

Good afternoon. Welcome to the 12<sup>th</sup> annual State of the City Address in the City of Wheeling. This is my fifth opportunity to speak to you as Mayor for this event.

To be honest, I was not sure if I would have this opportunity. Much has changed in 17 months since we last gathered in this forum to celebrate our shared fondness for the City of Wheeling. Last June, we had our quadrennial municipal election that brought three new faces to Wheeling City Council. For better or worse, that election also returned four of us, including yours truly, to second four-year terms.

But it is no secret that the big story of the past 17 months has been and continues to be something of an entirely different nature—the worst global pandemic that the world has faced in over a century. I will have much more to say on this topic later on, but let me just say how gratifying it is to be here—in person, not on some *Zoom* call—with so many familiar faces today.

Now, let us get started. Let me first thank those who made today’s event possible.

Thank you to the City of Wheeling Police and Fire Honor Guard for presenting our national, state, and city flags.

Thank you, Rabbi Lief, 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 Sklavanoukis, Ty Thorngate, and Dave Palmer.

Thank you as well 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
- Public Works Director Rusty Jebbia
- Building and Planning Director Tom Connelly
- Community Development Director Nancy Prager
- Police Chief Shawn Schwertfeger
- Fire Chief Jim Blazier
- Human Resources Director David Hacker
- 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.

And last but not least, let me also thank the former members of City Council who served through June of 2020, Ken Imer, Melinda Koslik, and Wendy Scatterday.

When I first took office five years ago, the State of the City event had already evolved into something special. And so I pledged to myself that I would stick to the basic format so as not to ruin a good thing. And I believe we have done that, with attendance continuing to grow for this event.

But we did make one substantive change, and I believe it is an important one. With so much of this event focused on the present and future *state* of the City of Wheeling, we felt it important to honor those contributions of yesteryear that helped move the needle forward in this community. We called this new honor the Gateway Award.

And for the past four years, it has been *my* distinct honor to bestow this award on former Mayor Jack Lipphardt, former City Councilman Barry Crow, former Mayor Nick Sparachane, and former Wheeling Heritage executive director Hydie Friend, respectively. That is quite a group of people right there.

And today's recipient of the fifth annual Gateway Award is no exception. I am of course talking about former City Manager, former Councilman, and former Vice Mayor of the City of Wheeling, **Mike Nau**.

It is difficult to think of anyone who has served the City of Wheeling longer and in more capacities than Mike Nau. Hired by the City as a housing administrator in 1972, Mike worked his way up to zoning administrator and later Assistant City Manager. From 1985 to 1990, he served as City Manager. By that point, most people would have had their fill of municipal government. But Mike then sought and won a seat on City Council, serving as Vice Mayor for a remarkable 18 years until he chose not to seek re-election in 2008.

During Mike's 36 years serving the people of Wheeling, the City faced countless pressures, including a declining regional industrial base and business trends that drove retail commerce away from downtowns. Nevertheless, the City, with Mike very much in the mix, weathered these storms as well—if not better—than any other community in this Valley.

During this time the City took decisive action to redesign its ignored waterfront into Heritage Port and develop citywide bike trails. The Wheeling Stamping Building became home to hundreds of Orrick employees. The vacant Stone & Thomas Building was redeveloped into an important Downtown office building that is today filled with employees. The City worked with various partners to save the Capital Theatre. And Wheeling became one of the pilot cities in the State's Home Rule program, which was initiated in 2008 and became permanent in 2020. Mike Nau was at the center of all these decisions and countless others.

During my five years holding public office, the truth of that famous Abraham Lincoln quote about not being able to please all the people all the time has been affirmed. Over and over again. When you make tough decisions, you win some friends and you create some critics. Sometimes even enemies. But what is amazing to me about Mike Nau is that despite his long service to his community—including *18 years* holding public office—he somehow managed to emerge from it

all as well liked and respected as when he started. This is especially true of those who served with him.

