



# STATE OF THE CITY WITH MAYOR GLENN F. ELLIOTT, JR.

JULY 25, 2023

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## SCHEDULE

*All times are approximate.*

**12:05 p.m.**

- Presentation of colors by Wheeling Police and Fire Honor Guard
- Invocation by Rabbi Joshua Lief, Temple Shalom
- Welcome by Vice Mayor Chad Thalman

**12:15 p.m.**

- Mayor Elliott's State of the City Address

**1 p.m.**

- Photos with honorees

Good afternoon. And welcome to the 14<sup>th</sup> annual State of the City Address in the City of Wheeling. This is my seventh and last opportunity to speak to you as Mayor at this event.

Let me start by thanking the City of Wheeling Police and Fire Honor Guard for presenting our national, state, and city flags.

And thank you to my good friend Rabbi Joshua Lief for leading today's invocation.

Thank you as well to my fellow members of Wheeling City Council: Vice Mayor Chad Thalman, and Councilors Ben Seidler, Rosemary Ketchum, Jerry Sklavounakis, Ty Thorngate, and Dave Palmer.

Thank you to City Manager Bob Herron, Assistant City Manager Bill Lanham, as well as the following department heads who keep our City running every day:

- City Clerk Jessica Zalenski
- Community Development Director Nancy Prager
- Building and Planning Director BJ Delbert
- Police Chief Shawn Schwertfeger
- Fire Chief Jim Blazier
- Parks and Recreations Director Rochelle Barry
- Information Technology Director Mike Lloyd
- Human Resources Director Kayla Graham
- City Solicitor Rose Humway-Warmuth

and all other City staff members who are here today, including Michele Rejonis, our Marketing and Community Relations Specialist.

And thank you to Kim Florence and the team here at the Casino for being such accommodating hosts for this event over the years.

And last but not least, thank you to my beautiful wife Cassandra for being willing to share me with my mistress—the City—for the past seven-plus years.

Before we get started, a quick word about why today's address will be my seventh and final during eight years in office. This event used to occur on the last Tuesday of February. In 2021, because of the pandemic, we pushed it back to July. And we decided to keep it here to ensure this event never takes place in election season. I think that is a better outcome for everyone—except perhaps the poor soul who ends up in this position next year and has less than a month to get ready for this. But as the only adult in the City who is not eligible to be in this position next year, I'm OK with that.

This being my last time giving this address, you will forgive me if I run over the 45 minutes typically budgeted for my remarks. That said, I can assure you that you will all get out of here with plenty of time to make it home for dinner.

As is tradition, I shall begin today not by looking at where we are, nor where we are headed, but rather how we got here in the first place. And by recognizing the acts of someone from decades prior who helped shape the Wheeling of today. We call this recognition the Gateway Award, and its first six recipients are as follows:

- Former Mayor Jack Lipphardt;
- Former City Councilman and Planning Commissioner Barry Crow;
- Former Mayor Nick Sparachane;

- Former Wheeling Heritage executive director Hydie Friend;
- Former City Manager and former Vice Mayor Mike Nau; and
- Former Mayor and former Ohio County Commissioner John “Jack” Fahey.

Today’s Gateway Award honoree is no longer with us. In fact, it has been more than three decades since his passing at the age of 68. But make no mistake: It is difficult to find anyone in the annals of local history whose life was more dedicated to the advancement of Wheeling than former newspaper editor Harry Hamm.

This is not the first, nor will it be the last recognition bestowed upon Mr. Hamm for his work in service of his beloved Wheeling. He was inducted into the Wheeling Hall of Fame for public service in 2000. And much has been written and said about him in the time since his passing. For my purposes today, I shall focus less on his biography and more on his actual words, of which there are so very, very many to choose from.

But for those unfamiliar with Mr. Hamm, he spent 50 years working for The Ogden Newspapers, primarily as an editor at the Wheeling News-Register. He served in the Army during World War II and received a Purple Heart for injuries suffered in combat. He and his wife Mary had twelve children, many of whom still live in the surrounding area, and some of whom are with us today. You can do the math on how many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and so on that means.

Though to my knowledge he was never elected to public office, he certainly spent the vast majority of his adult life thinking and writing about public policy. In the 1960s, he penned a series of ten articles in the News-Register framing how he saw “The Rebirth of Wheeling”, which he characterized as a “factual story of a great city’s comeback.”

He recognized early on the opportunity that Wheeling had to take advantage of its tremendous stock of Victorian-era architecture.

