaneously not allowing those problems to unduly distract or derail our plans for progress and reinvestment in our city.

Something we did not begin to know on our first day here, was the crisis of mismanagement of the city's finance department.

We would only begin to learn the depths of that problem in the first three months of 2018, and we have spent every day since then fixing that, and the work continues. As we go through the present budgetary process, we are still dealing with the consequences.

Before I took office, we were all told that the city had a \$2.5 million dollar surplus. What we came to discover was that this number was nothing more than slight of hand, enabled in part by mismanagement of our resources.

Don't actually try this at home, but imagine if you will, that one day, even though you haven't lost your job and you are still collecting a paycheck, that you stop paying your mortgage, your car note, most of your bills, and you don't fix things that break, and you don't buy nutritious groceries – just bologna and

cereal to get by – and you don't change the oil in your car, or fix the broken windows or the roof on your house.

This may be an oversimplification, but the point remains:

If you have the money, and just don't pay for things, you too can create a deceptively impressive balance in your checking account. That. Is not. A Surplus.

Allow me to be blunt. Up to the beginning of 2018, the city of University Heights was not paying its bills, the city was deferring many necessary capital expenditures, had abandoned maintenance on many city assets, and made expensive and/or shoddy repairs after things broke due to lack of care.

In early 2018, we paid a months old repaving bill from 2017 to the tune of nearly \$300k that ended up coming out of last year's budget. We had debt collectors calling seeking payments, such as for CodeRed from June of 2017 (when incidentally, there was a free program the county offered called ReadyNotify that did essentially the same thing – and which we will be moving to this year).

Council appropriated money for an ambulance, and for new police cars, the purchase orders for which were closed out by the old finance director without being paid for, creating the illusion of yet another surplus at the end of 2017. (By the way, we did order and obtain those vehicles this year.)

When one manipulates the numbers in these ways, one can take a snapshot of a moment in time to create the appearance of a surplus. One can draw focus on that number, while diverting attention from everything else.

You can also create the illusion of a stronger financial position, when in 2013, you take the \$2.2m dollars in general bond revenue, use \$600k to buy the land for the park, use a quarter mil or so to demo the old school on that land, refinance some short term notes, and put the rest of the money ...elsewhere... in municipal finances.

Our city will be paying for those bonds well into the next decade, long after the money is spent.

The consequence is that this city has been riding a wave of borrowed cash since 2013, but that wave has crested, hit the shore, and dissipated. (And now we have some hard choices to make in this years budget.)

On top of all of that, in the year 2017, the city of University Heights did not balance its checkbook.

Not even once.

Early in 2018, when we had our initial meeting with the auditors to do the city's annual audit, it soon became evident that we had -*nothing* to give them.

The city had not kept books in 2017 that could be audited.

The city had not done any monthly bank reconciliations in 2017, and here we were, in February of 2018, and they were still not being done. And at the same time, we were operating under temporary continuing appropriations, as no budget had been passed for 2018. And under state law, we were required to pass one by the end of March.

I called the then finance director into my office.

I told him, that on top of working on the current year's budget we needed to go back and construct monthly bank reconciliations starting with January 2017.

He said, that's going to be a lot of work.

And I said, I know. A year's worth. More even, because it's already February.

I gave the two people I inherited in the finance office the opportunity to fix this.

By the end of March, we passed a budget, such as it was. And by mid-April, with no progress in doing the books for 2017, the turnover of the City Finance Dept began.

Our city had to take two extensions on our audit for 2017. That's the maximum allowed by state law. If we didn't come up with books by then, the state would have declared us unauditable.

That would have been a huge black eye for this city, and that surely would have negatively affected our ability to make the kinds of investments in this city that we need to grow this city and be financially sustainable.

The finance office was mismanaged the year before I got here. But then it had become my responsibility to fix it.

And we did.

