



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

JULY 26, 2022

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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 Rev. Erica Harley, Vance Memorial Presbyterian Church
- 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 13<sup>th</sup> annual State of the City Address in the City of Wheeling. This is my sixth and penultimate opportunity to speak to you as Mayor at this event.

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

And thank you, Reverend Erica Harley, for leading today's invocation.

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

And 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 BJ Delbert
- Finance Director Seth McIntyre
- Community Development Director Nancy Prager
- Police Chief Shawn Schwertfeger
- Fire Chief Jim Blazier
- Parks and Recreations Director Rochelle Barry
- Information Technology Director Mike Lloyd
- City Solicitor Rose Humway-Warmuth

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

As I have in years prior, I will begin today by turning our gaze backwards to recognize someone whose past contributions helped shape the Wheeling of the present. We call this recognition the Gateway Award, and its first five recipients are quite a group. They are:

- Former Mayor Jack Lipphardt;

- Former City Councilman and Planning Commissioner Barry Crow;
- Former Mayor Nick Sparachane;
- Former Wheeling Heritage executive director Hydie Friend; and
- Former City Manager and former Vice Mayor Mike Nau.

Today's Gateway Award recipient began his public service to our community over a half century ago when he was first elected to Wheeling City Council in 1971. Following his re-election four years later in 1975, he was chosen by City Council to serve as Mayor of Wheeling, as was the process set forth by the City Charter at the time. I am of course referring to John Edward Fahey, more commonly known as "Jack", who joins us today with his family.

Jack Fahey has worn many different hats during his decades of public service to our community. Eight years on City Council, including four as Mayor; twelve years as a Commissioner of Ohio County; two years as a member of the West Virginia House Delegates; and countless years as a member of various boards and commissions. Along the way he has also worn the hats of husband to Katie, his late wife of 72 years, of father to seven, of grandfather to 20, of great-grandfather to 30, and of "Uncle Jack" to 17 nieces and nephews.

One of Jack's passions during his time on City Council was to complete the Wheeling Creek Watershed project. During his first year as Mayor in 1975, construction began on a series of seven flood-control dams on portions of Wheeling Creek. The final dam for this important infrastructure project was built in the mid-1990s, during then-Commissioner Fahey's second term on the Ohio County Commission.

During his time as Mayor, he made it a priority to restore order and decorum to Wheeling City Council. And by successfully urging the formation of the Wheeling Hall of Fame in 1977, his efforts also helped enhance our community's sense of history and civic pride. Notably, Mayor Fahey also began a push for a City Charter review that would

ultimately reach Wheeling's voters in 1991 and, in the following year, lead to the adoption of the Charter that still governs our municipal affairs today.

In researching this portion of my remarks, I learned that in his capacity as Councilman and Mayor, Jack Fahey was never afraid to go against the prevailing political winds and instead vote his conscience. Indeed, he was famously the lone nay vote in many recorded 8-1 votes during his time in office. When asked about this by the *Intelligencer*, he said:

*I've been my own person. I hope I haven't made too many enemies, but I tried to vote my conscience. I never voted for something just because someone else was a fast talker.*

Now, we can only wonder which members of today's City Council that Jack would have deemed to be a "fast talker." Or we could ask Councilman Jerry Sklavanoukis about it. And he would tell us. *Quickly.*

But let us reflect for a moment that Wheeling has had 70 mayors since its founding. Of those 70, only four ever went on to induction into the Wheeling Hall of Fame. And of those four, only two made it in for their contributions in the realm of public service: They are former Mayor Charles Ihlenfeld, inducted in 1992. And former Mayor John Edward Fahey, inducted in 2011.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great honor to bestow yet one more recognition on this distinguished career of public service. Please join me in congratulating the City of Wheeling's 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Gateway Award Recipient, Jack Fahey.

As we turn back to the present, let me state what should be obvious to anyone who drove here for today's event: Wheeling very much remains a city under construction.