In a 1971 editorial congratulating the preservation efforts of the then-newly formed Friends of Wheeling, Mr. Hamm wrote:

*What we are seeing in all of these efforts is that Wheeling is not a “pre-fabricated” city. Because of her age, Wheeling is a living, pulsating symbol of all that went into creating our country. There is an opportunity here to seize upon the city’s historic past to build for the future.*

In another 1974 editorial, Mr. Hamm’s words were prescient and could just as easily be said today in the current debate surrounding the proposed Life Hub concept:

*“Often there is help available for those in distress but the problem is lack of information. They do not know where to turn for assistance....*

*“Frequently, an impoverished family requires the combined assistance of a number of agencies and services in order to free itself from a vicious cycle of poverty . . . . But being referred all over town to various scattered agencies becomes unbearable for a person whose spirit is near the breaking point. In too many instances the assistance provided for those in need is of a temporary, emergency nature. The coordinate of agency help is lacking to provide for a more meaningful and lasting solution to the problems. As a result we have created a permanent caste of the dependent, a colony within a community.*

*Establishment of a multi-services center here, in our opinion, would be a major step forward in building bridges between those in need and those with the resources of providing relief.*

*...[W]e do believe City Council should give serious consideration to providing ample supplementary support for the multi-services center. We see it as a human investment program and as an opportunity to restore the dignity of life to many.*

I could fill the rest of your day with the words of Harry Hamm, and you would be the better for it. But time is never my friend at this event, and I have much else to cover. That said, if you want to learn more about Mr. Hamm and his legacy, there is a collection of his papers available at the Ohio County Public Library for viewing.

Of particular note is his *Wheeling 2000* plan penned in the 1980s that set forth a bold vision for our wonderful city.

Any way you look at it, Harry Hamm's life was one spent in furtherance of his beloved Wheeling. Of Mr. Hamm, Senator Robert C. Byrd once said he was "both the chronicler and the conscience" of this community. Apt words indeed.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating the family of the City of Wheeling's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Gateway Award Recipient, Harry Hamm.

OK, let's bring our focus back to the present. It is no secret that there is a lot going on these days in the City of Wheeling. So much so that if Harry Hamm were still writing editorials, he may be celebrating the rebirth of this "great city."

There is no singular definition of what makes a great city. But there is a general consensus around many of the key ingredients. To name a few, a great city must afford:

- safety and security;
- strong infrastructure;
- a high quality of life;
- diverse job and housing opportunities;
- cultural vibrancy;
- a sense of community;
- openness and inclusivity; and
- strategic urban planning.

If I accomplish nothing else today, I hope that I can at least make the case that Wheeling is checking a lot of boxes on this scorecard. Not only because of the work spanning back several City Councils, but also in large part because of the efforts of so many of you in this room and the organizations you may represent.

Let us begin with those critical first ingredients: safety and security. For a city to truly thrive, it must afford its residents and visitors alike a safe and secure environment in which to flourish. And Wheeling does just that. We have a historically low crime rate for a city of our size—especially when it comes to violent crime.

While there is always room for improvement, we do a very good job in this city when it comes to ensuring the public's safety. And a big reason for that is that we have police and fire departments comprised of men and women who are trained professionals. Make no mistake, if you are in the City of Wheeling and you call 911 in distress, qualified and capable help is on the way.

How about a round of applause for our City's first responders?

It gives me great pride to be able to say that for the first time in several generations, both our police and fire departments will have headquarters actually designed for—and fully compatible with—the modern world. And for this much credit goes to the men and women who have served with me on the past two City Councils. Without their shared vision for new public safety facilities, without their resolve amidst early setbacks and seemingly endless criticism, and without their willingness to make a very unpopular vote, our police department would not have cut the ribbon on its state-of-the-art new headquarters earlier this month.

And our fire department would not be doing the same later this year.

Public safety has always been a strength in the City of Wheeling. But because of these critical investments in these new public safety facilities, we have given our first responders the tools they need to ensure that this community asset will never become a liability.

Wheeling is an old city. Just a few years ago we celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our founding. And like most old cities, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Wheeling had found itself put together with a lot of old parts.

We have already talked about our antiquated public safety facilities. But the list is much longer. For example, when Vice Mayor Thalman, Councilman Thorngate, and Councilman Palmer, and I took office with the 2016 Council, we inherited a state-of-the-art water treatment plant approved by the prior Council. That was the good news. The bad news was that this brand new facility was pumping crystal clear water through some lines installed during the presidency of Chester A. Arthur. And let me assure you: There are few worse calls to get on City Council than



those from residents who have raw sewage in their basements because of the City's inadequate sewer line capacity.

Neither our current City Council nor its immediate predecessor has blinked in the face of these infrastructure deficiencies. Rather, we have attacked them the same way it is said you eat an elephant: one bite at a time.

And on the topic of elephants, let's begin with the one that's been in the room for nearly a decade now: the long-awaited Downtown Streetscape project. Already set in motion when we took office seven years ago, this massive infrastructure project had been elusive. But it has arrived. With a vengeance. What started as a limited scope \$8.7 million project has evolved into a \$33 million complete facelift for our central business district, the vast majority of which is funded by the West Virginia Division of Highways and a U.S. Department of Transportation grant.

