

State of the City 2022
Delivered by City Manager De'Carlton Seewood
June 2, 2022



Good morning, I'm De'Carlton Seewood, city manager for the City of Columbia. Thank you for joining me today for the State of the City, where I will highlight some of our successes from the past year and plans for the future. I will also outline some of the challenges we currently face. My hope is that when you leave here today you have a clear vision of where the City will move in the next year and what we aim to accomplish.

This is my first State of the City as city manager, but mine may not be the only new face in the room. We are beginning a new period here at the City of Columbia, with a new mayor, council member and even some staff, and soon, we will have several other new faces in leadership positions. We are currently in the process of interviewing candidates for Human Resources director. We have opened applications for a new fire chief, and will soon open applications for an Information Technology director and Public Works director.

I know this is a lot of change in our organization which, understandably, can be scary to some, but I see this as an opportunity for us to bring new ideas and experiences forward. This will push us to be better. As we welcome these new faces I challenge our staff to be open to new ideas, and to look at new ways of doing things rather than relying on the ways we've always done them. This outlook will be especially important as we address some of the most pertinent issues our community is facing.

I know the work we put out is only as good as the staff we have, so before I begin I want to thank our amazing employees, some of whom have joined us here today. Our assistant city manager once said working in municipal government is not a glamorous job, and I agree. It is oftentimes a thankless job. But, I know that our employees do not do this work for thanks. They do this work because they love it and because they want to make their community better. Our employees understand that we are about service, and each of us comes to work every day because we see the value in having neighborhoods with ample green space, safe drinking water, access to immunizations, a thriving business community and so much more.

While we do many things well, municipal governments can be slow to adapt and when it comes to compensating our workforce this remains true. The City is behind on providing adequate pay for employees, our most valuable asset, and we are seeing the effects with issues in hiring new staff and retaining employees. I know income is an integral part of creating an environment where employees, and in turn, their work can thrive, which is why I have identified this as a priority in the upcoming fiscal year. We are currently in the middle of a comprehensive classification and compensation study that will look at the pay and benefits of our workforce compared to the labor market, something we have not done since 2013.



We are at a critical point at the City. If we do not address the challenges we are facing with staffing now, we will start to see negative impacts to service and feel the consequences years down the road. We currently have vacancies in almost every department and more than 380 City employees will be eligible for retirement within the next five years.

Because we are at such a critical point with staffing, we are taking steps now while we wait on the results of that study. Mid-year pay adjustments of 3% have already been approved this fiscal year for permanent staff. I will also recommend in the upcoming budget an additional pay increase of 4%. Overall, this will equal a 7% across-the-board increase in pay for all permanent employees over two fiscal years. We have also implemented a one-time retention payment for employees who continued to provide critical City services during the pandemic. Additionally, leadership is looking at new, creative ways to recruit employees to join our team and to engage and retain a happy and healthy workforce. We want the City of Columbia to be an employer of choice.

Despite being understaffed, our employees are still accomplishing many great things. Last year around this time, former City Manager John Glascock stood before you and spoke about the adjustments City staff were making as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to maintain continuous operations. Even though all of us have come to live with the virus in some form, our staff has continued to adjust to changing circumstances.

Through their resiliency and flexibility, we have seen incredible success in fighting the pandemic. In Boone County, more than 62% of all residents have been fully vaccinated, compared to around 40% this time last year.

Our decision to follow the science surrounding the pandemic, educate the community about the importance of vaccinations and make them easily accessible has helped get us to a point where each of us can be here in person today. Tables at restaurants are full again and employees have returned to their offices. I know this pandemic is not over, but residents and business owners are now equipped to make decisions around their own health.

We have seen our tourism and hospitality industries that were so strongly impacted by the pandemic begin to bounce back. Festivities like the Roots N Blues, True False Film Festival and Unbound Book Festival returned to Columbia this year. Art in the Park will return to Columbia this weekend for the first time since 2019. We have seen conventions and meetings return to our city, meaning more people in our hotels and local businesses.

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In fiscal year 2021, occupancy rates in Columbia hotels climbed to just over 52%, up from just under 44% in fiscal year 2020. Notably, the number of permits for special events jumped to 51 in fiscal year 2021 from just 15 in fiscal year 2020. This year, we will continue to welcome sports teams, conferences and business travelers to our City. This summer, children are able to participate in summer camps and Parks and Recreation programs and enjoy their favorite summer sports. We are also looking forward to celebrating with each other at events like Fire in the Sky once again.

While we continue to push forward, we still have work to do in our recovery process. The pandemic highlighted disparities within our own community and has exacerbated issues like homelessness, and it is now our responsibility as a community to address these issues. We have an especially unique opportunity to do this using American Rescue Plan Act funding. Many of you will remember the City will receive \$25 million in funding to assist those individuals and industries impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We have one opportunity to invest in projects that will have transformational impacts and benefits for our community.