Most notably, we are in the final stretch of the three-year, \$215 million I-70 Bridges Project that, when complete, will have either fully

renovated or replaced 26 of the I-70 bridges between the Ohio and Pennsylvania borders of Ohio County.

And since we gathered here a year ago, the West Virginia Division of Highways has commenced work on a \$17.9 million renovation of the Wheeling Suspension Bridge that will guarantee this national treasure remains standing for future generations.

And as I have promised from this podium for at least the past three years, we have reason to believe that the long-awaited Downtown Streetscape Project will begin later this year.

If I sound like a broken record in this regard, let me offer two grounds for my defense:

First, optimism is almost baked into the job description of mayor. Try running for this office and telling everyone the future is dark and hopeless.

But more importantly, this year *is* different. And that is not just my optimism talking. On June 23<sup>rd</sup>, DOH actually put this project out to bid, with a bid opening scheduled for this morning at 10:00 a.m.

I have said it before, but it bears repeating: This streetscape project will be transformative for the way Downtown Wheeling looks, feels, and functions for both pedestrians and drivers. Beyond providing desperately needed new street surfaces, it will include new sidewalks, new traffic signals, new trees, redesigned intersections with curb bump-outs to shorten pedestrian crossings, and new stormwater retention capabilities, including bioswales.

Now, let's transition away from these three State-controlled projects to some roads for which we actually have responsibility.

Let's start with Nailers Way. In conjunction with the Streetscape Project, we have opted to reconfigure a portion of what was known as South Street running behind the Intermodal Garage. While Vice Mayor Thalman and I were in the room when this suggestion was made, we

cannot take credit for it. It belongs to former City Councilwoman Wendy Scatterday. The idea is to create a true four-way intersection 16<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets that is much safer for pedestrians while also freeing up space adjacent to the Flat Iron Building for a future outdoor plaza. It is an exciting preview of what is to come with the Streetscape Project. And it has already given drivers coming north on Main Street the opportunity to turn left at 16<sup>th</sup> and take a short-cut to Heritage Port.

Looking beyond Downtown though, over the past six years, this City Council and its immediate predecessor have undertaken a massive and deliberate paving effort that is unparalleled in City history. Since 2016, we have allocated roughly \$5.6 million to resurface 273 City-owned streets and portions of the bike trail. With our latest paving contract, we were able to pave the major traffic arteries of Washington Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> Street east of Eoff Street. And rather than letting up in this multi-year pursuit, we expect to do a second major paving contract this year. Assuming that City Council gives it the go-ahead, you can expect another \$1.8 million paving contract by September that will include 64 more streets and—importantly—74 alleys. The vast majority of City alleys have not been touched in any serious way since the 1980s.

And when we bring those alleys into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they will be paired with many other updated physical components of our municipal infrastructure. None perhaps more deserving than the respective headquarters for our police and fire departments—both of which are on their way to a long-overdue replacement.

Most of you likely recall that the prior City Council created quite the stir a few years back by imposing the dreaded User Fee to finance new public safety facilities.

This effort earned me my first and thankfully so far, only, cartoon. But I must say, it really captured my essence. And the looks on those kids' faces. And their father's emptied pockets. Priceless!

But just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, Vice Mayor Thalman and Councilman Palmer earned their own cartoon a few weeks later.

Now, a couple of things about this cartoon deserve mention. For one thing, those who know the Vice Mayor well insist that he has not been this thin since high school. Nor has he ever carried a clipboard. But the icing on the cake here is the name affixed atop this rickety structure. "Council's Castle." That one stung.

But despite all the criticism, we went forward with the User Fee in 2020, and we are now just months away from the ribbon cutting on a new police department headquarters that will be fully equipped for 21<sup>st</sup> Century law enforcement.

And by December 2023, we expect to be opening the huge garage doors of a brand new fire department headquarters on 17<sup>th</sup> Street in East Wheeling.

