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Mayor Scott Conger
State of the City Address Transcript
January 16, 2024

Author Jen Sincero writes, “Gratitude is one of the strongest and most transformative states of being. It shifts your perspective from lack to abundance and allows you to focus on the good in your life, which in turn pulls more goodness into your reality.”

I stand before you today to talk about my thoughts on a virtue that many times goes unnoticed in the daily craziness and hustle and bustle of our lives: Gratitude.

When we take the time to reflect on the blessings and positive aspects of our lives, we shift our focus from what may be lacking to what we already have.

Expressing gratitude strengthens our relationships.

Whether it is acknowledging a friend’s support, a colleague’s collaboration, or a family member’s love, gratitude deepens the bonds that connect us. It acts as a glue that binds people together.

2023 was a demanding year. It was full of challenges, but I am thankful and grateful for how we worked together every single day and every single challenge.

I want to show my gratitude to you. I do not know if you remember it or not, but there was an election this year. I want to say again how grateful I am for you. You all placed your confidence in me again through your sacred vote. It is not something that I take lightly, and I want to wake up every day and make you proud of what we are doing as a city. I want to express my gratitude to you, that together we showed that in Jackson, no matter your race, gender, orientation, political views, economic status: that We The People means Everybody.

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We should always be thankful and grateful for the employees in our city. These public servants, from police officers, to code inspectors, to claw truck drivers spend their careers making our community a better place to live.

We should always show gratitude to our law enforcement personnel. I say it everywhere I go, but we have the best police department in the state. Chief Corley started the year with a renewed effort to what he calls the three C's of policing. Community Policing, Collaborative Policing and Constitutional Policing. Our police officers are going to be in your community getting to know your and their neighbors, they are going to work with other law enforcement agencies, and they are going to protect people's rights. Under Chief Corley's leadership, in conjunction with Deputy Chief Tisdale, and newly promoted Deputy Chief Benton, the department is in excellent hands.

Two months ago, we saw the approval of a contract with an Architectural and Engineering firm to begin the process of a building a new Public Safety Complex. The current state of the police department and Fire department administration buildings are not ideal, to say the least, with buildings being 70+ years old. The new complex is going to be state of the art and will be more adaptable to today's technologies, and leave room for tomorrow's growth. We owe it to those officers and fire department officials that put their lives on the line to come to work every day and give them a decent place for them to do their jobs. Chief Corley, Deputy Chief Benton, Chief Friddle, and Deputy Chief Turner have put in a lot of work on what the new complex will look like, and how it will functionally work. I am excited to see this project started.

Police officer shortage is not a problem isolated here. We currently have 191 officers out of 220 budget positions that would make us fully staffed. We hired 21 new officers in 2023, up from 16 in 2022. In 2023, the patrol division has filed 18,237 incident reports and 3,901 crash reports. The traffic unit issued 1,006 traffic citations that include speeding, distracted driving, leaving the scene of an accident, and registration law violations. That is just short of three citations a day for the entire year. I think we can agree that there are drivers in Jackson that

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need to slow down. Thanks to our officers and the approval of the city council, the Traffic Unit acquired 5 handheld RADARS, and 2 in-car mobile RADAR systems. This equipment will be used by the Traffic Unit and Patrol division to place an increased emphasis on speed enforcement going forward. Through a Tennessee Highway Safety Office grant program, JPD acquired a RADAR trailer. This trailer is already being deployed in areas of high complaints for speeding violations and is making a distinct impact. A second RADAR trailer is being sought through the use of Capital funds. If you are concerned about speeding in your neighborhood, reach out to the police department to see if you can get the RADAR trailer up for a time period.

At Safe Hope Center in 2023, we have provided services to approximately 1,178 persons who have come in seeking an Order of Protection, speak with investigators, or speak with WRAP. The Domestic Violence Unit has 4 investigators who work approximately 1000 cases annually, along with their captain, Dee Jones who also maintains a case load, the DVU has a clearance rate of approximately 80%. Captain Jones is also a Human Trafficking Task Force Agent with the TBI. She works in collaboration with the Scarlet Rope project to rid us of Human Trafficking, and bring those involved to justice.

Another note of gratitude goes to Sergeant Adam Pinion. He has been instrumental in bringing the FLOCK camera system to the City of Jackson. These cameras are the most beneficial advancement in law enforcement since the identification of fingerprints. The FLOCK system leads to arrests, the recovery of stolen vehicles, and the location of missing and endangered persons daily. We have doubled the number of FLOCK cameras this year, and we now have 70 deployed through the city.

Investigator Kevin Mooney is in charge of the CRIME SCENE unit. His knowledge, attention to detail, and hardworking drive have led to the successful prosecution and conviction of many violent offenders. Inv. Mooney has taken on training and equipping several officers and civilian employees to assist him on scenes.