Public Health and Human Services recently began a robust community engagement process for the American Rescue Plan Act funding. This will allow our residents to be engaged in the process to determine how the money will be used in our community.

The City Council has identified four priority areas for the first half of the funding: community violence, homelessness, workforce development and behavioral health. Staff are putting together requests for proposals to find organizations that can build programs for each area in our community. The Columbia Housing Authority and other partners working with our unsheltered neighbors are currently putting together plans for addressing homelessness in our community. Having those community partners who are already working to help our unsheltered population at the same table will allow each of them to bring their expertise and innovative ideas.

While American Rescue Plan Act funding will help those impacted by the pandemic, our regular budget is still in some ways feeling the impacts. We are facing supply shortages as well as inflation. Although we have seen an increase in sales tax, some items now cost double or even triple what they did before. Our Utilities and Public Works departments are now having to wait weeks or sometimes months for materials, causing us to have to press pause on some projects.

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In July, I will propose a budget to the City Council that will allow us to prepare for these changes to the best of our ability. However, I expect us to see some projects slowed as a result of these issues for months to come.

This budget will also be critical in funding key projects and programs. Priorities for this upcoming budget include our own employees, social services, public transportation and public safety.

In April, voters approved the use tax. This 2% tax on out-of-state purchases will also help fund essential City services moving forward, such as public safety, health, infrastructure and more. It is anticipated the City will collect around \$5.6 million annually, which could fund up to eight police officers, seven firefighters, and sidewalk and street maintenance and repairs.

As we look at this and future budgets, it is important that we look at how it is impacting goals set forth in various City reports and plans. This year, our Finance Department has worked to align the budget with the Strategic Plan, helping us to be more accountable in fulfilling our goals.

The City's Strategic Plan, created by staff with public input, outlines goals and action items for each strategic priority area. This plan serves as a guiding document on why we do what we do, as well as how we get there. Although it was only adopted by Council last year, staff has already been working to lay the groundwork for the plan to succeed. This plan, along with others like the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan, will be top of mind as we move into the next fiscal year. As I outline priorities for the next fiscal year, I want to also highlight some of the work staff has done on the plan.

The first objective area of the Strategic Plan is organizational excellence. Employees who have volunteered to help carry out the goals in this portion of the plan are exploring new ways to get front-line employees engaged in City processes and to increase employee satisfaction.

I have vowed since I started in my role as city manager to work on improving engagement both internally and externally. As COVID restrictions have been lifted, I have been meeting with employees in different departments. It is important to me that employees have an opportunity to ask questions to City leadership and have open and honest conversations.

I also believe as a City we should be looking for new and more convenient ways to hear from our residents. That is why this year we launched a new website, BeHeardCoMo. This site allows



us to have a central location for project details where residents can provide feedback and engage with staff from the comfort of their own homes or anywhere if they have access to the internet. While BeHeardCoMo is not meant to replace in-person discussions, it does allow the public to be involved in our processes, even if they cannot make it to weeknight meetings.

The second priority area in the Strategic Plan is one that residents have repeatedly identified as a priority themselves, Safe Neighborhoods. Under this priority area, the Columbia Police Department, Columbia Fire Department and Public Health and Human Services are all working to improve trust within the community, as well as services to the City's most vulnerable populations.

American Rescue Plan Act funding will allow us to invest in programs to combat serious issues our community is facing such as gun violence and mental health. We know that marrying the experiences of the police department, the health department and of community partners to fight public health issues like these will create the best outcome to combat and prevent violence.

Our public safety departments are also working to keep up with a growing City. The Columbia Fire Department is expanding to keep response times low. We are currently in the process of building two new fire stations, one on the southwest and one on the east side of town.

Our Police Department has also expanded. Last year, we celebrated the opening of the Molly Bowden Neighborhood Policing Center in north Columbia. Today, around half of our officers are working out of the precinct every day, helping them remain in the neighborhoods they serve. This style of community policing helps officers build important relationships with residents.

While these expansions are necessary, our public safety departments have been significantly impacted by staffing shortages. These departments are exploring new ways to recruit diverse and skilled employees. Staff with the Columbia Police Department met with Missouri Gov. Mike Parson last month to discuss adding curriculum in Columbia Public Schools that would allow students to graduate with pertinent experience to work in law enforcement.

Of course, no City can have successful programs or initiatives without reliable infrastructure, the third priority area in the Strategic Plan. Staff focusing on this portion of the plan are looking at conducting a citizen satisfaction survey to determine where citizens would like to see improvements in the City. This group is also exploring how our infrastructure goals can have a positive impact on affecting climate change.



