



City of Duluth  
Emily Larson, Mayor

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## STATE OF THE CITY – FORWARD TOGETHER

4.27.2016

Thank you.

Four months ago, I stood here promising an administration committed to fairness and opportunity for all neighbors, across all neighborhoods.

One that is inclusive, collaborative, and transparent.

And I promised to be back – to provide an update on our progress, and to lay out a vision and an agenda for tackling the challenges we face.

So here we are.

And I don't know about you, but I'm here to get started!

Some of you have heard my story of falling in love with Duluth as a five-year old during a family vacation.

Seen through the eyes of a child, the world is refreshingly clear and honest.

Hopeful, even magical –

Everything is possible.

So during my first week in office, I asked the children of Duluth to show me their vision for Duluth.

I wanted their words and pictures up on my office wall.

Hundreds sent in pictures and posters, some are behind me tonight.

Their hopes are simple, direct,

And profoundly challenging.

“My dream for Duluth is no one hurts” – says one.

“No more bad people” – says another.



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“No bullying.” “No more drugs.” “No more weapons.”

Others are more playful – “Give us fun!”

“Make food free.”

Or “An outdoor pool and splash pads!”

They are aspirational: “I have many gentle possibilities.”

And one simply declared: “Duluth is home.”

Then there was this young girl, Pearl, who of great faith, set the bar really high when she said:  
“Duluth is more better with you.”

Duluth is home.

It is what we make it.

And our challenge is to make Duluth ‘more better’ because of the work we do together.

We come to this challenge with strong foundations and gritty resilience.

There is a different mood in Duluth today. One many of us haven’t felt for a long time.

There’s a cautious optimism that after decades of hardship we’re on the mend, and on the front foot moving forward.

We’re seeing development, growth, revitalization, and investment.

There are more jobs. Unemployment is lower than it’s been in ten years.

There’s a lot of good that’s happening.

And in the last 100 days we’ve been off to a fast start making sure the momentum continues.



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We've freed up an additional \$800,000 for streets.

We're partnering with the County on several key projects, including the Kozy. Developing this blighted property is a key element for revitalizing this part of downtown.

The NorShor is finally at lift-off.

We continue supporting a vibrant business district in Lincoln Park and the Western Waterfront Corridor.

And with literally millions of dollars on the line, we've partnered with our local legislators to secure our bonding priorities – transitioning the Steam Plant to cleaner energy and revitalizing the Zoo.

It's also been a busy few months building out our leadership team.

We just announced finalists for Chief of Police and the new Fire Chief.

It's been a robust and transparent process, and I want to thank the hundreds of community members and staff who participated and provided input.

I'm not aware of another time when the Duluth community and City staff have been asked to engage in this way.

We're also about to hire a new Human Rights Officer, a position I elevated to report directly to me.

This person will be part of my core administrative team and help drive our work addressing systemic barriers to opportunity, and ensuring equal opportunity for all.

A lot of our time has been spent asking questions and listening – building relationships and trust.

We're surveying frontline city workers to learn what they need to succeed, and how we can work better, together.

We took City Hall out of City Hall and put it where it belongs – in the City.



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We started holding open neighborhood forums across the city hosted with a city councilor.

I've initiated listening sessions with small groups of people from communities and circumstances too often marginalized, or overlooked in our policy debates and decisions.

Folks who would never likely have the ear of the Mayor.

Their stories of resilience, determination, fear and hope animate my work.

Finally, my staff and I have reached out to dozens and dozens of individual community leaders, non-profit organizations, and businesses to ask for their ideas, their criticisms, and their needs.

What we've heard is hopefulness, and a reaffirmation that the city is moving forward.

There's genuine excitement and energy.

But it's not without caution.

We've also heard from too many people who are hurting.

People left out. Or overlooked.

There are deep divisions that still need healing.

And it's clear that we'll only move forward as a city, when we move forward together.

This will be my focus!

I'll start with a story – Duluth's Point of Rocks.

It's that rock cliff that towers over you as you come down Mesaba and wrap past the M&H gas station on Michigan.

The Point of Rocks has historically been both a physical and symbolic divide in this city.

In the early days, it presented an imposing physical barrier, which made it difficult to trek between East and West.



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As the city grew, this rock cliff separated the industries and working class neighborhoods of the West, from the downtown commercial district, middle-class streetcar suburbs, and London Road mansions of the East.

Over the years, newspaper editorials regularly talked about this divide.

There were repeated calls to blow the rock up –  
to widen the road and profit off the crushed rock,  
but also to symbolically bring the city together.

Duluth still remains divided in significant ways.

