

2021 State of the City Address

5 April 2021

6:30 pm

“Our Path to Recovery”

Thank yous:

Miigwech Renee

National Poetry Month, spoken word artists

Kate & Team

WDIO

Erik

Noah

My Family

I start tonight by acknowledging that Anishinaabe peoples and other Tribal Nations have inhabited this land for centuries. As Mayor I am committed to understanding and telling the story of this land and people in a good way, with greater accuracy and accounting and with a deeper humility. I am committed to a thorough discernment and deliberative land acknowledgement as part of my administration moving forward.

It's Spring after a hard winter and long year.

The hurt and loss we experienced this past year weigh heavy on many of us.

The fact that I'm delivering this speech remotely speaks to the challenging times we're in.

But there's something else going on as well.

Hopefulness.

A sense of community and connection forged through shared adversity.

It's that feeling and relationship that comes when you've shared a tough time with others.

A couple of months ago I had the opportunity to spend a virtual hour with the Dalai Lama along with 10 other mayors across the country.

It turns out the Dalai Lama has a long history of working with mayors.

He talked about two things that deeply moved me.

The first was "no mud, no Lotus."

The Lotus flower is a symbol of enlightenment and rebirth. It sinks its roots deep into the mud to grow. And even in the dirtiest water the Lotus produces beautiful flowers.

The Dalai Lama also called on us to “see ourselves as part of a shared humanity.”

I found this profoundly hopeful, particularly in these trying times.

In this mud – in these dirty waters – we seek hope. We find strength in seeing ourselves part of a shared humanity. Where rebirth and regeneration are possible.

I call this resilience.

For me, resilience isn’t something that you can pull off the shelf when you need it.

It isn’t a given.

It’s forged with purpose, built on truth, infused with empathy, and tempered through hardship – we find it in the relationships that make us stronger and carry us through together.

Resilience is about intentionally choosing a path and way of being together.

Building common ground based on truth.

The foundation upon which we can build an equitable and sustainable future.

Our resilience and gritty determination have been tested this past year.

You’ve shared hundreds of stories with me.

Stories filled with fear, pain, sadness, and frustration.

Of not being able to see and hug grandchildren and loved ones.

Parents trying to juggle their work on one screen while helping their child with remote school on another.

Small business owners who stayed awake nights tormented with trying to save their businesses and protect their employees and customers.

And the stories that tore at me most were those of not being able to say goodbye to loved ones.

In Duluth alone, Covid has taken the lives of 145 people. Every one of them had a story to tell. They were a parent or child, a grandma or grandpa, a cherished sibling or a dear friend.

Each one leaves a gaping hole in our hearts, in our lives, and in the fabric of our community.

We did not all suffer equally, but all of us experienced pain.

And this was just the pandemic.

There was also the brutal death of George Floyd, mass protests, cynical lies perpetrated about our election, and an armed mob attacking our nation’s Capital.

It was quite a year.

No wonder we’re emotionally exhausted.

But there were also inspiring and even funny moments this past year.

Hundreds of you chalked messages of encouragement on your sidewalks and delivered meals to neighbors.

When needs arose you responded. You donated generously to local food banks, made masks and gave them out free, checked in on friends and neighbors, turned your businesses over to making personal protective gear.

We came up with new and creative ways to safely hold small gatherings and stay in touch.

Who knew we'd all become digital meeting experts or that virtual happy hours, concerts and game nights would become a thing?

Who knew this year's punchline would be [- "wait, I think you're on mute."]

Duluth, we not only got through this last year together, we got through it stronger and more resilient than ever.

Let's take a moment to celebrate what we got done.

It's hard to remember a pre-pandemic time – it's hard to remember much of anything from last year.

So here's just a few highlights.

- Superior Street is nearly complete. We have only a few spots left to finish - thank goodness! And thank you to everyone who sacrificed through this three-year project!
- Construction is booming. This is Duluth's biggest construction year in generations. You'll see road construction, boom cranes, and buildings going up across the city.
- We rebuilt fourteen and a half miles of Duluth streets.
- And after three successive Lake Superior storms, we rebuilt the Lakewalk to last.

