



Mayor Lee Brand – State of the City Address June 30, 2020

Good evening, Fresno.

I know this is a change from our tradition for the Mayor's annual "State of the City" address – but by now, we should be used to doing things differently.

In that spirit, I'm going to show you an up close and personal view of me in my role as your Mayor.

This is my last address to the people of Fresno, and I want to speak from my heart to express my gratitude for having the opportunity of serving you as your Mayor.

But before I begin my speech, let me pause for a few moments to reflect on my life, remembering many years ago, a troubled young boy struggling to grow up in a poor neighborhood on McKenzie Street in Southeast Fresno.

My life has followed a long and winding journey through good times and bad. As a young boy, my world was bleak and my future was uncertain.

As I grew into a teenager, my troubles mounted, and I was arrested in 1964 at my Junior High School and booked in the Fresno County Jail. Later that year my father died, leaving my mother a widow, raising three children on a social security check. This was the worst year of my life.

Through hard work, fortuitous events and by the grace of God, I was able to overcome the many challenges I faced. I was the first in my family to graduate from college and shortly after graduation I started a small business that grew into a much larger, successful business.

And the most important part of my life was marrying my wife Trish, having four children and four grandchildren.

So I hope you can now understand when I say not a day goes by that I don't remember where I came from **and** in my wildest dreams, I could have never imaged being here today as the Mayor of Fresno.

I want you all to know how proud I am to be your Mayor. For the past three and a half years I have committed my heart and soul to making Fresno a better city for all of us. This has been no easy task.

In both a campaign and while in office, your family shares your triumphs and your failures. This is the burden and the sacrifice that goes with the job.

Being an elected official in today's world of 24-hour news cycles and a constant stream in social media is invasive and sometimes repugnant. But I have no regrets, because it was my choice to become Mayor.

But I can candidly tell you, as much as I have treasured my time as Mayor, my heart longs for the private life I gave up over 18 years ago. I miss traveling with my wife and I miss spending more time with my grandchildren. And I won't miss controversy, conflict or 12-hour workdays.

These are troubled and divisive times. Our City and the nation are facing unprecedented challenges, as the fabric of our great nation is pulling apart – but not breaking – headed in an uncertain direction. It's up to us all to find the 'better angels of our nature' and to forge a path together for a united city where we all stand together.

In these tumultuous times, change is everywhere.

We can see it in the way we work, the way we interact with family and friends, the way we make choices and the way we express what matters to us.

It's been over 100 days since our whole world changed. Challenging, fearful and uncomfortable at times, and at times humbling, peaceful and encouraging.

During this unprecedented juncture in our city's history, I've asked you to sacrifice your normal routines to help us save lives, knowing that it would cause much adversity.

President Theodore Roosevelt, for whom my high school alma mater was named, once said, "In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."

In response to an unseen adversary, I chose to do what I felt in my heart was the right thing – and I stand by those decisions. We are all still learning how to manage this virus and I believe we are doing better than most cities in protecting the health of the community and also allowing our economy to rebound.

We still face many challenges ahead and we'll have many more hardships to endure, but in the end, we can all be proud of the way we have responded to every crisis put in front of us.

And in that spirit, I want to share my thoughts about the state of this great city and the future that lies ahead.

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to many special people. First, thank you to Nathan Ahle and the Greater Fresno Area Chamber of Commerce and to the team at Nexstar and KSEE24 for inviting me to deliver the State of the City in this historic way.

To my wife Trish: thank you for your love and support and for putting up with me, working from home for the past three months. Only six more months to go, sweetheart.

To the members of the Fresno City Council: thank you for your service, and let's keep working together every day to make our city safer, stronger and fairer for all.

I would be remiss if I didn't recognize Councilmember Paul Caprioglio who has served this City as a Planning Commissioner and Councilmember for over 10 years. Like me, he will be terming out at the end of this year. I want to personally thank him for his public service and making Fresno a better place. I will miss you my friend.

To Wilma Quan, who has led this organization with wisdom, grace and steadfast resolve; our amazing executive team; and our exceptional department directors: thank you for guiding our city with resilience and resolve.

And to our City of Fresno employees: you have filled roles you never expected in order to maintain the essential services our residents and businesses depend on. Thank you for your service and your sacrifice.

Finally, to the citizens of Fresno: we could not have made it through the past 100 days without your support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

And thanks to you, the State of the City is ... **hopeful**.