- A person living in Congdon Park can expect to live 11 years longer than a person living in Lincoln Park.
- Unemployment is around 5% -- but if you're African American or Native it's more like 20%.
- One in every five Duluth residents lives in poverty.

I could go on with shocking statistics. Over 600 Duluth residents are without homes on any given night.

Thousands more struggle with uncertainty to pay the rent, or keep their homes.

We're making progress, to be sure.

But these persistent disparities thwart our progress.

Our right to a good and healthy life should not be determined by our zip code, or our income, education, race, gender or religion.

What divides Duluth now is racism, poverty, education and access to economic opportunity.

These divisions cannot be healed by blowing up a rock.

We must address them head on, full on, together.



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As one native elder reminded me, “we must name the trauma to heal, and we must heal to move forward.”

There’s a saying that if you don’t know where you’re going, every path will get you there.

But moving forward with purpose requires vision.

My vision is of a healthy – prosperous – sustainable – fair – and inclusive community ...

for all neighbors and across all neighborhoods.

I see diversified economic growth that benefits every neighborhood.

I see meaningful jobs with living wages. Jobs that support families. Jobs with pathways to careers.

I see everyone with a decent place to call home – in a safe neighborhood – anywhere in the city – free from the threat of violence, harassment, or displacement.

I see Duluth as a green city on a great lake,

with clear streams and fresh air,

and parks and trails accessible to everyone.

A future powered with clean, renewable energy.

I see people with affordable health care, including mental health and preventative care.

And people shopping for healthy, local food, regardless of where they live.

This vision didn’t come from the top floor of City Hall.

It came from your hard work, and the dreams you’ve shared with me.

But Pearl said it simpler–

our vision is a Duluth “more better” for everyone.



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I'm asking you to join me on this journey, and commit to making this vision real.

I'm calling our commitment "Forward Together."

Forward Together represents a different way of doing business –

where governing meets community leadership.

Where the City acts as a collaborator with community organizations.

Supports, lifts up and partners with local efforts.

Reaches out to include and help amplify seldom heard voices.

Forward Together means developing a shared agenda

Where we measure our collective success.

Where we will make the path by walking it together,

And where the City leads by walking its own talk.

What I call "Lead by Being."

We all know the City doesn't have unlimited money ...

our community's needs will always be greater than our wallet can deliver.

But the City is not without significant resources.

We are one of the area's biggest employers with 850 amazing, creative, committed employees.

We are one of the largest purchasers of goods and services.

It matters where we focus our attention.



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I think we can set the bar high for others in the community, by setting the bar even higher for ourselves.

That's what it means to Lead by Being.

I've started this process with my Directors – identifying four simple questions that challenge us to stay true to our commitment and core values. They are:

- Who did you talk with – and how and when did you engage with them?
- Who is not at the table who should be?
- How does this tip the balance toward justice – toward more fairness and opportunity, and less disparity?
- What might be the unintended negative consequences of our decision?

These questions will help focus our approach.

We also lead by being when our workforce reflects the experience and diversity of our community.

We have a lot of work to do –

Hiring and retaining talented employees of color and persons with disabilities.

And in the Police and Fire Departments, women.

Immediately after taking office, I formed an internal team of Directors and Managers and asked them to participate in a year-long program called the Government Alliance on Race and Equity, or GARE.

GARE is a national network of municipal governments working to achieve racial equity and advance opportunities for all.

This team will become internal champions, who can help drive our conversation and evaluate our cultural competency and practices.





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We have already taken some immediate first steps.

Our Human Resources Director Theresa Severance has started to review job descriptions to determine whether they have unnecessary qualifications that present barriers.

One quick example, and simple change was to eliminate the requirement for a driver's license for seasonal laborers.

Driving is not a job duty for these workers, and the license requirement excluded otherwise qualified people from even applying.

We'll continue this work by pulling together a cross-department task force to systematically examine our job requirements, and evaluate our hiring, promotion and retention practices through a fairness and inclusion lens.

To lead by being, we need to do better building relationships with promising potential employees.

Both the City and County have an aging workforce, and many will retire in the next 5-10 years.

Duluth has 22,000 students in our local colleges and universities – some 4,000 graduates in any given year.

Hundreds of them have fallen in love with Duluth, and would love to stay.

We would be a richer community if they could.

We're sitting on an incredible opportunity.

We need to tap it.

We need to build a Public Service Pipeline that partners with community organizations, our local colleges and universities, and creates pathways for talented young workers to find work serving the City of Duluth.

Diversified and inclusive hiring is one way we'll lead by being.

But we're looking at every angle.