We didn't accomplish these alone. It took the focus and work of hundreds of people throughout the city, and the faith, confidence, and support of thousands more.

I'm deeply grateful to every one of you and want to say thank you.

City government itself also got the job done.

Presented with unprecedented challenges we worked each new problem until we found the right solutions.

Here's just a few examples.

Our balanced budget

When everything shut down in March we faced staggering 35% unemployment and economic stagnation, and with it the collapse of our revenue.

Confronted with this catastrophe, by June we had already estimated up to a \$38 million crisis.

Everyone pitched in to stabilize our budget; everyone made sacrifices.

City employees made personal sacrifices to help the City's finances and minimize layoffs.

The City Leadership team, City Council and I all took pay cuts.

We implemented a hiring freeze, laid off seasonal and temporary employees, and with some help from the state and federal government we put together a sound budget for this year.

I am so proud of this whole team effort.

We've weathered the initial budget storm, and last month's America Rescue Plan will bring over \$60 million in desperately needed funds to begin building a resilient recovery.

Our small business assistance.

Our local small businesses faced unprecedented challenges and many were unable to secure federal or state assistance.

Through DEDA and the 1200 Fund we mobilized and redirected critical resources to meet this need.

DEDA provided \$400,000 in small business support and the 1200 Fund supported 137 local businesses with direct grants. We particularly focused on supporting women and BIPOC-owned businesses.

We supported our local employers and workers in other ways as well – for example, our commitment to increase availability of affordable childcare. Last year, the 1200 Fund supported opening two new childcare centers with 45 spots.

The path to recovery has only started for many local small businesses. Know that we have your back in the months ahead.

Our worker assistance.

With the emergency shut-down, thousands of Duluth workers lost their jobs, literally overnight.

Hundreds of calls began to pour into our CareerForce Center. And as other Duluth city offices closed, they stayed open to handle the emergency.

Staff juggled phones while trying to figure out how to protect their own health and assist and comfort a stream of shocked and fearful people who needed help.

They connected people to food banks and helped fill out unemployment applications and overcome barriers to employment.

One of the biggest barriers was Duluth's digital divide. Workers and students who didn't own and who struggled to use a computer were now expected to do everything online.

To meet this need, CareerForce reached out with LISC to local foundations and other community allies to create the Duluth Digital Inclusion Initiative.

Since May they've raised over \$1 million, distributed 6800 computers, created 1000 wi-fi hotspots.

I'll be talking more about this digital divide later in the speech.

Our Parks and Rec response.

Last April people needed an outlet – something – anything to do.

Indoor spaces were closed, most of the City's trails were unusable, and stir-crazy Duluthians overwhelmed the Lakewalk.

Parks and Rec got to work and opened 10 miles of seasonally closed roads and paved trails for walkers, joggers, and bikers. This initiative was nationally recognized.

Staff also developed self-guided family activities like the Egg Hunt and Joke Trail and delivered virtual tours of the City's parks.

This winter they provided free loaner sleds at multiple sites so sledding was available to everyone.

And they launched the Snow Stompers where volunteers committed to stomping 10 miles of trails after each significant snowfall.

When others were staying home to stay well, our staff was hard at work to make sure you could safely get outside.

Finally, our Police Department.

I want to take a bit more time here.

Like other first responders who risked their lives for the rest of us, our police officers couldn't stay home.

People were scared this last year, and pandemic tensions and social isolation made public safety work more important than ever.

Our officers did their job well.

Policing is always a challenging job, but it took an even higher emotional toll in this most challenging of years.

One day Duluth officers were visiting local kids' birthday parties and flashing their lights and sirens in celebration.

Then George Floyd died while in Minneapolis police custody, and as Chief Tusken has said, "in a day we went from 'heroes to zeroes.'"

Like the rest of us, Duluth's officers were shocked and angry.

And for millions of people, the pent-up frustration and rage from decades of racist and unaccountable policing erupted in mass uprisings across the country, including here in Duluth.

That's real, and raw. It's hard.

But our responsibility is not to become hardened.

I want to share one story of resilience and hope. It points to how we can all choose to build a better future.