And while the delay of this project has been frustrating, it has afforded both the City and our local utilities the opportunity to replace all our underground lines and cables beneath the project area. And for all impacted buildings lacking a sprinkler system, we have encouraged the owners thereof to upgrade with a new six inch water line in advance of the project. Most have eagerly complied.

I could go on about the many complex details of this project, but all have been widely covered in the media. Let's try to be patient during the next 18-24 months until this project is completed. And let's not forget to patronize those Downtown businesses whose front doorsteps have been surrounded by orange barrels, deep holes, and the sounds of construction.

Just last week, I had the opportunity to walk U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg through the heart of this project. As a former mayor of a Rust Belt city larger than but not that dissimilar from Wheeling, he saw right away the potential that this once-in-a-generation undertaking had for injecting vibrancy back into the heart of our downtown. Buckle up.

Moving on, while the streetscape project has dominated the media coverage on the infrastructure front, the past two City Councils have been on a quiet-but-steady mission to repave the rest of the City. Some perspective is in order here. Since July 1, 2016, we have allocated roughly \$8.5 million for paving. That works out to about \$1.2 million in paving per year—between two and three times as much as had been averaged per year by prior City Councils. The result? During that time we have paved:

- 444 streets and alleys;
- Three City basketball courts;
- Wheeling Island Marina;
- 20th Street-Chapline Street parking lot; and
- Several miles of the City’s bike trail.

And just last week, our Finance Committee sent City Council a proposal to fund another \$800,000 of paving later this year using funds carried over from our fiscal year surplus.

Now, to be fair, you can criticize us for those remaining streets and alleys that we have not yet paved. And indeed, my email inbox is a frequent repository of such complaints. But I challenge you to find any comparable era of sustained investment in paving than has occurred in the last seven years. If we haven’t paved *your* street yet, it is only because we have been busy paving those streets and alleys prioritized by City staff

as being in the worst condition. Chances are a bright yellow road roller is headed your way in the coming future.

The next ingredient of a great city—its quality of life—is much harder to define but no less important in an era where more and more Americans are choosing where they want to live *first* and where they want to work *second*. And it turns out that people want to live in communities where they can afford a high standard of living without a high cost of living. And that they look for access to quality health care, strong schools, and a variety of recreational facilities and green space.

I don't know about the rest of you in the room, but I feel pretty good about where our cost of living stacks up against a lot of larger cities. And I feel pretty good about our local health care system that is only going to get better when a new \$80 million cancer center opens on the footprint of the former OVMC campus. And it is hard not to feel just as good about Ohio County having the best assortment of public and private schools in the state.

But I could not be more proud of our work on City Council over the past seven years moving the needle forward on our parks and recreation system—most specifically, our playgrounds.

Those who listen to the Vice Mayor and me on our weekly radio show have heard us say this *ad nauseum*, but it bears repeating. When we campaigned for this office eight years ago, we were told by some that children don't use playgrounds anymore. "Playgrounds are a waste of money", we heard.

Fortunately, we ignored the so-called experts and listened to the local parents who kept telling us that their kids *would* use the

neighborhood playground if it wasn't full of rusting equipment from the last century.

The results since have been nothing short of spectacular, Specifically, we have made significant upgrades to 18 of our 22 City playgrounds since 2016.

The most recent of these upgrades—Edgington Lane—very well might be the most impressive of all. And by year's end, it is the hope of our Parks and Recreation Director Rochelle Barry to have the remaining four playgrounds replaced as well. They are Pulaski , Clator , Elm Terrace and 36th Street.

And just last week, City Council approved funds for a new 23<sup>rd</sup> playground to be situated in the northeast portion of Market Plaza downtown. This new amenity will make it possible for a new child care center to be opened at 1000 Main Street.

Such a complete rethinking of our network of playgrounds does not happen without a broad consensus on City Council, and I would like thank each member for their continued support for these recreational investments.

I have to add that as a relatively new parent myself, I have now seen firsthand just how critical playgrounds are for childhood development. My wife will stop at nothing until our son Harrison has explored and conquered each one.

Now, before we leave parks and recreation, let me quickly mention another type of recreational asset that we have focused on.

Namely, dog parks. Thanks to the success of the flagship Fitzsimmons Family Dog Park at Tunnel Green, and thanks to the

continued generosity of the Fitzsimmons Family Foundation, we now have two more dog parks within the City, both bearing the Fitzsimmons Family name. The first one, at Wheeling Park opened last Fall, and we will soon be having the ribbon cutting for the second in Warwood later this year.

What is the net result of all of these quality of life investments?

Well, for starters, just last month, Fortune Magazine ranked Wheeling the top city in West Virginia and 33<sup>rd</sup> city in the nation for families.

And recently, City Council was just provided a report contracted by our partner Belomar that made the case that Wheeling is ideally situated to leverage its low cost of living and numerous quality-of-life assets to attract remote workers. It is only a matter of time before the outside world fully appreciates what we already know: Wheeling is a great place to live and raise a family.