It started in finding the right people... Our finance director now is James Goffe. Mr. Goffe is formerly of the state auditor's office and state attorney general's office, formerly the finance director of Canal Fulton. When he took over in Canal Fulton, it was under similar dire circumstances. He turned around Canal Fulton, and he is turning around University Heights.

With Mr. Goffe and our new team in finance, thus began the salvage operation of the 2017 finances, while trying to hold things together in 2018, so that we can now implement best practices in 2019. And make sound long range plans and decisions.

Our new finance staff reconstructed the 2017 books and gave the auditors something to audit, and we passed. Official word of that just came out in mid-November. We are transitioning to a new accounting system, improved record keeping, and now have internal controls in place. And even though cities are not

required by law to do this, after the present budget process is concluded, we will begin working on a five year forecast, just like school districts do, to aid in our ability to make meaningful long range plans for this city. Something which simply has not been in many years, if ever.

The city's biggest accomplishment in 2018 might just be that the new finance department saved our hides – so that we can do the many things we need to do to rebuild and grow this city.

Together, we can overcome these challenges, and accomplish great things in 2019 and beyond.

As an aging city, with most homes over 50 years old or older, it is paramount that we not only maintain what we have, but that we build upon it.

This is also why in late 2018, we created a Community Investment Corporation. Or CIC.

When founded, we assigned our CIC the name, “University Heights Future Corporation.” That was just a placeholder.

But the name “City Beautiful” has been part of our community since at least 1980. Mayor Beryl Rothschild formed the University Heights City Beautiful Commission and filed it as a corporation that year.

Now, that corporation ceased to exist in the mid-1980's, but the City Beautiful Commission was reformed under local ordinance. There were several civic projects that fell under City Beautiful, the last of which that remains being the Beautiful Homes program and awards. But the larger mission, as state in the ordinance: and I quote, is

“to study, formulate and develop plans for the beautification of streets, park and recreation areas; to encourage and recommend the placing, planting and preservation of trees and other shrubbery; and to otherwise promote public interest in the general improvement of the appearance of the City.”

My friends... what IS a CIC really, but to do all that and more.

Tonight I propose we rename our CIC the Beautiful Homes Corporation.

We won't just beautify the city.

We will restore our beautiful homes, and build beautiful homes.

We won't just promote general improvement.

We will make those improvements.

We will take the historic name City Beautiful, and transform its historic mission into the modern ultimate form. A tool of council, of administration, of housing and community development, and of economic development. It is another way we are moving forward here in University Heights.

Mayor Beryl Rothschild from time to time would refer to the City of University Heights as a jewel. It is easy to see, when we are nestled between four neighborly prongs. Cleveland Heights, Shaker Heights, South Euclid, Beachwood. We will continue to work cooperatively with our neighbors, be it the Heights Hillcrest Regional Dispatch, the EDGE Specialized Units, Heights Hillcrest Technical Rescue Team, the Heights Libraries, and last but not least, the Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District.

And I want to talk a little about the school district – but first I want to talk a little about the city we share our schools and libraries with, Cleveland Heights.

While we value all of our neighboring communities, I cannot deny our special relationship with Cleveland Heights. Idlewood was founded in 1907 when we broke away from Cleveland Heights and took a portion of Warrensville township with us. Over the next few years, we traded streets back and forth with Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights before settling on the present municipal boundaries. But throughout that and onward to today, we have always shared with Cleveland Heights a school district, and a library system. Because of all this, our history and our fortunes are tied together. It will always be in the interests of University Heights to see Cleveland Heights do well – and it will always be in the interests of Cleveland Heights to see University Heights do well.

Accordingly, we work together, endeavor to do so well, and will continue to do so.

This year we are working together to improve Meadowbrook Blvd, and Washington Blvd. two important streets that both our cities share.

We are committed to working together for the improvement of the shared Cedar-Taylor district. as we look for ways to advance and promote redevelopment in that district.

We watch with excitement the possibilities and vision for Top of the Hill. And we share your pain over Severance Town Center, as surely as you share ours over University Square.