A few days after George Floyd's death, a thousand peaceful demonstrators gathered in Duluth to call for justice.

Tensions ran high.

Here in Duluth, Sgt. Tony Radloff faced a line of protestors who challenged him and his fellow officers to read aloud the names of those killed by police –Breonna Taylor, Philando Castille, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and the list goes on.

Similar scenes were playing out across the country- with examples of provocateurs inciting violence, looting and fires.

We didn't see that here in Duluth.

It wasn't because we're that much different, or particularly better people.

It could have happened here. But it didn't because we intentionally chose a different path.

Sgt. Radloff took the list and read the names to the crowd. His training and experience told him to do this, but also because it was the right, decent, and human thing to do. To say aloud those who have died. To acknowledge the pain and suffering.

By demanding the names be read aloud. By challenging our systems to be better – community showed us all the raw power of showing up with courageous vulnerability.

By reading those names. By living up to the challenge, Sgt Radloff took a step toward healing our community. A step toward building trust and resilience.

Truth and reconciliation. Trauma and healing. While there's more to do, we start the healing by telling the truth and naming the trauma.

That's how we move forward.

So, let's look forward.

We're all desperate for a return to "normalcy" – I get it.

And we're so close.

With vaccines coming we can see something better over the edge – we need to hang on just a little longer.

Please continue wearing your masks and keeping safe to get us to the end of this.

But going back to where we were at a year ago isn't good enough.

We need to define what a new "normal" will be.

What a resilient and equitable recovery will look like.

I laid out a vision for Duluth in my first year in office.

I promised to build a more inclusive, collaborative, fair and sustainable city for all neighbors, across all neighborhoods.

This core vision still guides me.

It will be our North Star pointing our path to recovery.

We will build upon 3 core principles – equity, sustainability, and community.

Let's look at each.

First, Equity

Fairness and justice have been our bedrock in everything we've done.

Our comprehensive plan, elevation of the Human Rights Office, staff training and the creation of an Equity Action Team ensure our commitment to equity across every department.

Our new City Attorney, Rebecca St. George, is now collecting race data for the first time on all criminal cases referred to her office. We will use this data to analyze our response for implicit or systemic racism.

These are efforts we've already done. Now we need to build on and accelerate them.

Here's two examples of where we're headed.

Community Policing 2.0

The first is reimagining our police department, what I'm calling Community Policing 2.0.

For 20 years we've been a national leader in community policing. Every day is community policing day in Duluth.

When the state passed police reforms in the wake of George Floyd, Duluth had already been doing all of them for years.

Our department pioneered embedding civilian mental health workers.

It's won national recognition and awards for work with Mending the Sacred Hoop, where the police invite community members to review police reports and policies and help revise them to make them work better for the community.

Recently, the Duluth NAACP held a press conference highlighting police statistics and demanding more from us. They are absolutely right.

We are statewide, regional AND national leaders. We have phenomenal staff. AND we're still not yet where we need to be.

Our goal is simply to be the best, most community oriented, most effective, most respected and most trusted public safety department in the state.

This will be hard work.

It will require difficult and direct conversations and speaking truth of pain and hope from all sides.

It will take us years to build and earn the trust that is required.

It will be worth it.

As a starting point, I've directed our police department to engage with our community in a top to bottom Racial Bias Audit to identify problems and areas we need to address in our approach to policing.

Secondly, we just added a third Deputy Chief whose sole focus will be on advancing the department to be more effective and responsive to the community. Especially WITH our communities of color.

Finally, this includes taking on a multi-year CALEA accreditation process. CALEA stands for the Commission on Accreditation of Law Enforcement Agencies. It is the platinum standard for best practice policing rooted in community trust.

Auditors come in and examine every part of the department to determine where improvements can be made.

Our goal is for Duluth to be the first city in the state to earn this accreditation.

The Marten Trail

My second story is the Waabizheshikana (wah-ba-zhay-she-kuh-nuh) or The Marten Trail.

Formally known as the Western Waterfront Trail, the Marten Trail will follow the St. Louis River from the Irving neighborhood to Fond du Lac.