Moving on, it should be self-evident that no city can achieve greatness without having opportunities for quality employment and affordable housing. I have lost track of how many local business owners have told me that their number one challenge in today's market is finding employees. It is a common refrain that has only been exacerbated in recent years. So what's the issue?

One of the key culprits that we have identified is a lack of diverse housing options for employees who might otherwise choose Wheeling. This is not to say we do not have quality homes in our community. If you want a 120-year-old Victorian house in a neighborhood with towering trees, you've come to the right city. But those homes aren't for everyone. Some people want new housing free of the maintenance worries of an

older home. Some do not want yards. Some want to live where they can walk to work, the grocery store, and many restaurants. And some have budgets that constrain which neighborhoods they can afford.

For Wheeling to maximize its employment possibilities, it must ensure it has a diverse menu of housing opportunities. Otherwise, our housing stock will continue to act as a bottleneck for our workforce.

In this regard I am happy to say that we are moving in the right direction. Our strategy has been simple: In a city without much available flat land for new neighborhood developments, why not encourage housing on vacant lots or in vacant buildings where we already have adjacent streets and nearby water and sewer lines?

Fortunately, we have developers willing to do just that. If you have driven south on Main Street during the past year, you have surely noticed construction of The Doris on Main taking place on what used to be an unattractive surface parking lot. This 46 unit new apartment complex is being undertaken by Woda Cooper Companies, which has shown a continued interest in investing in Wheeling.

And if you drive north in the 1100 Block of Market Street, you will see crews working on the exterior of the future Wheeling Pitt Lofts project. Though delayed because of supply chain issues and rising interest rates, make no mistake: This \$40 million project is happening. Just a few months ago, four of us—Vice Mayor Thalman, Councilman Seidler, and City Manager Herron, and yours truly—drove to Canton to meet with its developer Steve Coon and his team about their plans moving forward. When complete, the Wheeling Pitt Lofts will have filled a long-vacant building with 110 new market rate apartment units.

Just down the street on Market, crews have been fast at work stabilizing and abating four historic buildings in the 1400 Block for an upcoming renovation project. This project is being undertaken by Desmone Architects from Pittsburgh and has involved a terrific collaboration with our city partners Wheeling Heritage and RED as well as a group of local banks.

Jumping back to Main Street, one of the most exciting new housing projects is the DiCarlo Building planned for the vacant lot at 1115 Main Street. What makes this project different is that it will be condominiums rather than apartments. First listed for sale in February, five of the planned units were quickly sold or under contract. That inspired Toni DiCarlo, the project owner, to work with her developer to add a fifth floor—and two more units—to this project. Stay tuned for this exciting new addition to our local housing stock.

One more quick note on housing. Earlier this month, we added a new tool to our housing development toolkit. Specifically, the West Virginia Secretaries of Commerce, Economic Development, and Tourism each signed a letter certifying Wheeling as a designated BUILD WV housing district. This will allow future housing projects to take advantage of a new State law that provided targeted tax credits for qualifying housing projects.

To close out this section on jobs and housing, allow me to note that beyond the surplus of employment opportunities in Wheeling right now, there is an even larger reservoir of *self-employment* potential. Indeed, the Wheeling of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was built far more by local entrepreneurship than it was from companies moving here.

And our next two honorees have exhibited precisely the type of entrepreneurial spirit that came to define Wheeling of old.

I am referring to Jessica Barclay and Vanessa Craig, who began their business adventure by focusing on something near and dear to so many of our hearts: our dogs.

Since 2005, they have opened three popular dog hotel and social adventure centers appropriately called *Play N Stay Pet Camp*. The latest installment in this budding *Play N Stay* empire opened in December 2022 in South Wheeling.

Along the way, they decided to broaden their focus from canine care to human wellness. In May 2019 they opened up *ThrIVe* on Main Street in downtown Wheeling.

In the process, not only have they brought new life to a once-vacant building, but they have also brought services like of cryotherapy, infrared sauna, flotation therapy, IV, halotherapy, and so on to a community where the “smart” investors might have said it would never work. But despite opening up just before a global pandemic and seemingly endless streetscape work on Main Street, *ThrIVe* has, well, thrived in its downtown location. And if you walk by during business hours you will see more than just a freshly renovated building, you will hear the sounds of pop music coming from their external sound system—adding exactly the sort of life and vibrancy to our rapidly evolving downtown footprint.

Now, there are those who say that what Wheeling really needs is for more outside companies to move here and create new jobs. While we always look for and welcome outside investment, what I think Wheeling needs is more of the entrepreneurial spirit embodied by these two ambitious ladies.

Please join me in congratulating Jessica Barclay and Vanessa Craig for bringing that “I Can Do” attitude back into the Wheeling Feeling.



A city with cultural vibrancy is one that celebrates its cultural diversity and heritage with a robust combination of the arts, music, theater, festivals, live entertainment, and so on.