Consider this quote from former Mayor Nick Sparachane, who tapped Mike to be his Vice Mayor during both of his terms:

*In my tenure as Mayor of Wheeling, I cannot think of anyone who contributed more to the City than Mike Nau in his roles as a former City Manager, Councilman and Vice-Mayor. He totally understood the innerworkings of the City and was a guiding light for our Council.*

Or this quote from former Mayor Jack Lipphardt, who also chose Mike as Vice Mayor:

*[When Mike was first picked as Assistant City Manager, it was] a selection worth its weight in gold. [And when the City Manager position opened] it was a no-brainer to appoint Mike. Mike's administrative capabilities could only be exceeded by his impeccable character. I count it an honor to have served in city government with [Mike Nau].*

Going back a little further, this is how former Mayor Stella Koerner was quoted about Mike Nau in the Wheeling Intelligencer:

*I've often said, and I've even told him, that if I had ever been lucky enough to have had a son, I would have wanted him to be like Mike Nau.*

Wow. Mike joins us today with his wife of 49 years, Susan, and children. Mike, if I could just have you stand up. I would like to ask all of you to please join me in congratulating the City of Wheeling's 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Gateway Award recipient, **Mike Nau**.

Before we move on to all the exciting things happening in our community in 2021, let us take a few moments to reflect on what we have collectively come through in the past year and a half.

It began with news reports in late 2019 and early 2020 from other places about a new, highly contagious virus coming out of China. By March of 2020, we had our first documented cases of COVID-19 in our community. By mid-April, we had our first COVID-19 death. It had taken Ohio County three months to reach 60 active cases but just three weeks to more than double that.

For the first time in modern history, all non-essential businesses were ordered to be shuttered by order of our Governor. Concepts foreign to the American experience, such as mask-wearing and practicing social distancing, became part and parcel with our everyday life.

We moved quickly at the City level to accommodate the new reality that unfolded in early 2020. We suspended water shut offs. We cut the red tape for outdoor dining. We facilitated curbside pickup. We set up drop boxes for utility bill payments and building permit applications. We partnered with YSS to relocate the Winter Freeze Shelter to the OVMC campus.

And then for many of us, COVID-19 began to hit close to home. In a community like Wheeling, there is probably no more than three degrees of separation between any of us. And so when a global pandemic began to strike a few of us, we all inevitably felt it. Those of us here today are in many respects the lucky ones. I am willing to wager that everyone here knew someone who succumbed to COVID-19.

Let us take a short moment of silence to reflect upon the lives of those 90+ local residents that this virus took from us.

Which brings me to our next two honorees. Two men tasked by their jobs with keeping us safe who have worked tirelessly to do just that in the face of a global pandemic. I am of course referring to **Howard Gamble**, Wheeling-Ohio County Health Department Administrator and **Lou Vargo**, Director of the Wheeling-Ohio County Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency.

From the inception of the COVID-19 crisis, both Howard and Lou recognized the perilous risks that a community like Wheeling, with its older population, faced from an aggressive airborne virus that attacks the respiratory system. Their considerable training and experience served them well.

Both men hold Master's degrees from the West Virginia University School of Medicine. Howard, a Master's in Public Health; Lou, a Master of Science in community health management. Howard has been in his current position since 2007; Lou, since 1990. That is 45 combined years of public health experience. In short, our community was very lucky to have two seasoned experts in such critical positions as COVID-19 found its way to the Ohio Valley.

From the beginning, those of us in public office looked to both Howard and Lou for guidance. Tough decisions were inevitable, but looking back, I believe our community was served very well by these two gentlemen. By the time the virus had been detected here, they had worked with Wheeling Hospital to establish a testing site, first at Wheeling Park, and then at multiple sites across the city, including the former OVMC campus. Thus far, there have been 88,817 COVID-19 tests administered in Ohio County thanks to their efforts.

Beyond testing though, they helped facilitate a system for contact tracing and provided government officials with critical guidance on how to continue serving the public amidst the pandemic. And then starting in December 2020, they began the massive undertaking of administering COVID-19 vaccines to all eligible members of the local population. To date, more than 36,000 vaccines have been administered locally, representing roughly 57% of the local population.

If you are an adult without special circumstances who remains unvaccinated today, you cannot blame Howard Gamble or Lou Vargo. Both men have gone above and beyond to make the vaccine process as painless and convenient as it can be while relying on the latest scientific consensus.