Along the path, interpretative placards, story poles, artwork, pause points and overlooks will share the stories of the diverse people of the region and lessons the river can teach us.

This trail embodies the type of equitable development and storytelling narrative that will become our standard – a model for other City projects combining recreation, community building, economic development, and an honest telling of history.

Sustainability

The second principle guiding our recovery will be sustainability.

In my first State of the City address I spoke of Duluth as a green city on a great lake, with clear streams and fresh air, with parks and trails accessible to everyone and powered by clean, renewable energy.

My goal remains making Duluth the greenest city in the country.

We're building the scaffolding to get there.

Four years ago, we pledged to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions to meet the climate crisis.

Three years ago, we created the Energy Plan Commission to guide our energy reduction efforts. We pledged to convert our coal-powered Steam Plant to reduce pollution and reduce waste.

Two years ago, we announced an Office of Sustainability.

Last year we hired the city's first Sustainability Officer, Mindy Granley.

This year a City Sustainability Action Team began to set standards and drive sustainability efforts across city departments.

And we're seeing results.

- Nearly 20% reduction of City emissions since 2017 – across all sectors but transportation.
- Duluth's Steam Plant is burning less coal than ever, and we're committed to eliminating it altogether.
- Converting the plant from steam to closed-loop hot water has already reduced energy waste by half, saved 20 million gallons of water and a 25% reduction in consumer energy consumption.

Sustainability is essential for our health, but it makes good economic sense as well.

Moving forward, sustainability will be a measure for all our decisions.

There's no shortage of good ideas to pursue.

Let me quickly highlight a few.

Renewable energy

We can and must produce more local, renewable energy.

We will pursue and support smaller projects like the new Eco 3 community owned solar garden in Lincoln Park, and larger projects like the Riley Road solar array, a partnership with Minnesota Power which promises electricity for 200 homes.

But it's time to scale up our ambition.

We have large blocks of city land, old industrial sites, brownfields, and other locations. We need to do what we can, where we can, to find sites suitable for expanding Duluth's renewable energy production.

My goal, and I'm confident we'll achieve it, is for Duluth to have a large-scale solar array in the next three years.

This is a City-wide effort.

As the City government we can only do so much. We make up about 4 percent of the overall problem we face.

So, I'm calling on the community to join us.

There are already efforts underway, like the business-led Keep Duluth Clean and the resident-led Citizen's Climate Action Plan.

I'm asking our Sustainability Officer Mindy Granley, to pull together a new city-wide Sustainable Duluth Task Force, comprised of businesses, unions, citizen groups, energy companies along with the county and schools.

Their task will be to take a comprehensive look at the sustainability challenges facing our community, and map out actions that we can work on together to make a sustainable and economically vibrant Duluth.

Community

Building a caring and connected community will be the third principle guiding our recovery.

Let's start with affordable housing.

Having a safe place to call home is a basic human right, yet too many people in Duluth have no home or precariously rely on friends and family.

Too many worry they'll never realize their dream of having a home of their own.

The pandemic has only made the problem worse.

Three years ago, we made affordable housing a top City priority.

Two years ago, we created a dedicated housing team in our planning department and launched Rebuild Duluth.

Our persistent efforts are starting to pay off.

Last year Duluth saw 600 new housing units completed or under construction – 129 of them are affordable. 150 of them are mixed housing in the downtown.

Rebuild Duluth has approved 14 in-fill sites for up to 32 new affordable housing units.

Redeveloping blighted downtown areas continues to be a top priority.

And with changed work patterns it's likely many people will continue working from home creating excess downtown office space.

The Greater Downtown Council, together with the City, just launched a survey of downtown businesses to understand when people are coming back and how they are coming back, and we will continue to work closely with them through this transition.

We're making progress, but we have a long way to go.

And there is more we can do.

Housing Trust Fund

Two years ago, we convened the Mayor's Housing Task Force. Last year they recommended creating a dedicated fund targeting affordable housing.

Tonight, I'm announcing the City will commit \$2 million to create the Duluth Housing Trust Fund to create affordable housing.

It will help rehab or renovate dilapidated units to make them livable, develop infill sites, and support accessory dwellings on existing properties – what's sometimes called the parents-in-law apartment.