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In addition to everything JPD does, they successfully hosted the JPD's first "Youth Police Academy". Approximately 15 middle and high school students participated and were exposed to Police Operations to include Crime Scene Investigation methods, Patrol function, and Law enforcement technology. JPD officers engaged in over 1,120 hours of community interaction. They have been active in many organizations to increase our community policing efforts and to make connections with citizens, particularly our youth. Collaborating with groups such as The Salvation Army, the boys and Girls Club, the Hub club, United Way, and others has been an important component in fulfilling our community-policing mission. JPD has also created new partnerships with the local schools (both public and private) in order to increase student safety and to affect the major issue of Juvenile Violent Crime.

One of our 2023 goals for JPD was to increase officer education and training, focus upon employee wellness and benefits, and to create a leadership culture which supports our staff. Part of that goal included the efforts made to increase officer salary and benefits. Starting salary for police officers has risen from \$35,000 in 2019 to \$50,000 this year. Additionally, multiple training resources were provided to enhance the leadership skills of our employees at all levels.

The Jackson Fire Department saw the installation of a new chief as well, when Chief Daryl Samuels retired, Deputy Chief Don Friddle was sworn in as Fire chief. Under his leadership, Jackson became the first 4-minute City in the world through collaborative efforts of Friends of Heart, Jackson Madison County General Hospital, Jackson Med-link, and our own Jackson Fire Department. In addition, the first Safe Haven Baby Box in West Tennessee was installed and placed into operations at Fire Station 2. A contract for a second baby box has been signed with the goal for installation being late spring or early summer of this year.

Central dispatch answered 49,342 9-1-1 emergency phone calls and 79,553 administrative calls for service. 100% of these calls were answered within 20 seconds with 98% answered within 10 seconds. To the world, they may be only a voice on the phone, but to the caller, they're heroes!

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I am incredibly grateful for our maintenance team. Led by Kirk Smith and Damon Harvey, they keep the city running. From putting up illegal dumping cameras, to HVAC repair and replacement. They add a lot to the quality of life for Jackson. In addition to their regular duties throughout the year, they have hired a crew for Park maintenance and plan on getting the parks in the best condition possible. In addition to that, on their own, they came with a plan to purchase pressure-washing equipment and hire a crew to run it. This was an easy “yes”. They will begin first of the year with sidewalks and public area parking lots to make the city look more aesthetic.

Our Recreation, Parks, & Tourism crew has been busy, and that’s a good thing! Led by Tony Black, they are constantly working to improve our areas of programming and meet future needs. Our public facilities have been consistently booked every weekend, facilitating local nonprofit and community groups in achieving their objectives for the year. We prioritize reinvesting in our facilities, implementing improvements and ongoing building updates.

At the South Jackson Community Center, they were able to connect with 7,645 people in their programming and rentals of this facility. Under the direction of Debra Williamson, most of you all will know her by peewee, they held their first symphony concert in the park, they held their first movies in the park, and held their pickle ball classes for beginners. Do not let her physical stature fool you, she is a giant. She recently received the “giraffe” award from the positive living group for “sticking her neck out there” for the community.

The Ned McWherter Cultural Arts Center, under the leadership of David McCall remains a vibrant destination in the City of Jackson Downtown Arts District. They marked a turning point this year with the production of Dreamgirls. The overwhelming support from the African American community of Jackson further emphasized the absolute necessity for diversity in programming. The production drew more than 2,200 attendees over two sold out weekends. Next year marks the 50th anniversary of the Theater program, and to commemorate the occasion the Ned will present the premier musical that started it all: Cinderella.

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The TR White Sportsplex, under the leadership of Terry Smith, has seen a great deal of activity in maintenance and renovation to continue to be an asset to the community. The complex got a new parking lot that was badly needed, and the entrance redesign continues and is nearing its completion.

In addition to all of that....

We added 6 more pickle ball courts to Conger Park giving the public now 12 playable courts. We are also working on converting two unusable tennis courts to 6 more pickle ball courts.

The sportsplex set an all-time record with 1,682 teams in 2023 that amounted to a 51% increase over 2022.

Recreation and Parks hosted and celebrated the largest to date Jackson Christmas Parade on December 4.

They started hosting free weekly exercise classes at Westwood Recreation Center for seniors

They started hosting free weekly senior line dance classes at Westwood

They hosted "Halloween at the Farmers Market" that drew over 1,000 people

2023 also saw the hiring of a new Public Works Director, Austin Clark, and his work has been transformational. His role is to manage the repair, maintenance, and installation of our public infrastructure as well as our health & sanitation services. The department also maintains over 700 acres of municipal owned property, and the management and repair of over 900 municipal owned vehicles and machinery.

Health & Sanitation, under the leadership of Leilani Mills, has generated over 43,000 work orders this year. After a full year of implementing scheduled bulk waste collection, the quality of service has greatly improved. Residents are receiving collection within 3-5 days as opposed to what would be upward of 6 weeks. I cannot even begin to tell you what a relief this has been.

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2024 will see the addition of the 3-1-1 customer service center. As it stands right now, 3-1-1 complaints go to the various departments for their handling of the issues. We are going to consolidate it to make it more customer service friendly and solutions focused. All 3-1-1 issues will go to this department, and the hardworking employees will own the issue until it is resolved. This new department will be led by Debbie Click. Debbie is that person that nine times out of ten you get when you call about a trash issue, you're talking to her. Let me tell you, she is battle tested and ready for the new challenge.