Each of these facilities is an investment in our future that prioritizes the role that public safety and our first responders play in our community. But neither was easy to bring about. To finance these facilities, it took the willingness of five members of the prior City Council to make the unpopular vote to institute a new User Fee that would go into effect just months before the municipal election of 2020. And it took the votes of this City Council to direct that funding towards actionable projects to be implemented by City staff.

And before we leave the ever-popular subject of the User Fee, let us remember that one-half of the revenues it generates has been dedicated to public infrastructure projects. To date, we have allocated roughly \$700,000 of these funds for a variety of critical slip repairs, backflow installations, and piling walls across our community. But going forward, we have two higher profile infrastructure projects being queued up for action.

The first is the Wheeling Hill sidewalk replacement project. We have sought estimates for several options to replace the failing sidewalk alongside National Road between Generations Restaurant and the legendary McColloch's Leap monument. The least expensive option identified thus far would involve relocating the sidewalk to the other side of National Road. Stay tuned for upcoming discussions about our options here in the coming months.

The other User Fee project on the horizon is the repainting of the Tunnel Green Bridge located directly South of the I-70 and Route 2 interchange. This former railroad bridge is structurally sound for pedestrian and bicycle traffic. But its flaking paint looks dreadful and is situated in a high-visibility area off I-70. We believe that painting the support beams of this bridge and adding a Wheeling-themed message would dramatically improve the look and feel of that interchange.

Taken together, these public investments add up to a Wheeling much better situated to attract and retain families, businesses, and visitors for generations to come. And I want to thank all of my fellow members of City Council for moving the needle forward in this regard.

Let's now take note of some of the private investment taking place alongside all these public projects. And let's start with my next honoree today, who has the type of résumé usually found on Wall Street or in London's financial district. But fortunately for us, this 8<sup>th</sup> generation West Virginian has chosen to keep Wheeling as his home. I am of course referring to David H. McKinley, [who joins us today with his wife Meredith Javersak McKinley].

It has been nearly 20 years since David founded a Wheeling-based investment firm now known as McKinley Carter Wealth Services, with offices spread across four states. It would be an understatement to call a firm that now serves roughly 1,500 clients and has \$2 billion of assets under management a success. But it's not for *this* success that I recognize David today. It is instead for how he has put that success back to work right here in Wheeling.

Through his investments in local commercial real estate and his acquisition of the firm of McKinley Architecture & Engineering, David has been determined to put his resources to work for our local economy.

Under his leadership, MKA has pressed forward with an \$8+million investment in the historic Fort Henry Club that is due to be complete later this year. This beautiful building is an important piece of Wheeling history and is currently undergoing a full rehab to create new office space for incoming commercial tenants.

Now I know that there remain many in our community and probably some in this room who are convinced that Downtown's Wheeling's best days are confined to the distant past. And that no future without the literal reincarnation of G.C. Murphy's and the Stone & Thomas Tea Room is worth even discussing. To these people, I say, spend just five minutes with David talking about what is possible right here, right now. His belief in the future of this City is sincere. And he is not one to chase lost causes. He sees our central business district as anything but a lost cause. And we thank David for the strategic vision that he brought to it.

Please join me in thanking David H. McKinley and McKinley Architecture & Engineering for showing such a strong commitment to the future of our great city.

On the topic of those who possess an unabiding belief in the future of Downtown Wheeling, we might as well turn to my next honoree, Dean Connors, who joins us today with his longtime girlfriend, Susan Regrut, and his daughter, Alexa Connors.

In 2015, Dean relocated his CMS Bankcard Services business into Downtown. The following year, The Health Plan headquarters opened its doors. That spurred Dean to look for nearby investment opportunities. Roughly five years into this quest, Dean has added—you guessed it—five buildings to his portfolio. And Downtown's first parklet, which we will get to in a minute.