Two million is a good start but it will not be enough,

So we've been working with LISC, local foundations, HRA, the state and other partners to grow this fund. Our initial goal will be \$4 million dollars, and we intend to grow that even bigger.

Affordable housing removes a critical barrier to an equitable and thriving community.

The past year laid bare two more barriers– the ability to easily connect to the internet and to city resources.

First, the internet.

Reliable high-speed internet is no longer a luxury. It's an essential utility no less important to our future success than our roads, water pipes, and electricity.

We depend on internet access to find basic information, order prescription drugs, sign up for a vaccine, or receive official emergency alerts.

This past year we needed the internet to work from home or go to school. Yet a lot of you still have limited reliable and affordable service.

Right now, Spectrum is the only broadband provider in Duluth. They know it and your bills show it. Spectrum even raised prices in a pandemic – and this community, held hostage, had no choice but to pay or go without access.

This is unacceptable. Personally, I feel it's immoral.

Tonight I'm calling on Spectrum to work with us to provide equitable access, to lower costs and to improve reliability.

But we also need more competition in the market.

Our Planning and Economic Development team has taken on city-wide broadband as a top priority of my term and have built an internal team to advance broadband for all.

And that's still not enough. The city needs to act. Now.

I'm proposing one million dollars of Duluth's stimulus package go to incentivize new service providers to enter the market.

We will continue to push and pull at every single way the City can ensure that all Duluthians have access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet.

311

Covid also made clear the urgent need for accessible and responsive government.

Our staff went above and beyond the call to keep residents informed and connect resources with those who needed them.

But navigating the system is also bewildering to many people.

We need to do better. We can do better.

I've asked Chief Administrative Officer Noah Schuchman to lead a City effort to create a 3-1-1 division.

3-1-1 is a one call contact for all non-emergency City information and service requests.

Have a complaint to make. Call 311. See a streetlight out in the neighborhood, call 311. Don't know whether you need a building permit for that shed. Call 311. Want to pass on a thank you for a considerate snowplow driver. You got it. Call 311.

We intend to roll this out in two phases. Phase 1 we've already started – developing a phone app where you submit complaints that will go automatically to the appropriate staff person.

We want to launch Phase 2 next year with an actual live 3-1-1 call line.

Our goal is to make interacting with the city and city services as seamless and accessible as possible.

Those are a few goals on our path to a resilient and equitable recovery.

Last month we learned we will receive \$60.5 million from the America Rescue Plan. Over the coming year we will prioritize how we will use this money.

Our core principles of equity, sustainability, and community will guide our path.

None of this will be easy.

Last year tested us, and I hope we'll never go through anything like it again.

But I'm also confident as we emerge from this dark year, there is a brighter path forward.

I want to end with one more story.

It starts with soil collected from the Duluth lynching site and Bryan Stevenson. You may know him from his book and the movie "Just Mercy."

In either case, Mr. Stevenson and his Equal Justice Institute used the soil to create a sculpture etched with the names of those murdered by white supremacy – Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie.

This sculpture now hangs in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery Alabama.

In January, a group of us from MN contacted Mr. Stevenson to gauge interest in gifting us a copy of the memorial sculpture.

On the call various representatives from around Minnesota described how it would be displayed and used for education and remembrance.

Mr. Stevenson listened.

I was the last speaker on the call, and I paused before saying, "I know what you're asking even though you haven't said it. The sculpture isn't so much a gift as a responsibility to heal, to change."

You see, change isn't promising this tragedy will never happen again – it's about doing the work to make it impossible to repeat.

You can't skip over the mud and still get a lotus.

I ended by telling him: "We're ready. We're ready for this work."

We've lost a lot this last year. We've grieved and are still grieving.

But we are also strong.

We've hurt and it's our responsibility to reach toward one another and become better.

No mud, no Lotus.

And it's our next task to do the work needed to ensure our recovery is better than what came before.

We can create a "better normal"

A fairer normal

A more just normal

more equitable, sustainable, and connected than ever before.

For this – we are ready.

We are ready for this work.