I am going to save some time by saying what many of us in this room know: As a community, we know how to throw a party. In just a few days, downtown and center Wheeling are going to be overtaken by thousands of visitors taking advantage of the Italian and Grecian festivals respectively. And those are just two of more than a dozen local festivals held annually to celebrate the variety of cultural influences we have in this community.

And it is also safe to say that we are a town that shows up to watch live sports. For decades the Wheeling Nailers have been a mainstay on the ice at WesBanco Arena. Earlier this month we learned that a new arena football team—the West Virginia Miners—will be hosting at least five home games here each year as well. And we have convinced two successful basketball tournaments to relocate to Wheeling from Charleston. The MEC basketball championship tournament has had a great run here over the past five years and hopes to make Wheeling its forever home. And tonight at WesBanco Arena, for the first time we will be kicking off the first round of the TBT tournament featuring a Best Virginia team comprised of former WVU stars.

And while we are at it, let's take note of the higher quality of music and comedy shows we seem to be getting at WesBanco Arena and the Capitol Theatre. Under the leadership of new executive director Kelly Tucker, the Greater Wheeling Sports & Entertainment Authority has been turning up the volume of what is possible in these two entertainment venues. Overall sales for both facilities are up 62% in the past fiscal year, and combined with the newly created Entertainment

Endowment Fund, this should mean every bigger and better shows going forward.

Our next honoree has done much to enhance and expand the local arts and cultural scene during his five years as the Music Director of the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra.

I am of course talking about Dr. John Devlin. Now, to be clear, the Wheeling Symphony has been delivering quality symphonic music for nearly a century. And John's predecessor was no exception to this tradition. But something feels different with John at the helm. Something new. Something fresh. Something even edgy.

For one thing, through his innovative concert designs, John has transcended boundaries typically associated with symphonic music. If you happened to attend last season's opening show at the Capitol Theater, you will never forget it. And I am not referring to the fact that the most famous classical musician in the world—Yo-Yo Ma—performed in that show. Though that in itself was incredible and a testament to how seriously John is taken in his field.

But what made that show so memorable was that it featured an intricate and delicate dance between dissimilar styles of music. On the one hand you had an orchestra playing what sounded fairly conventional. On the other you had a beatboxer and hip-hop artist who was performing something very different. The result was electric.

But another reason why things just seem to be different with John is simply because he's here. Unlike many who have occupied the post, John has made Wheeling his home. And he and his wife Camille have made a very concerted effort to embrace everything that is Wheeling. Except maybe the pizza. Despite many efforts on my own part, there is no

convincing this New York native that pizza should be ever served with cold cheese. We'll keep working on that.

But in the meantime, let me share one fact about John that I learned in preparing this address. He is the the first honoree at this event who has also given a keynote TED talk at a TEDx symposium.

If you don't know what a TED talk is, let's just say that they are usually only given by people who are really, really smart or who have done really, really incredible things. Or usually, both.

But they are rarely given by people this humble. I have known John for the past four years, and we have had countless conversations in which he could have said, "Oh by the way I gave a TED talk." But that's not his style. And keeping to form, when we asked him for information to include today, his main concern was that we acknowledge how hard his board and staff worked in recent years navigating a pandemic and prolonged vacancy in the executive director position without sacrificing the quality of their music.

Please join me in congratulating Dr. John Devlin, or as I will be calling him henceforth, "Ted."

As we think about all the elements of Wheeling's cultural vibrancy, try to imagine the void that would exist without the historic Capitol Theatre. Our next honoree knows a thing or two about the subject. Frank O'Brien is in the 51<sup>st</sup> year of his long love affair with Wheeling that began while he was attending band camp at Camp Russell.

Though he has never actually lived in Wheeling, Frank is as Wheeling as its one-way streets and fried fish sandwiches. For nearly two decades his was one of the best-known faces of Wheeling as a reporter and anchor at WTRF.

In 2005 he transitioned from reporting the news to making it when he became the executive director of the Wheeling/Ohio County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

The timing was perfect. Because in 2006 the iconic Capitol Theatre went dark after it was found to be in violation of numerous public safety codes. The story of what happened next has been well documented. And many people and organizations stepped up. But make no mistake: Frank and the CVB were at the heart of all of it. And by the close of 2009 and after \$4 million in renovations, the CVB had purchased and restored our City's only irreplaceable entertainment venue.

Ten years later, in 2019, Frank and the CVB held a mortgage-burning celebration after all debt on the Capitol had been repaid. Thanks to his efforts and the efforts others in this community, generations of Wheeling residents not yet born will be ensured the opportunity to enjoy this priceless community asset.

And so, given his track record in getting the CVB to go outside its conventional lane, it should come as no surprise that Frank pushed the CVB to take the lead on another downtown development project. Last year, the CVB purchased the former Wheeling Inn next to the historic Wheeling Suspension Bridge to create a new gateway to Wheeling and West Virginia for those traveling on Interstate 70.