Mayors before me and the mayors who follow always use this time to proclaim that the state our city is strong.

And Fresno was strong at the start of this year. But over the past six months, we have witnessed a “Tale of Two Seasons,” seasons as different as summer from winter.

Before the pandemic hit and shook this city to its core, Fresno was in the best financial shape in its history.

Our unemployment rate, which for decades had languished at double digits, hit 4.7% last summer and was the lowest sustained jobless rate in Fresno’s history.

We have built and maintained an A+ credit rating after rising from junk bond status 10 years ago, allowing us to refinance our bonds and dramatically reduce our debt.

We have secured a \$34 million reserve balance, less than a decade removed from the brink of bankruptcy.

We are the only city in California with a fully-funded pension system and one of only seven in the nation.

By all accounts, Fresno has been one of the best-run, fiscally responsible cities in America. And that's something to be proud of.

We should also be proud of an historic collaboration between city and citizen that turned a \$66.5 million-dollar Transformative Climate Communities grant into over \$177 million in economic development in Downtown, Chinatown and Southwest Fresno.

This past year, we have seen a number of the projects approved from that grant to begin work, celebrating the beginning of a brighter and healthier future including:

- The Southwest Village Urban Farm and Community Garden in Southwest Fresno.
- The installation of solar panels at an affordable housing facility for seniors in Southwest Fresno, thanks to the Housing Authority.
- And building the Inside Out Community Garden at the Sunset Community, in partnership with the Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission, to plant trees and vegetables with community volunteers.

The three projects are the first of a total of 18 projects that include a new West Fresno Satellite Campus for Fresno City College, transportation improvements, affordable housing and local economic development.

We're also doing our part to transform the way our city looks. At last year's State of the City address, I announced the start of Keep Fresno Beautiful with a mission to organize, promote and maintain a city-wide effort to clean our neighborhoods, streets and highways.

Starting with our kickoff event last November at Mariposa Plaza downtown, the City has worked with partners from across the community to provide litter, weed and graffiti abatement and support citywide clean-up activities.

One activity in particular was especially meaningful to me. About 200 volunteers gathered on a Saturday in February to plant drought-tolerant trees on the McKenzie Trail in Southeast Fresno.

Thanks to Tree Fresno and CEO Mona Cummings, and the City's Public Works Landscape Division, we planted 180 trees that will help reduce carbon emissions, fight climate change and provide an attractive place for Fresnoans to enjoy the outdoors.

Even though COVID-19 has put a temporary hold on large gatherings, Keep Fresno Beautiful is busy planning new cleanup and beautification projects in the coming months.

But we haven't stopped cleaning up. In fact, in March we began the Highway Litter Abatement pilot program to tackle one of this city's biggest eyesores: the trash along our local highways.

The program is done through a partnership with the City, Caltrans District 6 and the Fresno County Transportation Authority, and in just four months, we've picked up over 2,000 bags of trash - that's more than 20 tons that our crews have collected.

And now that Caltrans has announced that they're resuming highway cleanup crews along the embankments, we'll have a sustainable program to keep our highways as free of litter as possible.

This is a big step in the right direction.

We've also taken a giant stride – literally crossing Highway 99 – toward finally completing a major transportation project that had been sitting dormant for decades: Veterans Boulevard.

Last September, we completed Phase One, a new \$5.5 million section of Bullard Avenue helping residents south of Herndon get to their destinations more quickly.

Phase Two is now underway, and to ensure that we can finally finish what we started back in 2003, the City of Fresno was awarded a U.S. Department of Transportation BUILD Grant for Veterans Boulevard, providing the final funding to complete this \$138 million project.

I want to thank Congressmen Jim Costa and Devin Nunes for their assistance in securing this grant.

Another important project that was debated for years was the need for a state-of-the-art animal shelter.

We all know the challenges our community has faced when it comes to animal control services. We looked at a number of options and studied countless designs. But solutions were hard to find.

Finally, this year the City reached an agreement with GAP Inc. to purchase 4.8 acres of land on Airways Boulevard for \$1 with the plan of building a state-of-the-art animal shelter on the site.

This parcel is part of the 200 acres of land adjacent to Fresno Yosemite International Airport that the City sold to The Gap in 1997 to build their regional distribution warehouse. It's the perfect location.