Dean's building inventory suggests he is turning our Downtown street grid into his real-life Monopoly game board. So far, he has acquired each of the following properties:

- 1057 Market Street: Home of MMM Popcorn
- 1061 Market Street: Home to Lucky Candies 2
- 25 11<sup>th</sup> Street: Home to the West Virginia headquarters of the law firm Wilbraham, Lawler, and Buba
- 27 11<sup>th</sup> Street: Home to Ohio Valley MMA
- 1035 Chapline Street: Home to Information Helpline, Sexual Assault Help Center, and NAMI of Wheeling, while also serving as the operations center for Dean's CMS business.

Of note, many of these properties also contain upstairs apartments. Also of note, all have been fully rented since being acquired by Dean.

But just as important as is Dean's financial commitment to our city is his dogged determination to restore its vibrancy. Dean led the charge to rebrand Market Plaza to *The Plaza on Market* and has worked with local organizations to bring more programming to this long-underutilized public square.

He has even brought snow to The Plaza. Literally. By purchasing snow machines and placing them on one of his roofs during our *Winter on the Plaza* tree-lighting event last year Dean has also worked with City staff to coordinate the purchase and placement of new tables and umbrellas for *The Plaza*. And he has converted a long-vacant lot next to 1057 Market Street into a small parklet, complete with artificial turf and string lighting.

To spend any amount of time with Dean is to be subjected to an endless barrage of ideas about what is possible for our community. I can only hope for Susan's sake that he is able to turn his brain off as he's winding down at the end of each day.

But the bottom line is this: We all know people who have ideas about how to revitalize our City. Social media is replete unsolicited advice. But far too often, people share ideas with a sentence that begins “*Somebody* really should do X there.” I would like to propose a new nickname for Dean today. Let’s all just agree to call him “Somebody.”

Please join me in congratulating Dean “Somebody” Connors for his unrelenting quest to help revitalize our City.

Our next honoree has shown that it’s not so much the size of one’s investment in Wheeling that matters as much as it is the story that it tells to the outside world. Betsy Sweeny, who currently serves as Director of Heritage Programming for Wheeling Heritage, is a Pittsburgh native who took a roundabout way to find herself in Wheeling.

With degrees in art history and anthropology, as well as a masters in historic preservation, and with no connections to Wheeling, it was far from inevitable that Betsy would today be making this City her home. But after several years working at James Madison’s *Montpelier* in Virginia, she accepted a position at Wheeling Heritage that gave her the ability to work in her fields of training but with much more direct community focus. The result has been a win-win for Betsy and for Wheeling.

Not long after her arrival here, Betsy began looking for a historic home to purchase and revitalize. She found the perfect fit on 14<sup>th</sup> Street in East Wheeling. This elegant 1895 Victorian home had sat empty for some 30 years before being purchased in 2013 by then-future Councilman Brian Wilson, who, along with his wife Stephanie, saved this structure from almost-certain demolition. By 2019 the McLain House had been stabilized, but it remained a major fixer-upper project.

Enter Betsy. She purchased this historic home for \$18,500 and obtained a loan for its rehabilitation. Of note, she also decided to share her story with the world. Literally. Within two months of her purchase, her preservation story had gone viral and was the focus of a *Cheap Old Houses* feature, a video from a popular YouTube influencer, and several

national news stories. Betsy's personal story because synonymous with the investment opportunities abounding in smaller communities like Wheeling across the country. And it brought considerable national attention to our City's rich architectural heritage and low cost of living.

By 2021, Betsy and the McLain House were featured in an episode of *In With The Old* on the Magnolia Network that documented not only her efforts at restoring this beautiful home but also showcased Wheeling as a community on the rise.

With so much national exposure, Betsy is regularly contacted by people who have decided to visit Wheeling and see what all the fuss is about. It is not an exaggeration to say that there are people living in Wheeling today simply by virtue of the fact that they came across Betsy's story. And she is not done telling her story. The McLain House is close to the finish line, but more work remains. And Betsy has plans to rehab more historic Wheeling homes in the future.

Please join me in congratulating Betsy Sweeny for framing the story of Wheeling's potential in a way that is accessible to people everywhere.