For example, our Chief Financial Officer, Wayne Parson, just reviewed City purchasing to see how we can better leverage our purchasing power to generate local economic growth.



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The City of Duluth spends about \$35 million a year on goods and services. About 60 percent of those purchases come locally, and 88 percent within the state of Minnesota.

These are good numbers.

It'd be easy to give ourselves a pat on the back.

Instead, we're looking at how to do even better.

We intend to expand the number of local businesses in our purchasing pool, and make renewed efforts to ensure that local area businesses know about bid opportunities.

We'll lead an effort to identify local vendors (particularly minority and women-owned businesses) who want to be notified by the city about purchasing opportunities,

And then we'll mentor those businesses on how to navigate the City's contracting process.

We will lead by being,

But City Hall alone can't achieve our vision.

We don't have all the answers.

But there's "untapped brilliance" in this community.

People who have something to say.

Something to give.

And we need to create the space, relationships and trust to watch, learn and listen.

We need to engage the community, and be a reliable and trusted partner and collaborator.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and the rebuilding of New Orleans, a community organizer remarked: "Decisions made about us, without us, will fail us."

Decisions made about us – without us – will fail us.

This simple statement will guide our decision making.



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Our first big go at living this principle comes when we begin revising our Comprehensive Plan later this Spring.

Most people hear plans and their eyes glaze over and they start to tune out.

But stick with me on this.

Because community planning, done right, happens every 10 years or so.

It's a time when the community comes together to evaluate where we're at –

define where we want to go – and determine what we want to look like in the future.

It's a time when we set our collective priorities around land use – where should we develop, or what should we protect.

We set priorities for the type of housing we need, and where it's needed.

And how we connect people with jobs across neighborhoods.

Keith Hamre and our Planning Department have been hard at work developing a timeline and process that maximizes genuine community engagement.

Our current plan is guided by 12 governing principles.

We're adding two more:

- How does this increase fairness and opportunity across neighborhoods?
- What are the health impacts of our decisions?

Both go to the heart of our core values and vision.

Both will shape every aspect of the plan.

Another way we'll engage our community is through Duluth's 34 boards, commissions, and authorities.

These range from Planning to Parking – Housing to Human Rights.



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They provide a way for people to participate formally in providing advice and guidance on City decisions.

Working with the City Council, I want to empower and diversify these boards so they are more representative of our community and have the support, training and tangible tasks that will maximize their impact.

We've already started reviewing them to identify vacancies.

But we need to do more.

We need to build partnerships with community organizations, and dig deep into the richness of our community's expertise

Recruit those most impacted by our decisions to serve on the bodies helping shape those decisions.

Systematically remove barriers for participation,

And support new members with training and mentoring.

Through these efforts, and others, we will begin tapping our City's brilliance.

We're working on dozens of great initiatives with local businesses and community partners.

But in my last few minutes I want to focus on three of my priorities for the next year – jobs, housing, and sustainable energy.

Each of these will require collective effort and community commitment to move forward.

## **On Jobs**

Few things are more important than finding a good job and doing meaningful work.

I want to hone in on two aspects – job preparation and job quality.



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Workforce development makes it possible to connect people struggling to find jobs with good jobs.

Under the leadership of Paula Reed, Duluth's Workforce Center is all about partnerships and collaboration.

From working with employers to identify, develop and implement Career Pathways – to working with local stakeholders in the community to address employment disparities.

Our summer youth employment program – done in partnership with the Duluth Public Schools – provides an example.

Rather than waiting until school is done to provide pre-employment training, as we've done in the past, this year, starting last week, we're providing students training one day per week at school.

This allows more training and ensures students can start working as soon as summer break begins.

We need to double down and expand partnerships like these.

But we can also lead by being.

The City currently asks area employers to provide mentoring and work experience for Workforce Center job seekers,

but as a City we don't provide it ourselves.

I will be calling together a cross-departmental task force to identify what it will take to make Duluth a model employer for workforce development.

And then we'll implement it.

I will find additional flexible funding to support outreach and creative solutions to the barriers current funding doesn't cover.

Furthermore, I'll be asking the Duluth Workforce Board to convene a group of community stakeholders to identify gaps and key barriers to employment,



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And then make specific recommendations for what the City can do – working with others – to create a more effective, more streamlined system to get people working and move our community forward.

We need to continue preparing and connecting people to jobs,

But the jobs also need to be quality jobs that provide dignity and support workers and their families.

Too many jobs in Duluth and across the country do not meet this standard.

One critical gap is the ability to take paid time off when a worker is sick, or needs to care for a sick child or loved one.