Through a partnership with Wheeling Heritage, Frank has been on a mission to secure the estimated \$16 million in funding necessary to demolish the existing hotel structure and build a new welcome center at the northwest corner of downtown. Just this past Friday, the Senate Appropriations Committee advanced a bill containing a \$5 million earmark for this project that had been requested by Senator Joe Manchin.

And efforts are underway to secure West Virginia tourism funds to complete the project.

While it may take a few years and some additional funds to see this project to completion, we are very thankful to have people like Frank leading the way.

Please join me in congratulating Frank O'Brien and his team at the CVB for a job well done.

Our sixth ingredient for a great city is also somewhat hard to define, but it refers to the way a community fosters social connections, civic engagement, and a sense of belonging. I can think of no better way to start this discussion than with our next honoree.

When asked to describe what is going on in Wheeling these days, it is so easy to begin with the numerous public and private investments taking place in our city. It is, after all, an impressive list. But Wheeling will always be defined first and foremost by its people. And for the past eleven years of this event, one of the honorees has been recognized for his or her particular efforts to make Wheeling a better place to live. This recognition is called the Community Spirit Award, and in just a moment, I will name this year's recipient thereof. But let's pause to take a look at some of the incredible names found among its first eleven honorees:

- Susan Hogan (2012)
- Lorraine McCardle (2013)
- Pete Holloway (2014)
- Rich Lucas (2015)
- Robert Fitzsimmons (2016)
- Bill O'Leary (2017)
- Margaret Brennan (2018)

- Robert “Scat” Scatterday (2019)
- Jay Frey (2020)
- Ellen Gano (2021)
- John Nanny (2022)

You will be happy to know that today’s honoree will fit right in with this illustrious group. And that is because the 2023 Community Spirit Award recipient is none other than Dr. (and Suffragan Bishop) Darrell Cummings.

Dr. Cummings has served as pastor of the Bethlehem Apostolic Temple in Wheeling for more than four decades. And for much of that time, he has used his ministry to give back to his adopted community. By holding holiday giveaways. By literally handing out food to families in need. By making sure that local children have school supplies. And so on. It is no stretch to say that his name has become synonymous in this community with caring.

And it is likewise no surprise that he has been named the 2023 recipient of the Dr. Lee Jones Patron of Youth Award. Wheeling YMCA Executive Director Adam Shinsky had this to say about Dr. Cummings’ selection:

*We give (this award) to people who make a difference, and that’s an understatement for the work that he does. He makes holidays. He makes people’s years. He makes kids’ school years.*

Beyond his charitable endeavors, Dr. Cummings makes time for service on numerous boards, committees, and councils, including serving as the President of the West Virginia Human Rights Commission since 2006. And he has been a consistent voice for justice, fairness, and

compassion through countless op eds in statewide newspapers and by speaking out when his voice is needed.

And through it all he has kept his focus on building a congregation that has fostered countless interracial connections in our community. So much so that in 2021 the *Washington Post* did a feature story on him entitled *The Pastor Who Defied the Odds: How a West Virginia Reverend Created Something Distinctive: A Diverse Congregation in an Overwhelmingly White Area*. To quote Dr. Cummings from that story: “We’re not a Black church or a White church. We’re just a church.”

Dr. Cummings is one of those rare individuals equally comfortable in any room regardless of the racial, socio-economic, or religious makeup of its occupants. For all his accolades and accomplishments, through all his friendships and appointments, he has stayed true to the core reasons that drove him into the ministry in the first place. A message of hope, economic opportunity, and justice for all.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating Dr. Darrell Cummings as the 2023 recipient of the Community Spirit Award.

Today’s next honoree knows a thing or two about building community bonds as well. Kristy Ferguson moved to Wheeling in 2017 on somewhat of a whim. As a licensed massage therapist and an accomplished photographer, she didn’t see Wheeling as a likely destination. But she decided to give the Friendly City a chance to be near her sister and three nieces.

The result has been good for Kristy. And for Wheeling. Shortly after moving here, she opened Elite Massage Therapy in Elm Grove. Soon, she became active in the Elm Grove Business Association—so much so that by 2022, she had been elected its president. And in that

position she has worked to strengthen the bonds between Elm Grove businesses and the surrounding community. She has said, and I quote:

*If we want the community to support local business as businesses, we must support the community.*

Under her leadership, the Elm Grove Business Association has been busy with measures to enhance the look, feel, and experience of the Elm Grove community. It has undertaken beautification measures such as painting curbs, planting flowers along National Road and incorporating artwork from Ohio County students wherever possible. It created two new annual events: *Grooving in the Grove* and *Elm Grove Fall Fest* that are already annual staples. And it has sponsored and hung banners celebrating various holidays and local businesses.

In short, while Kristy's journey to Wheeling may have been by chance, much of what she has done since has been done with purpose towards making her community the best it can be. She has said that she feels more "at home" in her adopted city of Wheeling than she had anywhere prior. So let us all do what we can to keep it that way.