Any way you look at it, there is a lot of investment taking place in Wheeling right now.

The foundation of the future Market Street Parking Garage is taking shape, and it won't be long before this structure starts going vertical. An important component of this project is the addition of roughly 10,000 square feet of retail space on 11<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets.

This project will help support the ongoing rehabilitation of the Wheeling Pitt Lofts project, that, when complete, will bring more than 110 new market rate housing units to Downtown Wheeling.

This critical Downtown housing project has been delayed by supply-chain issues, but it is moving forward. Just yesterday, workers were installing a suspended scaffolding system to begin exterior work on this

12-story skyscraper. When complete, this building will again be one of the most celebrated in Wheeling.

Another project worth noting had its ribbon cutting earlier this year. The Ohio Valley Community Federal Credit Union opened its doors on Chapline Street.

This structure represents just the second new private construction project Downtown since the 1980s, with the first being The Health Plan headquarters in 2016.

But before it was completed earlier this year, the third such new construction project had already broken ground a few blocks away. I am of course referring to the new 46-unit workforce housing project called The Doris that is already showing signs of its four-story height on Main Street.

And these are just the projects that have begun construction. Many more projects are deep into the discussion and planning stages. Of note here, earlier this year, City Council took two related steps to facilitate the redevelopment of more of our existing building stock.

The first was to work with officials of the Wheeling Fire Department on adding more flexibility to our City's Fire Code. These changes do not mean that we are compromising life safety issues, but rather that we are allowing developers to be creative in coming up with life safety solutions for 19<sup>th</sup> Century buildings that were never designed for modern fire codes.

The second initiative was to approve a new Upper Floor Incentive Program, modeled on the City's successful Façade Improvement Program. This new program will provide matching funds up to \$200,000 to developers adding life safety components such as stairwells, sprinklers, and fire separation systems.

When you factor in the tens of millions of dollars of public and private investment already taking place with these new targeted

development incentives, there may not have been a better time in our lifetimes to invest in Wheeling than right now.

All these investments aside, Wheeling has always been more defined by its people. As noted earlier, this is our 13<sup>th</sup> Annual State of the City event. But for the past ten years, one of the honorees has been recognized for his or her particular efforts to make Wheeling a better place to live. This recognition has been deemed the Community Spirit Award, and in just a moment, I will name this year's recipient thereof. But let's review the first ten recipients of this award. Most of these names should be familiar to all of you:

- Susan Hogan (2012)
- Lorraine McCardle (2013)
- Pete Holloway (2014)
- Rich Lucas (2015)
- Bob Fitzsimmons (2016)
- Bill O'Leary (2017)
- Margaret Brennan (2018)
- Robert "Scat" Scatterday (2019)
- Jay Frey (2020)
- Ellen Gano (2021)

How about a warm Wheeling round of applause for that uniquely Wheeling group of Community Spirit Award winners?

Through his lifelong work of giving back not only to his community but also to his country, today's Community Spirit Award recipient is a worthy addition to this distinguished list of Wheeling's finest. My only regret is that he cannot be with us today. He passed away earlier this year at the age of 79. I am referring to the late John Nanny.

Following his service to our country in the Marines as a young man, John spent the rest of his life being a force for good in our community and beyond. He co-founded Youth Services System, Inc. in Wheeling and served as its president for 14 years. He founded the West Virginia Youth

Advocate Program in 1983 and served as its president for ten years. He served as president of St. John's Children's Home and Big Brother/Big Sister of Wheeling. He was a Past Commander of American Legion Post #1. In short, he was a tireless advocate for children and for veterans throughout the Ohio Valley.

One of John's passions was running the Mountaineer Boys State Program for American Legion Post #1. I had the chance to participate in this program as a high school student and met John in 1989. If you look closely at this *Intelligencer* photo from that day, you will see John seated front and center. I am behind him to his left. To my right is former State Senator and current U.S. Attorney Bill Ihlenfeld. To Bill's right, just past the guy who somehow had a full mustache in high school, you will see current Ohio County Commissioner Zach Abraham. It is of course possible that the three of us would have gone on to public service anyway. But I like to think that this experience had an impact. It is impossible to calculate the impact this program had on countless young men during the 40 years that John oversaw it.