Those of you who are choosing to remain unvaccinated without special circumstances are relying on something *other than* the accepted scientific consensus. It is as simple as that. And you are putting our community at risk not only of more COVID-19 deaths but also future

shutdowns. Is there anyone here today who wants to see another Governor's order shutting everything down? I know that I emphatically do not. I have enjoyed seeing our economy re-opened, and as I will discuss below, there are many exciting investments taking place in our community this very moment.

As impressive as it is to see 57% of us vaccinated in this community, both Howard and Lou would agree that we need to do better. Across the nation right now, 99% of the people dying from COVID-19 are unvaccinated. 99%. That is a demonstrable fact. And so I urge all those choosing not to be vaccinated to reconsider their decision. In this quest, please put politics aside and seek the scientific consensus clearly visible to all willing to see it. Howard and Lou would both deeply appreciate it, as would I.

Please join me in congratulating **Howard Gamble** and **Lou Vargo** for their tireless efforts over the past year and a half to keep our community as safe as possible during a global pandemic.

Now, as noted, COVID-19 brought the first global pandemic to the City of Wheeling in 100 years. Beyond its impact on human lives, it did take some of the wind out of the local economy during much of 2020 and early 2021.

But in spite of all of this, we are currently seeing both public and private investment in our community at levels equally unseen in the past 100 years.

For starters, we are in the midst of a three-year, \$215 million highway project by the West Virginia Division of Highways that is the largest single highway project in West Virginia in terms of both scope and cost. When complete, we will have 26 bridges on I-70 bisecting Ohio County that are either fully renovated or replaced as part of this project.

Two other significant WV-DOH projects are set to get underway in the coming months.

One will represent a roughly \$35 million investment into the streetscape in Downtown Wheeling. This project will span State Route 2 Downtown consisting of:

- Main from 9<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>;
- Market from 10<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>;
- 10<sup>th</sup> from Main to Market;
- 16<sup>th</sup> from Main to Eoff;
- Eoff from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>; and
- Chapline from 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>

It will also include the City-owned streets of 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> between Main and Market.

For each street in question, there will be new sidewalks, new light signals, new crosswalks, new trees, new curb bump-outs to enhance the pedestrian experience, and new stormwater retention capabilities, including bioswales. And of course, new street surfaces.

I can say with no exaggeration that no issue generates more criticism for those of us on City Council than the current condition of those streets just mentioned. Trust me, I am frustrated by their condition too, and I am frustrated that this project has not yet commenced.

But these are not City-owned streets. They are state-owned. And state engineers working on this project have encountered numerous obstacles in the past few years finalizing design plans—not the least of which is the existence of dozens of underground vaults along this streetscape.

If there is a silver lining to the delays on this project, it is that the project has been expanded well beyond its original scope to include the entirety of Route 2 in Downtown Wheeling. When complete, it will represent the first total facelift for our Downtown streetscape since 1980, and the underground improvements being made in advance of this project will encourage investments for decades to come.

Another imminent WV-DOH project is the rehabilitation of the historic Suspension Bridge, which has been closed to vehicular traffic since September 2019. The DOH has requested that bids for this project be submitted by August 10 of this year. This project is estimated to be between \$8 and \$15 million and will ensure the structural integrity of this historic bridge while adding decorative lights. Whether the bridge will re-open to traffic remains an open question about which there will be many conversations in the months and years ahead.

When it comes to City-owned streets, this City Council and its immediate predecessor have embarked on an unprecedented amount of paving projects over the past five years. To date, **\$4.9 million** has been spent resurfacing approximately **245 streets** within City limits, including portions of the bike trail. There is no five-year period of local paving in City history that comes anywhere close to this. Obviously, much work remains, but we on City Council are committed to catching up with all overdue paving projects and ensuring that funding is in place for more frequent paving in the years ahead. We are even looking at expanding our paving to many alleys citywide, most of which have not been touched since the 1980s.

And we are continuing to move the needle forward on critical investments to our underground infrastructure. Since July of 2016, this City Council and its predecessor have invested **\$11 million** in water and sewer infrastructure improvements. This summer alone, we plan to move forward with another **\$6 million** worth of wastewater treatment improvements and **\$25 million** worth of sewer projects.

The City of Wheeling also has three new major construction projects that are queued up and ready to go.

