

2017 State of the City Address: final version, as spoken

“Lead by Being”

Emily Larson, Duluth Mayor

20 March 2017

We live in loud times.

Look at the headlines,

the tweets

nightly news shows

Facebook posts.

The fear, anger and frustration is real.

The stakes are high.

Our political debates have become more polarized –

where it is more important to be loud, than to listen.

Right, rather than in relationship.

Lash out, rather than learn.

Brash, rather than bold.

This past year, I've learned – over and over – you can't calm the waters by thrashing around.

So I want to begin tonight by reflecting on the quiet,
meaningful ways the city is working and making progress.

Successes that matter.

Each day I hear incredible stories about the ways our team of committed public employees help make Duluth safer and stronger.

The extra steps they take to make each resident feel a bit more listened to, cared for, or respected.

They do this without headlines, or any expectation of recognition or reward.

- The Duluth police officer, who made time to sit down and talk with a young Boy Scout, after he was randomly approached by a mother in the skywalk asking if he could help her son earn his Law Badge.
- The workers in Park Maintenance who patiently answered countless calls from agitated residents asking for debris pick-up after the storm last summer – one worker pitched in and took 14 calls every half hour on that last day of pick-up, answering each calmly and courteously.
- The two city workers who quietly go to Enger Tower, sometimes trudging through snow, often after hours, to hook up their laptops and manually change the lighting schedule to mark special occasions – like the night the tower went purple to honor Prince.
- The Public Works and Planning Department employees who worked feverishly with community partners and Comfort Systems one Friday afternoon this winter to make sure a resident with five children didn't lose her heat and electricity because she wasn't able to pay her bills.

I could go on.

There are many more stories,

and they won't often make the news, but they speak volumes to the quiet and steady ways city employees make Duluth better every day.

Thank you to our City of Duluth family for making a daily difference in people's lives.

Now I wouldn't describe my last year as a particularly "quiet" year, but it was a year focused on building foundations rather than making splashy headlines.

Without getting the fundamentals right, what we build won't last.

So I'm a bit geeky proud of what we have accomplished.

We've put together a top-notch administrative team with Police Chief Mike Tusken,

Fire Chief Denny Edwards,

and Human Rights Officer Carl Crawford.

Six shootings in four weeks this winter shook our community.

Mike, and his team of officers, responded quickly, professionally, and compassionately.

They've made 10 arrests for these shootings and are aggressively pursuing leads to bring each incident to conclusion.

Denny and his crew of firefighters have responded courageously to public safety events across the city, and are building relationships with other departments and regional agencies, bringing a spirit of cooperation to providing emergency response and public safety.

Carl has thrown himself into the work of making sure every resident of Duluth is valued and heard.

He's attended dozens of events, and has had literally hundreds of conversations.

Quiet conversations, which often begin with one simple question: "What can we do together to make things better?"

And last year, six Duluth City Hall staff attended a year-long program to find ways to make our City government a fairer, more inclusive place to work.

They're now beginning to implement an ambitious plan to reshape City hiring practices across departments,

providing additional training for city employees to confront implicit bias around race and gender

and creating career pathways to make our city workforce more diverse.

The past year was busy in other important ways.

- We've put the Casino dispute with our Fond du Lac neighbors behind us, and are forging a deeper relationship.
- We've found new ways to partner with St. Louis County.
- Maurice's is finished, filled and humming. And although it partially blocks my view, I'm thankful every day for their commitment to invest in the future of our city.
- The City's investment in redevelopment and local business expansion **is** paying off – 460 new apartments and homes built last year
- The \$10 million Cirrus expansion is done.
- By even a conservative account we've got over 30 new businesses which have opened this past year
- Construction is on track at the NorShor and we're preparing for the Superior Street reconstruction.

- Working with the City Council we addressed community concerns over our fee based streets system and passed a budget that changes the way we fund this core city service. It's not enough to fix our failing streets, but it's a solid base we intend to build on. Later this year when I present the next budget you'll hear in greater detail about a plan for streets.
- And based on community feedback from the western part of town, we've significantly increased our investment in parks and playgrounds where families can take their children to play.

There's more.

But Duluth,

Let me just say:

We're on the front foot,

moving forward!

So last year during the State of the City I announced Imagine Duluth 2035 – our comprehensive planning process.

Yes, I know, planning. She's going to talk about planning again.

Yup, you can roll your eyes.

But I also want to say, I couldn't be prouder of how this foundation building, planning process has engaged the community.