Please join me in congratulating Kristy Ferguson, President of the Elm Grove Business Association.

Our seventh ingredient for a great city is the way it embraces diversity and ensures that residents and visitors—regardless of their background—feel welcome and valued.

Ensuring precisely this has been a priority the past two City Councils. Even if some in our community are not happy about it. We have been told to "stay in our lane" and away from any so-called "social issue."



But there are two flaws in this line of thought:

First, city government is perfectly capable of walking and chewing gum at the same time. No economic development project, no street paving, no sewer line replacement, no new playground has been delayed or forgotten because we have debated an ordinance protecting minority rights. It has instead just meant that we have had a few meetings run longer than usual.

Moreover, the implicit suggestion that extending civil rights protections to minorities is somehow bad for business could not be more wrong. Look at the types of communities where Fortune 500 companies are investing.

To this end, during my time on City Council, we have taken bold steps towards being a more open and inclusive society.

Most in this room will remember the nondiscrimination ordinance that the last City Council approved in December 2016.

But members of our current City Council deserve credit for taking the inclusion baton and running with it.

In October 2020 we approved a resolution recognizing racism as a public health crisis and directing City staff to incorporate best practices to prevent both implicit and explicit racial bias in our policies and enforcement efforts.

In May of last year, City Council voted 4-3 to make Wheeling the third city in West Virginia to ban the scientifically disproven practice of conversion therapy.

And in February of this year, City Council voted unanimously in support of a CROWN Act to combat discrimination because of anyone's natural hair texture.

Contrary to what some may believe, these initiatives do not detract from what we do. Rather, they show *who we are*.

To close out our discussion on this topic, let me borrow a line used to great effect by Rabbi Lief, who got us started today with his lovely invocation. During public comment while City Council was debating the CROWN Act, he said, and I quote:

*Just because it didn't happen to you doesn't mean it isn't happening.*

What a different world it would be if more of us thought that same way.

Our final ingredient for a great city is strategic urban planning.

As much as I would like to delve into this topic, doing so this late in my remarks could produce a mad dash for the exits. Or for the Casino bar. So I'm scrapping it completely. There will be plenty to say on this topic next year as the City updates its Comprehensive Plan.

But lest you all think that means I am done, think again. This is me, after all. And brevity has never been a personal strength.

Before we part ways, I want to say a few words about the importance of hope. Specifically, the hope for a better tomorrow.

For many years, this community has been caught in somewhat of an identity crisis. No matter how many exciting new projects or investments are happening, it is hard for some to see Wheeling as anything other than a place that used to be something better.

A city of 70,000 residents.

A city encompassed by steel mills and heavy industry.

A city whose downtown streets were filled with shoulder-to-shoulder shoppers patronizing endless retail stores.

The problem though is that nobody wants to live in a city defined as one that used to be better.

And as long as the narrative persists about this magical Wheeling of yesteryear, it is easy to greet the present with cynicism. And thus easy to tune out those of us who are trying to paint a future that looks like something different.

It turns out that the truth in matters nostalgic is always a bit complicated.

Let's pick a year. 1955. And let's try to envision standing on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets looking at this bustling downtown. Now try to imagine yourself on that exact corner at that exact time in a wheelchair. Or as a woman wanting a career. Or as a Black man wondering in which establishments he was welcome. Or as a lesbian trapped in a marriage to a man she could not love.

My point here is not to judge the past by contemporary standards. Societies evolve. My point is instead one of perspective.

Looking out into this room, it is not a stretch to say that for many of you, there are more opportunities in Wheeling today than at any point in our history. And it is long past time that we started judging today not against some arbitrary barometer calibrated in the 1950s but instead by reference to where we are headed.

No matter where you are currently situated, it is the trajectory and purpose you set for yourself that truly matters. The focus should be on the future, on progress, and on making strides towards a shared destination. Not on lamenting where we are or longing for how things used to be.

In other words, where we are is in many respects far less important than where we are going.

And to say this is not to dishonoring anyone's past. I will always be in awe of what once was here. And I will always understand why so many of you embrace that history.

But where the rubber sometimes meets the road is in the marketplace of new ideas that are offered for the future of Wheeling. Far too many have come to see anything new as a threat to that nostalgic sense of how things should be. We lament the loss of how things were, but we line up to cheer on the failure of anyone trying to set about a new path.

There is nothing wrong with healthy skepticism, but it requires a certain degree of willful blindness to ignore everything happening in our community right now. We have not seen this level of private investment in over a century.

I recognize some may not want to admit this. Maybe they find comfort in cynicism. But make no mistake, the Wheeling of ten years from now is going to look dramatically different than it does today. How that future Wheeling compares to 1955 is of far less interest to me to how it compares to 2023.

It will be up to future city leaders and many of you in this room to nudge this trajectory one way or the other. I sincerely hope that these nudges continue to move us forward, not backwards. But either way, I look forward to the ride.