The first is a \$6 million transformation of the Valley Professional Center on the former OVMC campus into a new, state-of-the-art headquarters for the Wheeling Police Department. When completed in December of 2022, no longer will City law enforcement officers be forced to work out of the cramped, 4,600 square foot corner of the City County Building that they have occupied since 1959. The new facility will give the WPD all the tools they need to perform their critical duties to keep us safe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including an improved officer working environment, driving and real time simulation, secure evidence processing, and so on.

Likewise, we have taken the first steps in acquiring property in on 17<sup>th</sup> Street in East Wheeling to house the new \$6.4 million headquarters for the Wheeling Fire Department. This new structure will replace the current outdated facility located beneath the Center Wheeling Garage with additional functionality, including regional training capabilities. It will also bring a much-needed facelift to the portion of East Wheeling south of 17<sup>th</sup> Street, which is in the midst of a rebirth in its own right.

The third planned City construction project is a multi-story parking structure to be located upon the site of the former Chase Bank Building at 11<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets. This new garage will provide adequate off-street parking to support the redevelopment of the historic Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel Building and provide additional parking capacity in the portion of Downtown where it is most needed. Importantly, this new structure will also house roughly 9,500 square feet of 1<sup>st</sup> floor retail space fronting both 11<sup>th</sup> and Market Streets to encourage more entrepreneurs to establish Downtown retail locations.

All three of these new construction projects will be overseen by the City's revived Municipal Building Commission, which is chaired by the first of today's honorees, Mike Nau, and which also includes former Vice Mayor Gene Fahey and former Councilman David Miller. I thank each of them for their service and anxiously await these projects moving forward.

And in terms of public investment, while not a City project, I would be remiss if I did not note that Ohio County Schools has recently embarked on a \$76 million district-wide property improvement plan that includes considerable rehabilitation of beautiful, historic school buildings across our community.

Combined, these public projects represent a combined investment of roughly **\$400 million** into the greater Wheeling community. I challenge anyone to find any comparable period of critical public investments made locally in the last 100 years.

But what gives me an even greater hope for the future of this City is both the actual and imminent *private* investment taking place right before our eyes.

While some projects have encountered delays resulting from astronomical costs of materials exacerbated by the pandemic, it is worth a quick survey of those private projects in motion:

As mentioned earlier, work is underway on the \$30 million rehabilitation of the former Wheeling Pittsburgh Steel Building into a loft apartment complex. This project has been many years in the making, but let us not underestimate just how important it is to see Downtown's tallest building restored to productive use after nearly a decade of vacancy. Losing a structure like this would have been unforgiveable, and it gives me great joy to see Coon Restoration employees entering and exiting it each day as part of an 18-month rehabilitation project.

Less than a block south on Market Street is the historic McLure Hotel, which was purchased this month by Roxby Development as part of a major rehabilitation project. While plans for this enormous project are still unfolding, it is very encouraging to see such investment to a property that for many years now could be described as underperforming.

Moving across Downtown you see the historic Bridge Tavern building, which is currently undergoing a multimillion-dollar renovation from top to bottom, thanks to the efforts and commitment of the Carl family. Anyone on social media surely saw that outpouring of support and joy when the building's new neon sign was installed and illuminated at the corner of 10<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets. Make no mistake: That sign is an instant classic and will inevitably become an iconic "must see" on visits to Wheeling.

If you are on Chapline Street, chances are that you will see concrete foundations being poured for the new Ohio Valley Community Federal Credit Union—representing the second new private construction building in Downtown since the 1980s, with the first being The Health Plan headquarters.

Other projects may not have received as much attention, but are rapidly changing the look and feel of our beautiful city.

If you have not done so yet, stop and marvel at the gorgeous restoration of the front porch and façade of the historic Fort Henry Club being undertaken by McKinley Architecture and Engineering.

Or check out the transformative new windows and updated façade to the former Berry Supply Building on Water Street, under renovation by the Milleson family.

Or peek inside the front door of the ongoing total rehabilitation of the former Posin's building on Market Street being undertaken by the Hamilton family.

Or take a look at the ongoing masonry work on Downtown's oldest building, the First Presbyterian Church on Chapline Street.

Or look up at the ongoing roof replacement project taking place at the historic Victoria Theatre.