We promised we would do it differently.

That the community would be involved.

Wow! Did you respond!

To date we've held 125 meetings and received well over 5000 surveys.

FIVE THOUSAND surveys

And yet we still got feedback that we'd missed some important people.

Businesses reached out saying they felt they hadn't been contacted.

Other community groups of people asked to be included.

I want to pause to let this sink in.

We're talking about people reaching out asking to be a part of planning the future of this community.

So we responded.

We went to those we had missed.

And when we got it wrong we listened and kept working until we got it right.

One story in particular shows what has been different about this process.

We presented our survey to people at Community Action and Health in All Policies. They challenged us, saying the survey didn't make sense to some residents.

The questions didn't feel relevant.

So they helped rewrite them to make them more relevant.

But that isn't the end.

This group, many of them facing hardships of their own, took the survey and went door-to-door talking with their neighbors in Lincoln Park and other neighborhoods.

They collected over 600 additional surveys!

They weren't paid to do this.

They cared.

They understood all voices matter,

and more voices need to be included and heard
if we are to have a plan that is relevant to all neighbors across all neighborhoods.

This story – of not just complaining but pitching in to help make us better -
captures what makes Duluth different,
and this spirit
is what we must vitally hold onto in these unsettling times, now more than ever.

We don't know what we don't know until we are told.

Luckily (I think) you tell us.

That's Duluth.

Our history in one of involvement.

We can disagree – sometimes fiercely –
we fight passionately for what we believe in.

But in the end,

we also recognize

we're all in this together.

And that we, as one community, will rise or fall together.

So people continue to write me letters – for which I'm deeply grateful.

Sometimes they raise a concern,
sometimes they simply say ‘thank you.’
But more often they share a story or a thought.

Several weeks ago, a woman sent me a piece entitled “We were made for these times.”

One quote in particular struck me.

She wrote:

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.”

I started tonight by saying we live in loud and troubling times.

Lots of us are angry,
frustrated,
and frightened.

Sometimes it’s hard to know where to start
when the troubles seem so many and the problems so big.

But this woman’s letter reminds us that our task is not to fix the entire world all at once, but to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.

Duluth is still small enough to make a difference and big enough to matter.

We'll always have issues and ideas that divide us.

That won't ever go away.

But right now,

I want to call us back to each other.

To one community,

joined together,

pitching in,

leading...

making our part of the world better,

and through our example, moving others to reach out and act.

So in that spirit,

my vision for the City is to lead on three major priorities this year.

Three priorities which I believe we have in common,

and give us a shared purpose:

- 1 – take hold of the opioid addiction and overdose epidemic
- 2 – address our continued housing shortage, and
- 3 – build our energy and economic future

These are BIG priorities –

bigger than one Mayor,
one term,
or even one city can solve alone.
My commitment is that we will start leading in each of these areas,
and together with you,
begin to mend this part of the world within our reach.

So let's start with addressing the opioid epidemic.

In the 1980s Duluth pioneered a new response to domestic violence, which is now the most practiced model of domestic violence intervention in the country.

There are lessons we can draw from this experience to battle a different kind of violence – that of opioid drug addiction.

The use of opioid painkillers and heroin has reached a feverish pitch.

More people die from opioids than from car crashes and gun homicides.

This addiction destroys lives,
disrupts families,
drives up crime,
and tears apart our community.

Duluth and the surrounding area is not immune to these ravages.

Heroin and opioid drug overdose deaths have more than doubled in the past few years.

St. Louis County has the highest per capita rate of opioid related drug overdose of any county in the state – higher even than Hennepin and Ramsey counties.

Over the past few years, police have done their part – targeting dealers and those who prey on addicts.

- Heroin related drug arrests have increased 2 ½ times.
- More dealers are being charged and sent to jail.
- More drugs are being confiscated – in the past year we’ve doubled our drug confiscations

Likewise, local healthcare systems are collaborating to decrease the number of prescriptions and the quantity of opioids provided by doctors, as well as developing shared emergency room policies that help curb “doctor shopping” for painkillers.

These efforts are key parts of the solution,

but cutting off an addict’s supply or arresting their dealer is not enough to solve the problem.

Opioid drug abuse is an addiction.

A health problem as much as a public safety problem.

And until the cycle of addiction is disrupted it will continue to get worse.

For domestic violence, Duluth advocates, law enforcement, and health care professionals came together to disrupt the cycle of abuse –

they got survivors away from their abuser and provided support and safe places to recover.