The City continues to improve infrastructure, building new and better, and becoming more efficient. A new terminal at Columbia Regional Airport, for example, will open late this summer. This new terminal will include several passenger boarding bridges, a restaurant, a mother's room, a sensory room and an interior Service Animal Relief Area. This expansion will allow us to bring new flights, new events and new people to Columbia.

A large part of any infrastructure maintenance plan is upkeep, and our City facilities are no exception. Columbia Water and Light is currently moving forward with a project to improve the McBaine Water Treatment Plant. This project will meet water-quality goals, extend the life of the facility and restore the plant's capacity to treat 32 million gallons of water per day.

Public Works also has plans to help make operations more efficient. The department has budgeted to build a brand new salt dome on the south side of town. This will make our response to winter weather events more efficient by preventing plow drivers from having to travel to a different side of town to refill trucks. Public Works is also getting ready to begin the process of the final large project in the City's 10-year Capital Improvement Project Plan that was approved by voters in 2015. Work to make improvements to Forum Boulevard is expected to begin in 2024.

We are already working to make our City buildings more energy efficient in support of the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan using an energy benchmarking program. This compares their energy use to similar buildings in the nation and allows us to identify building performance improvement opportunities.

As technology advances, we will have more opportunities to upgrade our buildings and improve sustainability on the road. The City is looking at fleet electrification, with a goal of one day having a completely electric fleet of City buses as technology continues to improve, and eventually expanding to police vehicles and more. While we can only start small in some places, the City of Columbia wants to serve as an example to the entire community on steps that can be taken to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions right here in our own backyards.

Our Parks and Recreation department is also improving and expanding programs and facilities. This year, voters approved the Park Sales Tax renewal for an additional 10 years which will allow the department to provide critical upkeep for the many parks, trails and facilities our community enjoys. Park staff will begin necessary renovations at the ARC and Rainbow Softball Center this year and complete renovations to three 50-year-old park shelters at Cosmo Park.



While maintaining what we have is the department's priority for this upcoming fiscal year, one of its most popular facilities will be expanding. Phase two construction of the Columbia Sports Fieldhouse will add four additional hardwood courts for basketball, volleyball and pickleball play. We have seen more residents utilizing facilities like this. Spaces like the ARC and Armory are seeing numbers comparable to before the pandemic.

The fourth priority area of the Strategic Plan is Inclusive Community. This group aims to cultivate a safe and sustainable community and ensure there is equitable access and equal opportunity in the City.

While there are small steps we can take now to create a more inclusive community, in order to make real change, we will need to look at all of our policies through an equity lens, which is why the City has budgeted to create an Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. However, we need to lay the groundwork in order for this new office to succeed, such as fleshing out existing Strategic Plan objectives into a more detailed diversity, equity and inclusion strategic plan. We need our residents to know that the City is committed to creating a more equitable community.

The City's Strategic Plan also outlines goals to promote a sustainable and diverse economy, allowing ours to become more resilient. This group hopes to increase the number of minority-owned businesses in our community, expand affordable housing, and increase access to external data for stakeholders to make data-driven decisions.

Developing affordable housing in our community is one long-term goal of mine, however, I know that affordable means something different for everyone. I also know we cannot do this as a City alone. Relying on the expertise of community partners like the Columbia Housing Authority and Columbia Home Builders Association will help us identify how we can create enough availability for families to build a foundation in Columbia and grow.

The City is currently working on several housing initiatives. Work to complete Cullimore Cottages, affordable and energy-efficient homes in central Columbia, will continue this year. The City also continues to offer the Homeowner Assistance Program which makes homeownership more affordable for low to moderate-income households through down payment and closing cost assistance to qualified households. We also estimate the housing market will continue to grow in the coming year, with around 450 single-family homes and 200 dwelling units if economic conditions remain stable.

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The City's Economic Development department is working to encourage employers to come to Columbia as our City grows. Swift Prepared Foods, which announced it would be coming to Columbia in April 2021, will open in the first quarter of 2023, bringing more than 250 new jobs to the community. Economic Development is also working to support minority-owned businesses and provide resources whether they are existing or new. The City now has a full-time minority business coordinator who is dedicated to connecting these businesses to resources and partnerships that will help them thrive.

In closing, I am enthusiastic about leading an organization that thrives on making an impact on the lives of the residents we serve. I am confident the City is in a position to take on the challenges I have outlined today with a staff who is passionate about seeing change.

While our work at the City of Columbia is never done, unique and exciting times lie ahead. There are so many big things on the horizon and I know those projects will have a tremendous impact in our community, thereby making Columbia the best place for everyone to live, work, learn and play.