Or perhaps stroll through Market Plaza and see the refurbished pedestrian corridor crossing to Main Street, lined by several buildings acquired and rehabilitated by Dean Connors.

For our part, we have worked very diligently to create incentives for private investments in our built environment. During the past three years, City Council has awarded 30 façade improvement program matching grant awards totaling \$326,631. These public-sector investments have leveraged more than \$2 million in private sector investments in the subject properties—including some of the projects mentioned just moments ago. Earlier this year, thanks to the urging of Vice Mayor Thalman and Councilman Ty Thorngate, we expanded this program to apply to commercial properties outside the Downtown footprint. We encourage all owners of qualifying properties to contact the City to learn more about this important program.

Any way you look at it, Wheeling is—right now—a city being rebuilt before our very eyes.

For the last few years, the next of today's honorees has been doing its own part to rebuild a portion of Wheeling Island. In June of 2020—in the heart of the pandemic—the **House of Carpenter** finished construction on a new \$2.7 million youth center to expand its work with



children, youth, and families. When combined with its work on the nearby playground at Madison School, the House of Carpenter will have invested more than \$3 million in Wheeling Island since 2019.

**Reverend and Dr. Michael Linger** has been the Executive Director of the House of Carpenter since 2011. Along with his Board of Directors, he brought a changing vision to the mission of the House of Carpenter—transitioning from merely providing assistance for the current needs of local residents to beginning a movement to empower people to reclaim their lives and achieve self-sufficiency. This work includes not only assistance in paying bills but budgeting classes, money management, and even cooking classes. The work of the House of the Carpenter is supplemented by a terrific staff and by a number of community volunteers who provide over 18,000 hours of service each year.

Please join me in congratulating **Dr. Linger** and the **House of Carpenter** for their commitment to and investment in the future of our great city.

Our next honoree is someone who has been on the other side of the development equation, serving on the City’s Planning Commission for nearly a quarter of a century. **Jeff Mauck** embodies the characteristics you look for in a citizen volunteer—rarely missing a commission meeting and always being well-prepared for the subjects being discussed. Jeff had the opportunity to serve as chairman of the Planning Commission several times during his tenure, and he also served on the important 2014 Comprehensive Plan steering committee. Just last year, he chaired one of the largest public hearings in the history of Wheeling as the GC&P project in Woodsdale was considered. Remarkably, that hearing was carried out at WesBanco Arena in the middle of the pandemic with the requisite social distancing and mask wearing safeguards in place. Throughout his time on the Commission, Jeff has never been hesitant to challenge City staff on its recommendations, and he would regularly pose questions to applicants that would allow the Commission to make a more informed decision. For his long, proud tenure on the Planning Commission, please join me in congratulating **Jeff Mauck**.

For the last part of today’s event, I would like to focus on a variety of topics, organizations, and people that contribute to what we think of as our **quality of life** here in the Friendly City.

Let me begin with a Wheeling native who returned home in 2018 after several decades away and immediately set about making a difference in her hometown.

I am referring of course to **Ellen Gano**, the 2021 recipient of the City’s Community Spirit Award.

Born and raised in Wheeling, Ellen—like so many Wheeling natives in the past half century—left to follow her dreams elsewhere. After graduating from West Virginia University, she worked for various advertising agencies in Charleston, West Virginia, and then Washington, DC before landing a career position with the Department of Treasury. During her 24-year tenure with Treasury Department of the Treasury in Washington DC, Ellen held various public affairs positions focused on conveying information about United States currency—including the introductions of redesigned U.S. banknotes.

Upon her retirement in 2018, Ellen returned to her beloved hometown of Wheeling. But she did not come home seeking rest and relaxation. Rather, she committed to playing a part in the ongoing revitalization of Wheeling and founded **Volunteer Wheeling**. This organization calls upon area residents to participate in group projects, such as litter cleanups, curb painting, and streetscape beautification initiatives. Since its formation in 2018, more than 80 volunteers have been added to the roster. And during these three years, under her leadership Volunteer Wheeling has completed nearly 100 distinct projects in every corner of the Wheeling community.

It is difficult to put a dollar value on just how critical efforts like those of Ellen are for communities like Wheeling trying to reinvent themselves. But that value is real. And for her efforts, and those of the organization she set into motion, please join me in congratulating **Ellen Gano** for receiving the 2021 Community Spirit Award.