2023 saw the consolidation of Engineering, Planning, and Building Codes under the Planning, Growth, and Development department led by longtime City Planner, Stan Pilant. His expertise and experience is extremely valuable, and I am thankful for his counsel. They continued the coordination for the Jackson Walk project, which included the construction of 20 new homes. They reviewed and approved 68 separate subdivision plats in the region. They completed the design phase for construction of new access road for Great Wolf Lodge. The Code department is in process of cross training inspectors on all aspects of construction review. Instead of a plumbing inspector, an electrical inspector, and a construction inspector coming out, we are planning that just one inspector can come out and do it all. We successfully filled the City Engineer and Assistant city Engineer positions that included the first female city engineer in our city's history, Amanda Hicks. I do not have all of the data just yet, but I have lived in Jackson my whole life, and I believe that in conjunction with the state and TDOT, Jackson saw more roads resurfaced than ever before.

The Animal Care center was able to get more than 1,500 animals off the street this year. They also worked to keep the Pet Food Pantry active to aid in ownership retention in cases of financial instability. We are looking forward to 2024 with the projected completion of the new Animal Care facility...finally.

IT worked with Finance and accounting to implement our new financial enterprise software, Tyler Munis to enhance our technological capabilities and efficiency.

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Purchasing worked to streamline the bid and proposal processes that lead to an uptick in vendor responses. More vendors means more competition, which is better for the taxpayers.

The work done at the City's recovery court has been exceptional. Under the leadership of my friend, Judge Blake Anderson and Haley Coble, director of the program, they had 18 new participant admissions in 2023. There were 5 participants who purchased their own vehicle, 6 participants who got their driver's license, 6 participants obtained their own private residence, and 2 participants got baptized. One that completed the program in November of this year was Tekisha Moffitt. Jackson City Court Judge Blake Anderson had this to say about Ms. Moffitt, "Before recovery court, Ms. Moffitt's life was riddled with toxic relationships, substance abuse, domestic violence, and negative peers. These relationships and decisions brought her into a life of criminal activity that ultimately led her into the criminal justice system and Recovery Court. They caused her to be separated from her two daughters for a short while. When she entered the program, she was 40 years old, and knew she was ready to make a change for herself, her daughters, her family, and her future. She attended and completed Intensive Outpatient Treatment that focused on coping skills and provided education about substance use disorders and trauma. She completed moral reconnection therapy, and completed Mental Health Therapy Group. She also attended financial counseling at the Financial Empowerment Center. Through her involvement in the City of Jackson Recovery Court, Ms. Moffitt was given the opportunity to access many resources and services in the community. Ms. Moffitt is now working full time, and lives with her two daughters. She was able to obtain this job while in recovery court and was promoted to a management position due to her excellent work ethic and amazing interpersonal skills. She is attending online classes at Bethel to obtain her Bachelor's in Business Leadership. She is set to graduate in December 2024 and hopes to then start her master's degree. She was able to purchase a car, and she is applying for the first time homeowner's program next summer. She also recently celebrated one-year substance abuse free."

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Our Love Your Block program just completed their second year and completed 180 small home repairs across 14 projects.

Childcare continues to be a barrier to employment in West Tennessee. In 2023, the Jackson Madison County Children’s Cabinet was established. This cross-sector body includes all government departments that intersect with children and families and is dedicated to enhancing outcomes for our community’s children. We will continue to seek out grant opportunities to expand childcare in Jackson.

We completed the bid process for a construction management contract to build the Men’s Homeless Shelter. After an extensive design process, we anticipate beginning construction this summer.

In May, we were selected to participate in a national peer learning initiative that will help the city develop solutions to pressing housing challenges. For every 10 new jobs created in the state of Tennessee, we are only building six homes, leaving a significant gap in housing supply. Our objective is to work with state legislators to implement effective incentives that promote the development of workforce housing. We established a housing commission and initial goals for our housing action plan are currently underway.

2024 will see a renewed commitment to the arts AND the local artists in Jackson. With the new arena and convention center planned for the old Service Merchandise building, we have to make sure we have a homegrown, local music & arts scene. This year we have hired the number one Jackson celebrity there is to help us with this mission, Lauren Pritchard-Cobb, or LOLO as we all know her. LOLO is going to help us with a long-term vision and plan of what it takes to train up and retain local artists so they stay here in Jackson. This will include a new robust public art program in partnership with the Co, expanding arts funding access for local artists, event program match funding, budget increase and overhaul of the Carnegie legends museum, and expanded programming and line-ups ad the Amp.

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The people that have been mentioned today just barely scratch the surface of all of the amazing people that go to work every day to make all of our lives better. I am eternally grateful for all of them. We should all embrace gratitude as the guiding principle in our lives. We should all be thankful for the people, opportunities, and experiences that shape our journey. Through the simple act of expressing thanks, we not only uplift ourselves but also contribute to the creation of a more compassionate and connected world.

Thank you all again for allowing me to serve as your Mayor. I look forward to a prosperous 2024 in Jackson.

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