None of this would have been possible without the cooperation and collaboration with The Gap, who has been a great corporate partner from day one.

The design contract was awarded back in January and the construction contract was awarded last month. We expect this state-of-the-art facility to be completed by next May.

In 2017, the Federal government initiated Opportunity Zones to encourage private investment in distressed areas.

This past year, we launched “Opportunity Fresno,” a website that provides a platform for local business owners and developers to showcase new investment opportunities.

Nowhere is the need for investment and understanding more important than with our homeless community.

Homelessness continues to be a crisis in California, and while Fresno has lower numbers than other big cities, it’s still a constant struggle, especially during this pandemic.

Between 2010 and 2017, Fresno reduced homelessness by 59% thanks to our “Housing First” strategy.

But last year, we saw a 16% increase in homelessness over 2018 and expect another increase for 2020.

With 78% of Fresno’s homeless population without a roof over their heads, we saw the need to invest in shelters.

We developed a framework for action based on best practices from other cities, including smaller triage centers and low barrier shelters, with a goal of safely exiting in 90 days.

All that we needed was the funding and working with the other big city mayors in California, the Governor has budgeted millions of dollars to help us with this crisis.

We received \$3.1 million in HEAP funding, and our Continuum of Care received \$9 million and together, we opened up four low barrier Triage Centers with a total of 127 beds.

And we have great news: 98% of those beds are being utilized by our most vulnerable population. The most exciting figure is that 65% of residents exit to safe housing with 34% transitioned to permanent housing.

While these are encouraging numbers, we desperately need more funds for additional housing and services. Thankfully, Fresno received nearly \$6.2 million from the State for more housing and outreach starting next July.

The big changes take time and collective effort.

I would like to recognize a few extraordinary individuals like Pastor DJ Criner, Fresno State NAACP Chapter President D'Aungellique Jackson and local radio personality DJ Kay Rich for their impressive efforts to show government, the community and the world - in a peaceful and powerful way - that we need real change right here in Fresno. You have my sincere gratitude.

That's why I joined with Council President Miguel Arias and Councilmembers Luis Chavez and Esmeralda Soria to launch a commission for police reform. It will be led by former Fresno police officer, and my good friend and

former colleague Oliver Baines, and includes residents and local and national experts on community policing.

We are all looking forward to the commission's work so we can have an open and honest conversation about changing the way policing works in our city.

None of these changes will be effective without the right person leading them. That's why I am announcing today that the City will conduct a national search for Fresno's next police chief starting July 1st.

Mayor-Elect Jerry Dyer will be working with me on this crucial process.

Earlier I stated that over the past six months, we have witnessed a "Tale of Two Seasons," seasons as different as summer from winter.

At the start of 2020, we enjoyed a season of prosperity and excitement about Fresno's future. It was as bright as a brilliant sunset across our summer skies.

And then things changed dramatically and our second season, a kind of emotional winter filled with uncertainty, hit Fresno and the rest of our nation with a powerful punch.

We acted quickly and decisively, declaring a State of Emergency on March 16th to put our City in the best

position to protect the people of Fresno and be eligible for federal or state funding connected to the pandemic.

Two days later we asked you to shelter at home, wear masks to protect others, and practice physical distancing to help reduce the risk to public health and safety.

Our City employees stepped up to make sure your essential needs were taken care of.

We kept the water flowing and the busses running. We transitioned our service desks to online portals so you could pay bills and submit plans without having to leave home.

We donated masks and offered financial relief to small businesses hit hardest by the closures.

We put moratoriums on evictions and shutting off utilities to give you time to recover financially.

We've reopened our businesses and restarted our economy, putting thousands of people back to work and bringing optimism back to this great city.

We have been through two seasons together – the highest highs and the lowest lows – and have emerged into a new season. **A season of hope.**

As I close my remarks and consider the state of our city, I think of the words of Maya Angelou, the great American

poet and author, who once said, “We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt and plant forgiveness. Tear out arrogance and seed humility. Exchange love for hate, thereby making the present comfortable and the future promising.”

Those words should echo in every heart as we work as one for Fresno’s future, a future filled with promise, justice, opportunity and, most importantly, hope.

We will be strong again...TOGETHER.

Thank you again for giving me the privilege and honor of being the Mayor of this great City!

God bless you and may God bless the City of Fresno.