For drug overdoses, these supportive, safe places for recovery do not exist, unless you can wait for weeks to get treatment.

When emergency responders are called to deal with a life-threatening overdose they administer Narcan – save the person’s life – and take them to a local emergency room.

There the patient is monitored,
and once out of danger, sent home,
where the cycle of addiction usually just picks up again.

Even if a patient is ready to seek treatment,
the tools and resources needed to break the cycle do not currently exist.

So,

our commitment as a City

is to work with St Louis County, the Center for Alcohol and Drug Treatment, 6th Judicial Court, local hospitals and other partners to create an Opioid Withdrawal Unit,

a safe place for those who overdose and want help to go, medically withdraw and be connected seamlessly to other support and resources.

This safe place and support system is the first step in disrupting the cycle of addiction.

In the meantime, we must also ensure people do not fall through the cracks.

Currently the Duluth Police Department has a St. Louis County social worker embedded in the force,
an innovative and award winning approach to community policing that recognizes the economic and social forces that also impact public safety.
We'll work with Chief Tusken and his department to figure out ways they might help provide gap support for those in transition from emergency room to longer term resources.

Finally, in partnership with Opioid Abuse Response Strategies (OARS),
we will help sponsor a summit connecting experts, advocates, educators and policy makers to identify and align around needed systems, education and policy changes.

These conversations have already started – but now is the time to bring it all together.

We make this commitment today to those suffering the abuse of opioid drug addiction – and your loved ones, and your families:

we see you,
hear you,
and will not leave you behind.

Our second priority is housing.

Finding safe, decent, affordable housing continues to be a challenge for people in our community.

This lack of preferred and affordable housing is disrupting families, hurting children and destabilizing neighborhoods.

It's also a barrier for recruiting businesses and creating good jobs.

In 2014, a study coming out of the Duluth Housing Summit identified the need for 4,500 new housing units by 2020 – a mix of market rate with moderate and low income housing.

Half way to 2020,

we're now confident we'll meet our market rate housing targets.

From Lakeside to Smithville, you've seen new housing developments emerge.

And private investment is picking up, as Duluth increasingly becomes known as a vibrant, growing and thriving community.

We'll continue to encourage and find ways to partner with those who want to build market rate housing here in Duluth.

But for the rest of my term, we'll put more focus and resources into addressing the housing gap for Duluth households earning less than \$50,000 a year – that's literally one half of Duluth.

These are families that are working one, two or more jobs.

Young professionals that are burdened with debt.

Seniors who want to stay in their own neighborhoods, but need housing options to be able to do so.

Without our full attention to affordability, we will fall significantly short in meeting the housing needs of these moderate and lower income working families, seniors and young professionals.

Over the past year, the City has been assessing and shaping our housing priorities.

As federal and state monies for affordable housing continue to shrink, Duluth needs to become more and more innovative in coming up with homegrown solutions.

We need to think differently.

The City can lead, but we will need to do this together as a whole community.

In the remaining three years of my term we will pursue the following housing priorities:

- We'll focus on housing options affordable for those earning under \$50,000 a year
- We'll create a \$1 – \$2 million housing fund as a three-year pilot project to help cover cost gaps in new housing and for renovation and redevelopment projects.
 - This new housing fund will target affordable, owner occupied housing.
 - We'll focus on using tax forfeit parcels and renovate current condemned properties.
 - And whenever possible concentrate renovation and redevelopment in designated blocks, in targeted neighborhoods to stimulate additional investment and maximize a ripple effect
- With our business, labor and community partners, we'll encourage projects that include workforce development and help create career paths in the trades for low income and underemployed residents
- We'll work with HRA to help move Harbor Highlands to completion, along with other targeted affordable housing projects.
- And finally, we'll be calling on businesses to sit down and explore innovative ways to support the development of housing that is affordable for their growing workforce.

These steps will not solve our housing shortage completely, but they are critical steps we can take now, to start moving forward.

Our third priority is building our energy and economic future.

As a community, we face growing problems associated with polluting energy sources like coal.

- Every year the City's heating and electricity costs increase faster than growth and inflation – and the forecast is they'll only become pricier as coal, gas and oil become more expensive.
- One in ten newborns on the North Shore have unhealthy levels of mercury, according to a recent study from the MN Dept of Health. And coal fired power plants are the largest single contributor to mercury in our air, water, and fish.
- Catastrophic flooding, all-time warm winters, and the other climate bizarreness that populate our daily conversations threaten our jobs, economy, forests, and tourism. They tear at our streets and infrastructure.