Wheeling has long characterized itself as the “Friendly City”, and that is a nickname that holds up very well for the most part across all local neighborhoods. But there is always room for improvement. It is no secret that we live in a nation still bitterly divided on issues such as race and class. Today’s next honoree is an organization that recognized this room for growth and set about doing something about. I am referring to the **Men of Change**, a group of 14 professional Black men in our city who banded together a little more than a year ago to make a difference by uniting the community instead of tolerating division. Since their founding, they have worked towards youth mentorship, economic empowerment, political literacy, and health initiatives.

Perhaps the best-known Men of Change project has been the weekly bike rides that they have hosted since Memorial Day weekend in an effort to bridge those differences that still divide us. When asked by the local media recently what prompted this initiative, the President of Men of Change, **Joe Sparksman** said, and I quote:

*We’re separate in our own neighborhoods. There’s so much division between us, if we can just get a group of people to ride together, you can get to meet your neighbors in your community.*

If you think about it, he is right. Many of us live in our own respective bubbles and do not have regular, meaningful interactions with those of different races or income levels. While I will not ask for a show of hands, my guess is very few of us have hosted or attended dinner parties with attendees from different races or significantly different income levels. Think about the people that you know the best—they are the ones with whom you have broken bread and had meaningful engagements together.

That is why I so deeply appreciate the mission of the Men of Change. By getting people—especially local children—out of their living rooms and away from their television sets and into a position where meaningful conversations can occur upon the common ground of a bike trail, they are helping to bind the fabric of our community with mutual understanding and empathy. Please join me in congratulating **Joe Sparksman** and the **Men of Change** for their efforts to put the *friendly* in “Friendly City” and enhance our local quality of life.

Today’s next honoree is a lifelong Wheeling resident who has been leading a quiet movement to improve the quality of life in his upper North Wheeling neighborhood for several

decades now. You may know him as the deacon of Faith Community Church in North Wheeling or as a long-time sales executive at Cardinal Health. Or as the owner of two small businesses in North Wheeling. I know him as **Ray Carney**. And since I first took office a little over five years ago, his has been a steady voice in my ear advocating for improvements to his neighborhood.

Along with Dina, his wife of 35 years, Ray has acquired 30 North Wheeling properties in the past few decades, rehabbing those that could be saved, and demolishing those that were compromised. Several years ago, when the building that housed his church burnt to the ground, Ray donated land at the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Kenney Streets on which a new church could be built, partly by rehabbing a dilapidated structure, partly with new construction. At Ray's invitation, I toured the troubled structure that now houses part of the church in 2019. Standing inside the long-vacant structure, I must admit being somewhat skeptical as Ray discussed the grand plans for the property. But upon visiting several months ago, I could not help but marvel at what Ray had helped accomplish through perseverance and private donations. While more work remains, the lesson is clear: Do not underestimate Ray Carney.

Please join me in congratulating **Ray Carney** for his contributions to his North Wheeling neighborhood.

Today's next honoree is another Wheeling native who has sought to enhance the quality of life in the greater Wheeling community. Through his passion of youth baseball, **Doug Costain** has made an indelible impact on the lives of countless Wheeling youth. He has started various programs to help the children of the Ohio Valley better themselves as well as deepen their love for the game of baseball. Sixteen years ago, he started the Pinto Challenge—a baseball tournament for 7- and 8-year-olds. Held at the I-470 baseball complex, the Pinto Challenge gives its participants a “major league” feeling. Doug leveraged the success of the Pinto Challenge into the Foundations Baseball Organization, which helps young athletes expand their knowledge of the game while building foundational skills.

Funds from Foundations Baseball and other programs in which Doug has played a role have supported many other community sports teams as well as individuals in dire need. In coordination with the OVAC, Foundations Baseball gave out its first college scholarship this year and the hopes are for this scholarship to grow in the future.

Doug's other local baseball-related activities are too numerous to mention. In short, if it involves Wheeling and baseball, chances are he has been in the mix in some capacity. Doug joins us today with his wife of 26 years, Christy. Please join me in congratulating **Doug Costain** for years of giving back to his community through his passion of youth baseball.