And for me personally, John had a second chance to leave an impression. In 2018, he and I were sitting together onstage at the Italian Festival's annual veterans' ceremony. The keynote speaker that day was World War II Medal of Honor recipient Hershel "Woody" Williams, who, as I am sure most of you know, passed away last month and then became one of only seven private citizens in American history to lie in honor in the U.S. Capitol. But on that steamy July day, a still-very-spry 90-something Woody Williams looked at us and challenged us to bring a Gold Star Families Memorial Monument to the City of Wheeling to honor the families of those who lost their lives in war. There was no way we were going to say 'no.' And John left that ceremony on a mission to plan and fundraise for making that challenge a reality. Less than one year later, John had delivered.

In April 2019, John and I welcomed Woody Williams back to Wheeling for the groundbreaking of this monument at Heritage Port. I spent some time with both men that day, and you could not help but notice

the combination of relief and pride in John's demeanor as we talked about his latest mission. It was one of many opportunities that John had during his life to give back to his community.

And for that, we are thankful. To accept this year's Community Spirit Award for the late John Nanny, we are joined today by his daughter, Beth Ann Gerken, his nephews, Pete Nanny, Alex Nanny, and Shane Nanny. Please join me in congratulating them for this award.

Chances are that if you have heard me at the podium over the past six years or so, you have heard the phrase "quality of life" come out of my mouth. A city's quality of life measures factors beyond its basic economic condition. It measures the lived experience for those who call a city home. Its recreational assets. Its neighborhoods. Its nightlife. Its culture. Its inclusivity.

Wheeling has always offered a rich quality of life, but this City Council understands that we cannot rest on our laurels. We must press on. And we have.

We have enriched our neighborhoods by replacing 16 of the 22 City-owned playground installations across the city over the past six years, and we have partnered with Ohio County Schools to rehab and open several school playgrounds to their neighborhoods. Stay tuned for some more improvements to come, including an ambitious makeover of the Edgington Lane Playground, and a long-overdue update to Pulaski field and playground in South Wheeling in 2023.

We have further set aside an unprecedented amount of funding to help demolish blighted properties that have been plaguing some portions of our community.

Perhaps no demolition has made more of an impact than our removal of the former Hazel-Atlas factory at 19<sup>th</sup> and Jacob Streets in East Wheeling that for years stood as an unwelcome gateway to our Downtown from the South.

We have worked to enhance our connectivity to our waterfront with new recreational assets such as Gateway Park on Wheeling Island.

We will be adding a new splash pad near WesBanco Arena to add to the Heritage Port experience.

And we have plans to move forward with an attractive new park installation on the Robrecht site behind Main Street Bank.

We have created and funded an Entertainment Endowment Fund that has already expanded our ability to bring additional music and stage performances to the City.

We have acknowledged and confronted our City's early history of race relations with sincere efforts to be better. We have required that City employees undergo diversity training. We were well ahead of our State and our nation in recognizing Juneteenth as a holiday and in using it to enhance awareness that our City's many opportunities were not always open to all.

And just last week, we agreed in principle with the Ohio County Commission and Ohio County Schools to create a county-wide Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Officer position jointly funded by all three governmental entities. Once formally approved by each entity, this new position will provide strategic leadership for diversity and inclusion initiatives that advance diversity as a critical component of government, education, economic vitality, and the overall quality of life for our citizens.

Today's next honoree has done much during his time in Wheeling to contribute to its rich quality of life. In 1967, New York City native Bill Cornforth joined the seminary as a teenager, and, two years later, came to Wheeling as an aspiring priest. Though a future in the priesthood never materialized, it was here in the Friendly City that Bill discovered his love of both the theater and of teaching. And fortunately for us, he decided to stay.