Yet despite these indisputable impacts,

the current talk in Washington DC puts the United States as the only industrialized country in the world that still denies the scientific consensus and fact of climate change.

Let me state unequivocally,

here in Duluth,

we believe that climate change is real.

We can't solve it alone,
But we can begin mending the part of the world that we can reach.

The City of Duluth is in the energy business.

We're one of the largest consumers of energy in the region, and own two utilities –

Duluth Energy Systems – the coal fired steam plant, which provides heat to most of downtown Duluth and Canal Park – and

Comfort Systems – which provides most residents their water and gas.

The City must boldly lead the transition to clean energy.

Science tells us that to avoid the worst impacts of climate change we need to reduce polluting greenhouse gas emissions 80% by 2050.

Tonight, I'm putting the City on the side of science, and challenging us to meet this goal of 80% reduction by 2050.

I'm setting a goal of 15% reduction in municipal emissions for my first term.

It's ambitious – but our times require it.

And we can do it.

It will require a new mindset, coordination across all city departments,
and collaboration with local energy providers and strong community partners.

We'll rely on three strategies:

- Conservation
- Transitioning to renewable energy
- Reducing emissions from our utilities.

Our first strategy is conservation.

Any energy savings plan needs to start with using less energy.

Here we've already begun the transition to high efficiency LED lights in our parks, streets, and parking ramps.

They will provide better light and use far less electricity.

90% of the City's municipal buildings and building systems are at or nearing the end of their life cycle.

When we replace or renovate them we need to build in the principle of energy efficiency. And we will.

These are just a few ways we can save money and resources by simply wasting less.

Our second strategy is transitioning to renewables.

One of the fastest growing job sectors in the state is in clean energy, like solar and wind.

The Duluth area alone has 1600 clean energy jobs and growing.

One of our economic advantages lies in this growing energy economy.

Transitioning to renewable energy over the next 30 years just makes great economic sense.

Investing in renewable energy creates new markets, new job opportunities, and, if done right, helps democratize renewable energy to make it affordable and available to all Duluth residents.

Community Solar Gardens present one important opportunity for City investment here in Duluth.

These “gardens” allow anyone who has an electric bill to go solar.

They make solar affordable for renters and lower income residents or anyone who can’t afford an expensive solar array.

Minnesota Power, our local energy partner, is currently building out a Community Solar garden.

And the City is intending to invest in it

to purchase reliable, renewable energy at a lower cost,

and at the same time encourage future solar development and economic expansion.

We’re also looking at other partnerships with local businesses.

One recent example is with Enbridge, Minnesota Power and Hunt Electric on a solar powered electric car charging station in Canal Park.

When completed, the City will own the charging station and any extra solar electricity generated will offset the electricity used to light the Lakewalk.

We need to work with the community and grow these types of partnerships.

Working together – with our local energy and utility partners- will be critical in meeting this goal.

Our third strategy is reducing emissions from our utilities.

Downtown businesses have received reliable, cost-effective heat from Duluth's publicly owned plant since 1932.

But energy concerns in 1932 are different than today, and the steam plant suffers the inefficiencies of age and assumptions of a different era.

One immediate improvement will come if Duluth secures its bonding request to replace the steam pipes under Superior Street.

This investment will significantly increase the plant's efficiency, and lower its polluting emissions by using less coal.

Other options include substituting cleaner natural gas for coal whenever possible.

City government by itself will not solve the problem of climate change.

But we can do our part and lead.

And we can invite others in the community to partner with us
and help build a future that is good for Duluth jobs,
the health of our children
and the natural world.

In short,

the past year has been a good one.

It's also been a challenging one,
as we confront the realities of what we can accomplish
given how much we need to accomplish.

But we've been methodically laying the foundations
and building the trust we need to take on the big issues ahead of us.

Mayors and cities are on the front line of many of the biggest issues confronting
our country.

We see in very personal ways how they impact real people's lives – their jobs and
businesses.

Our resources may be limited,
But our commitment to this community, and each other, knows no bounds.

We have important work to do, and Duluth,
We are ready-made for this time!
We're being called to act!
I'm ready! And I know you are too.

Each of the priorities I've laid out starts here,
with us, right now.

Working together.

Locally. Staying connected.

And starting to mend this part of the world we can reach!