Our last—but certainly not least—honoree today is someone who has been deeply engaged in the conversation about building a better Wheeling for many years now. I am referring to **Susie Nelson**, who has served as Executive Director of The Community Foundation for the Ohio Valley since 2007. Early in her career, Susie made a choice to return to Wheeling when so many of her peers sought greener pastures elsewhere. And without ever seeking the limelight for herself, she has quietly made a difference in our community.

Under her leadership, Community Foundation assets have tripled from \$24 million in 2007 to \$72 million today. This has enabled this critical organization to grant millions of dollars to local groups working to improve the quality of life in the greater Wheeling area. During her tenure she has brought outside exposure to Wheeling while serving as past board chair and current board member of Philanthropy West Virginia. Recently, she was elected to chair the Community Foundations National Standards Board.

But it is something she did very recently that embodies her behind-the-scenes approach. For the past several years, even before the pandemic, we have seen our local homelessness problem in this city worsen. Homelessness is one of those issues about which nearly everyone has an opinion but few can offer tested solutions. In September of 2020, following media coverage of City Council grappling with this issue, Susie reached out to me personally and offered to use the Community Foundation's role as a convener to bring in an outside consultant to meet with the various local organizations engaged in combatting homelessness. After several long *Zoom* calls with yours truly and Councilors Ketchum and Seidler, Susie took the lead on arranging for a trained facilitator to come to Wheeling and host a conversation among the various organizations whose missions involve homelessness. That meeting happened in November 2020 and led to some key take-aways that ultimately led to City Council approving the creation of a new Homeless Liaison position. The goal is simple: Fostering the type of collaborative effort needed to effect community-wide change on the homelessness front.

Whether this new position will be effective remains to be seen, but for our purposes today, I would like simply to highlight the way **Susie Nelson** saw her role here. She called no press conferences, issued no press releases, but simply worked behind the scenes using the tools at her disposal within the Community Foundation. For that, and for her years of contributions to this community, please join me in honoring her today.

As always, at this event, time is not my friend. There is so much I want to say, but brevity has never been counted within my skillset. In the few short minutes we have remaining, let me wrap things up today with three upcoming initiatives that you will be hearing more about in the months to come:

First, about that dreaded User Fee. So much of the public debate and discussion on that topic centered around our need for updated public safety facilities. Those projects were mentioned earlier. What people sometimes forget is that half of all dollars collected from this fee are dedicated to infrastructure projects. Much of the early spending of these funds has been centered around critical road slips in neighborhoods across the City. This was necessary. But going forward, you can expect to see some more visible projects taking shape. Perhaps no more visible will be the replacement of the sidewalk and fencing alongside Wheeling Hill with something safe and attractive. Stay tuned.

Second, earlier this year, our Mayor's Advisory Committee on Economic and Industrial Development studied prior City plans dating to the 1960s. Every plan we looked at shared one common suggestion: Increase our connectivity to our waterfront. While much progress was made in the 1990s with the creation of Heritage Port, the fact of the matter is that we are leaving a lot on the table when it comes to exploiting our waterfront for economic growth. Plans are already in place for a new park on Wheeling Island immediately south of the Suspension Bridge.

And we are very excited about plans for the Robrecht property behind Main Street Bank. But let us figure out how to take this further. Let us be the generation that gets this right.

Lastly, a common complaint we receive on City Council is that Wheeling just does not get the same caliber of music and comedy shows that it did in the 1980s. To be honest, I am one of those complainers. I remember the bevy of incredible acts I saw live at the then-Civic Center as a teenager. From conversations with local officials like Denny Magruder and Frank O'Brien, as well as regional promoters who are interested in bringing more shows to Wheeling, we have identified that we need to revisit the way these shows are financed. We have to follow the leads of other communities and offset some of the risks these promoters face so that more of them are willing to take a chance on Wheeling. The idea currently on the table is an Entertainment Endowment Fund that is funded and managed jointly by the City and the CVB. So many details remain to be finalized, but stay tuned for an exciting discussion in the months ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have been so incredibly patient with me today, and for that I thank you. Let me wrap this event up by saying what I hope you all feel in your hearts: That the State of the City is primed and ready for the future.

Thank you.