Bill's first teaching job was at St. Vincent's School in Elm Grove. He made quite the impression on a young student named Dave Palmer who serves with me today on City Council. Councilman Palmer wasn't sure if Mr. Cornforth remembered him, so I took the liberty of asking a forensic sketch artist to imagine what young Dave might have looked like at the time.

Let's hope that narrows it down!

In 1979, Bill accepted a teaching position at Wheeling Park, where he began as an assistant speech coach. Less than one year later, the Wheeling Park High School speech team had earned its first Speech & Debate state championship. Now, forty-one years later, the team boasts 42 consecutive state championships, with Bill at the helm as head coach for the past 18 years.

This past year, a group of former students submitted his name for consideration for a Tony Award "for excellence in theater education." Yes, *the* Tony Awards. There were over 700 submissions nationwide, but ultimately, Bill was recognized in the top 18 theater educators across the country with an honorable mention.

One of Bill's former students, Adam Payne from the Wheeling Park class of 2017, sent us a copy of the letter he read at a recent Ohio County School Board meeting honoring his former mentor. It reads, in part:

*Mr. Cornforth, you have changed our lives and cared for each of your students above and beyond the call of duty for a teacher and a mentor....*

*You have instilled in all of us a sense of passion for communication, a drive to succeed, and to win as a team, to represent something bigger than oneself, and a tool belt of skills that each of us carries long beyond high school.*

That is quite a ringing endorsement. For his contributions to the Wheeling community over this past half century, please join me in

congratulating Bill Cornforth, who is joined today by his daughter, Jennifer Gmitter.

Like it or not, one of the issues confronting this City Council and countless other city councils across the nation is that of homelessness. If our estimates are correct, Wheeling is home to roughly 275 individuals who themselves have no home. This is roughly one percent of our local population. However you may feel about this topic, I hope that we can all agree that this many people living without homes in *our* City is unacceptable.

Now, we can disagree on the best strategies to confront this issue. But we must never forget that in discussing the homeless, we are referring to actual human beings with life experiences that often defy our understanding.

And we must resist the lure of anecdotes. For every story about someone pretending to be homeless and gaming our kindness, there are 20 stories of those suffering from serious mental illness, drug addiction, PTSD, or worse.

The reality is that this is a very complicated issue without any consensus solutions. Our City Council itself lacks consensus on what to do. It was by a narrow 4-3 vote last year that City Council voted to create a new Homeless Liaison Position to facilitate better cooperation and coordination among the various organizations throughout the community who strive to assist the homeless. Last November, Melissa Adams was hired to fill this position, and she has wasted no time in bringing the City to the forefront of the local conversation about homelessness. She has recently presented City Council with a very ambitious proposal to create a low-barrier shelter where each of the local organizations involved with homelessness can have a physical presence. This proposal is called the Life Hub, and it is modelled on what other cities across the nation are doing, including Pittsburgh. At this point, it is just an idea. And bringing it into fruition would require ample federal and state grants, along with

generous private philanthropy, to supplement whatever resources the City directs to it.

The costs of any holistic solution will be considerable. But the costs of doing nothing will be higher. We cannot afford to ignore this problem and be the City we want to be.

My next honoree today knows a thing or two about homelessness. For years now he has taken his family medicine practice out of his office and into the streets and campsites where our homeless population resides with the Project HOPE program he helped create. I am of course referring to Dr. William Mercer, who is joined today by his wife, Gigi Mercer.

In four decades of practicing medicine in Wheeling, Dr. Mercer always felt a responsibility beyond his patients to the community at large. He served as the Health Officer for the Wheeling-Ohio County Health Department for over 20 years, and along the way worked to make Wheeling one of the first cities in West Virginia to have restaurants and bars be smoke free.

He created the *Joe Too Cool To Smoke* program to educate children on the harmful effects of smoking. The larger-than-life Snoopy figure embodying this program resides in the lobby of WesBanco Arena. It is incredibly rare for the Schulz family of Peanuts' fame loan the copyright for their iconic character to anyone, but they were sold on Dr. Mercer's passion.