I want to make this real for us.

And for many of you, I know, it already is.

So imagine for a moment.

You don't have any access to safe and sick time.

You work in food service or with the elderly as a nursing assistant, and you're running a high fever.

Without paid time off you need to choose between getting paid or going to work sick.

Your child is sick, or a parent is dying.

You need to calculate how long you can leave them home alone.

You're fleeing from an abusive relationship and need time to file protection orders, relocate or seek shelter.

You must choose between keeping your job or finding safety.



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Nearly half of all workers in Duluth face these decisions every time they or a loved one gets sick.

Maybe that's you

Certainly it's a neighbor.

Employers will continue to struggle to recruit and retain great employees as long as workers face these impossible choices.

And we will not have a healthy community –

or secure and decent jobs –

or work that respects our families –

until we no longer have this disparity.

We have to figure this out as a whole city.

The City of Duluth will lead by being.

All of our unionized employees already have the ability to take paid time off.

But I've asked our Human Resource Department to identify other employees who may qualify, and to develop a plan that ensures every qualified city employee has the ability to take paid safe and sick time.

In addition, for our two largest employee unions,

we've already extended using sick time for the birth and adoption of a child.

And paid time off for non-birthing parents.

This time is over and above any additional paid leave mandated by state or federal law.

It's a start.

And we want to continue by extending this benefit to all of our employees in the next round of contract negotiations.



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## On Housing

Duluth's history makes us unique and gives our city character.

It also presents us challenges.

We're an older city, and our housing stock is old, too.

We have a critical need for affordable housing.

And Duluth's growing industries - like aviation and health care – struggle to recruit workers because of the lack of market rate housing.

We've got to start addressing our housing needs head on –

holistically –

across the whole City.

There's lots of activity going on. And some really, really great housing projects.

But as a whole, our current efforts are scattered, not cohesive, and too often reactive and opportunistic, rather than strategic.

We have a good idea of how many homes and what type of homes we need.

Now we need to answer the key questions - where to build, what to build, and what new and creative ways we can find to pay for it.

I'll therefore be calling on community housing organizations, low and moderate income residents, key businesses, developers and the building trades to come together in partnership with the City and other public entities.

I'll ask them to develop a housing strategy that identifies key priorities, and lays out specific action steps for moving forward.





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## On Sustainable Energy

Duluth is a green city.

We're blessed with clean air and some of the best water in the world.

We've been a leader in the state on alternative energy and climate protection.

We need to build on this legacy.

We're also an old city with all those old ailments – creaky infrastructure, leaky buildings, and inefficient energy systems.

My priority will be to look for every way to cut energy waste and shift to cleaner, more efficient energy alternatives.

It's not just the environment driving me.

Duluth loses millions of dollars each year because of these inefficiencies.

A few weeks ago we led by being, and announced a half million dollars for energy efficiency upgrades for city buildings and property.

Simple things like LED lights for the parking ramp and the Lakewalk.

This initial investment saves \$100,000 a year in energy costs, money that will be reinvested into a dedicated energy fund for additional improvements.

It's a first step.

Now we'll develop a municipal energy and facilities plan that identifies additional opportunities to save money and do right by our planet, people and place.

Furthermore, I am restarting the Environmental Advisory Council.

Formed in 1996 to advise the city council and administration around environmental issues, it has become inactive.



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I will ask the EAC to partner with City staff to provide advice and recommendations as we seek to expand energy savings, move toward clean energy alternatives, and make our city more sustainable and resilient.

Duluth is blessed with a collaborative spirit.

We get stuff done when we work together.

And there are so many groups pulling together to make a difference.

Health in All Policies, the Healthy Duluth Initiative, At Home in Duluth, and the Affordable Housing Coalition.

The Duluth and St. Louis County Mental Health Initiative.

Voices for Racial Justice, the Cross-Cultural Alliance, and Vision Duluth.

The Building Trades, Central Labor Body, Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Council.

Each of these efforts makes our city stronger.

All of our issues are connected.

But no single organization or group will solve the disparities and big challenges we face.

So is there more to talk about?

You betcha!

Streets. Crime and Safety. Drugs.

That darn Blue Bridge.

And more.



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There's more to dig into.

And we will.

So consider this a beginning.

A way to start healing the divisions of geography, racism, poverty and lack of opportunity.

To name these truths, so we can begin healing and start moving forward.

So my challenge in the coming months will be to come together in partnership – the City and the community.

To explore how we can do more – better – together.

To commit to acting together.

So we can move forward together.

So that we can make the city Pearl grows up in “more better” for everyone, together!

Thank you!