So, with all that, we know – because it is in Cleveland Heights' interest too – that you will support and cheer us on as we work with our shared school board in determining the future of the site of the former Wiley Middle School.

This school year marks the final school year of educational operations in the former Wiley Middle School facilities.

With all five board members in their first terms of office, we are seeing great things from our school district. We have Dr. Brian Williams taking over as interim superintendent, and we should see a new superintendent by August.

The pre-school programs at Gearity, Noble, and Oxford elementary schools were each awarded five star ratings by the Ohio Dept of Education, and yes, a five-star rating is the highest rating an early childhood program can receive and reflects the schools' commitment to excellence.

Student enrollment in the CH-UH district increased this past fall for the first time in eight years, and only the second time in the past 17 years.

And enrollment in Heights High School increased for the third straight year with a 4.2% jump this past fall – the largest annual increase in 20 years.

The middle school renovations at Roxboro and Monticello middle schools are near completion, and are on schedule to be completed in July, with the buildings ready for staff and students in August.

Which brings us back to Wiley.

The city of University Heights is committed to working with the CH-UH School Board to determine the future for the Wiley property. The loss of our community's middle school was decided years ago by the predecessors of the people now in office at the school board and in both of our cities.

In what to do from here, I take inspiration from the City of Lakewood, when Lakewood Hospital closed a few years ago. Once the closure was certain and irreversible, city officials and the community got to work on the future of the site of the former hospital. The site is 5.9 acres in the middle of the densest city in all of Ohio. And later this year, Lakewood will break ground on a new community space and mixed use development, one worthy of their city, one that takes a loss of one community asset, and creates a new community asset.

In what to do from here, I also take inspiration from our own city's history. I think of Earl Aurelius in 1941, the newly elected mayor of Ohio's newest village turned city. The newspapers and observers from all around marveled at this new City of Homes, with a booming population of just under 6,000 people. A city without a downtown, or a commercial business district, or an industrial base. A city made up of little more than planned neighborhoods, a university, and an old town hall.

Mayor Aurelius got to work. Under his leadership, the original Cedar Center shopping district was built. And across the street from there, a nine hole golf

course transformed into The May Company's first suburban location in Cuyahoga County, May's on the Heights. The predecessor of the Macy's that sits on that site today.

With the closure of Wiley, we have a once in a generation opportunity to make something that will improve our community for decades, twelve acres to build something that renews our sense of community, that creates jobs, that could be the home of new businesses, offices, laboratories, the home of new municipal and school board facilities, of new community space, of things that grow our community and build our tax base.

The tax base for our city – and for our city schools.

These things will not happen overnight. But they must happen. And working together, we will make them happen.

In the year and six weeks I have held this office, no day has been routine.

Every day has been an opportunity to serve and make a real difference in improving our community.

The privilege to do this for you and for our city is not one that I take for granted.

When you are mayor, you have no idea how long you will get to do that.

I would never want to look back at this time and think that I did not do everything I could do to improve our city.

I never want to look back and think that I held back.

President Barack Obama in his final address as president, gave the charge: *If something needs fixing, lace up your shoes and do some organizing... grab a clipboard, get some signatures, and run for office yourself.*

Before I did this, I doubted that I was worthy of it. I'm still not sure if I believe it. But I do believe in the strength of our ideas. And that the future of our city depends on their fulfillment.

Looking back on our goals, we have restored our safety services.

We are investing in our future.

We are renewing our housing.

We have established an economic development department, and it is busy at work.

We are transforming City Beautiful into a CIC – a tool to rebuild our city.

We have accomplished so much already. Yet there is still so much to be done.

We see the way forward, growing our city, and making it sustainable for the long run.

Together, we will reach new heights.

Together, we will show the world why University Heights is So Much More than Home.

We have a great history, but for University Heights, the best is yet to come.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Michael Brennan', with a stylized, flowing script.

Michael Dylan Brennan
Mayor of University Heights