During his decades of practice in our community, he has accumulated a number of awards from just about every health-related entity across the State. And he was recently nominated for a prestigious American Public Health Association award that celebrates health officers who have shown creative and innovative way of helping their communities.

Please join me in thanking Dr. William Mercer for his decades of service towards the greater health of everyone in our community.

Our last honoree today cannot be with us because of a scheduled knee-replacement surgery. But knowing Loma Nevels as I do, she will soon be putting her new knee joint to work.

In 2015, Loma retired as assistant superintendent in the Wheeling Water Department after nearly 32 years as a City employee. She was both the first female and the first Black supervisor at any level of our City government. When interviewed by the *Intelligencer* upon her retirement, she notably hinted that she had more to do, saying:

*I have a rocking chair, but I'm not ready to start rocking in it.*

And I am here to report that Loma's rocking chair is still collecting dust seven years later. She remains an active member of numerous local organizations, including:

- The Women's Circle of Wheeling
- The Wheeling Housing Authority
- Wheeling Neighborhood Ventures
- The NAACP
- Wheeling Heritage

She also currently serves as President of the Board of the House of Carpenter and as serves as a very vocal member of the City's Human Rights Commission. And in 2016, she came within four votes of winning a seat on City Council representing the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ward, which includes her beloved Wheeling Island.

During that campaign, an incident occurred that demonstrated Loma's strength of character. When one of her campaign signs was defaced with racist graffiti, Loma took the high road. She went out of her way to make clear that the actions in question spoke not for Wheeling but rather only for the individuals involved. She told the *Intelligencer*, and I quote:

*If doing this turned them on or whatever, I'm just glad I made their day.*

She added:

*I fear God. I don't fear man.*

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in giving Loma Nevels a round of applause loud enough that she can hear us from her outpatient recovery room.

As we wrap things up today, let me leave you with a challenge. We are a City rich in history and heritage. And as a people, we are prone to nostalgia. I too suffer from this clinical condition. I am old enough to remember shoppers walking shoulder to shoulder in Downtown Wheeling. I can recall watching fireworks from atop the Wharf Parking Garage. I can even remember when our Sunday newspaper came on . . . Sunday.

There is value in remembering and even celebrating our past. But when taken too far, our obsession with yesteryear can be problematic. Too often do we define what is possible in Wheeling solely by looking to our past.

For example, in practical terms, there is almost no chance for a future in Wheeling that includes tens of thousands of square feet of big-box retail stores lining our downtown streets. It is simply not going to happen no matter how many of us lament as much on social media.

Likewise, we must disabuse ourselves from the notion that the only thing that Wheeling is missing right now is more jobs. It is true that cities used to compete with job openings. But today's labor market is different. Far fewer workers today will spend their entire careers with the same employer as their grandparents might have done. Far more workers today are choosing where they want to live *first* and deciding where they want to work *second*. Add the newfound possibilities of remote work to the equation, and it is clear the world has changed.

More than ever, cities are being forced to compete in the quality-of-life marketplace. Workers are looking for safe neighborhoods, beautiful parks, vibrant and walkable downtowns, diverse restaurant and night scenes, accessible venues for public and private art, and a culture of inclusion. And Wheeling's success as a city in the decades to come will be determined by its ability to meet these expectations.

This does not mean we should not do what we can to attract outside businesses. But it does mean that we should recognize that increasingly, *employers* are going where the prospective *employees* are. Not the other way around.

And so my challenge is simply this: Please try not to let your memories *of* Wheeling cloud your dreams *for* Wheeling.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience today. And to all honorees and their families, I not only thank you for your contributions to this community but also ask that you stick around for a few minutes for photos.

Let me wrap things by saying that the State of the City is bright and for first the first time in many generations, defined more by its future than by its past. Buckle up.

Thank you.