Today's final honoree is an organization uniquely equipped to bridge our City's rich history with its auspicious future. For 53 years Friends of Wheeling has known just how lucky we are as a community to have such a rich stock of historic architecture sprinkled throughout our neighborhoods.

In its early years, it was actively involved in numerous redevelopment projects that brought an awareness of and appreciation for historic preservation and what it means to the community.

But as time went on, Friends of Wheeling gradually shifted away from actual renovation projects and instead focused on education and advocacy. And it perhaps became best known for its monthly tours of historic properties before and after renovation projects.

But around a decade ago, members of its board, including President Jeanne Finstein and Vice President Jay Frey, became convinced that the local preservation community had taken too much of a passive role in the while demolitions of local historic properties had become all too common.

And so they decided to put some skin back in the game and established a Preservation Loan Guarantee Program that reduces the borrowing costs for those rehabbing historic Wheeling properties.

Encouraged by this program's great success, they decided to go a step further. Just last year, Friends of Wheeling rediscovered its activist roots and took ownership of—and responsibility for—the historic Hughes Duplex in North Wheeling. To say that these antebellum homes had fallen into hard times would be an understatement. But Friends of Wheeling was not deterred and has been diligently fundraising and leveraging grants—including the City's Façade Improvement Program—to give these buildings a new lease on life. And thanks to its efforts, the Hughes

Duplex will be an asset to the North Wheeling Historic District for decades to come.

Earlier, I read from a 1971 editorial written by Harry Hamm commending the work that Friends of Wheeling and other preservationists. That same editorial concluded as follows:

*...Who knows but that these initial efforts today at restoration might set the stage for a true adventure into at least a partially restored neighborhood in our city, a place where the young can relive the excitement of early Wheeling and that the future may learn from the past.*

Because of the efforts of organizations like Friends of Wheeling, we can appreciate and indeed learn from the past without longing for it. Please join me in thanking the Friends of Wheeling for putting its commitment to historic preservation into action for the benefit of our shared future.

And now for the words you have all been waiting for:

In closing, if seven-plus years in this position has taught me anything, it is that there is no greater truth in political affairs than what President Lincoln said about pleasing some of the people some of the time.

That said, if I may paraphrase the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, I sometimes feel in this position that if my critics saw me walking across the Ohio River, they would say it was because I couldn't swim.

Trust me, I am not complaining. This is what I signed up for. And there is much comfort in knowing that at this time next year, somebody

else will walk through the frozen food aisle at Kroger terrified that a resident angry about a pothole will corner them.

But I do feel compelled to respond to one of the most frequent—and in my opinion most inaccurate—criticisms that has been lobbed towards me and the past two City Councils. And that is that we have spent taxpayer funds with reckless abandon.

The truth is that despite the myriad public investments and initiatives put into action by the last two City Councils, we have been careful stewards of the City's budget.

From 2004 until the time I took office in 2016, the City had a Budget Stabilization Fund of \$1.8 million. Today, it stands at \$5 million.

To put that in perspective, in the midst of paving more streets than at any comparable time in modern history, of providing long-overdue new headquarters for our first responders, of completely revamping our network of playgrounds, and incentivizing new developments like the Wheeling Pitt Lofts, The Doris on Main, the 1400 Block properties, the planned WVU Medicine Cancer Center, and so on. . . we have not only maintained a balanced budget, but we have also nearly tripled our City's rainy day fund for the future.

Many words can describe our stewardship, but *reckless* is not one of them. We have not spent beyond our means.

Now, it is fair to point out that the City has received an unprecedented amount of federal funds in recent years. But we also experienced an unprecedented economic interruption and have dealt with the same costs and supply chain issues as the private sector. Moreover, we have directed millions of those dollars out into the community to propel some incredible private-sector projects. I had hoped to provide a

full accounting of those federal expenditures in today's address, but for the benefit of everyone in this room, I shall share a summary on my Facebook page later today.

Let me wrap things up by getting to my primary duty in delivering this address: Giving my actual assessment on the state of our city. If you have been paying attention, you would be correct in finding me bullish on the subject. At the same time, if you have been paying attention, you are likely tired of hearing what I have to say. So for this year's assessment of our city, I am going to cheat.

I am going to borrow the words of the United States Secretary of Transportation who visited Wheeling just last week, who said, and I quote:

*I'd say this is a proud community, and it's a community that's been through ups and downs, but it's on the way up right now. You can feel the energy here. You can see that sense of momentum here. ...If Wheeling . . . was a stock, I'd be buying.*

Mr. Secretary, I agree. And as I look out into this room of fellow Wheeling shareholders, I think it is safe to say that this is not a time to sell.

Ladies and gentlemen, it has been the honor of my life to stand here these past seven years and share this space with so many people who love the City of Wheeling.

And to my colleagues on City Council, while we may not always agree on what we want to do, I thank each of you to a person for knowing *why* it is we do what we do.

Thank you.