

State of the City Address – January 14, 2024

Mayor Tonya Graham

Last year, I came before you and shared that Ashland was hopeful – the kind of hope that comes from having both a clear-eyed understanding of the very real challenges we are facing and the knowledge that we have what we need to square up against these challenges and come out the other side stronger and more resilient. And here we are – one year later. So much has happened over the past 12 months. I know I’m not the only one thinking about the state of our community, particularly in these rapidly changing times. So, I’d like to start the evening with an exercise.

Please get your cell phone out and go to the address on the screen. When you get there, put in the passcode listed on the screen. I’ll give everyone a minute to get into the program. Now, take a moment to think about the one word you believe describes Ashland at this moment in time and enter that in the field using your phone.

Now, please put your phone away – and make sure it will behave for the rest of the evening.

Ashland is a community on the move. Over the past 12 months, we have caught our breath, steadied our feet, taken hands, and gotten to work. We are reinventing ourselves in our homes, businesses, and organizations. We can see the results that come from this recipe of innovation, creativity, and hard work in many community partners, including Southern Oregon University, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, ScienceWorks, and the Ashland School District, among others. And we see those results at the City of Ashland. I have six pages of bullets outlining the accomplishments within the City. As much as you might want me to read them all to you, I intend to only share highlights.

City Council

The City Council sought your feedback at the town hall last January and took what you told us to develop these four priorities to help guide the City:

- Reducing our risk of wildfire
- Taking climate action by implementing our Climate and Energy Action Plan
- Diversifying our economy and ensuring City planning processes support both new and existing local businesses
- Improving affordability by supporting housing development and addressing other issues that can overburden our low-income residents

We are tackling these priorities in ways that support our commitment to social equity and to providing excellent customer service.

As part of that effort, we re-structured our Advisory Committees to make sure these expert volunteers are focused on the most important tasks that will help us meet our ambitious goals. All committees and commissions have entered 2024 with thoughtful and ambitious workplans that align with Council goals so that we can make real progress over the next year. If you volunteer on a city committee or commission, please stand so your community can thank you.

City Manager's Office

Our City Manager's office is outstanding. This small but mighty team is key to all City accomplishments, but it is responsible for specific progress in 2023, namely it:

- Created the Business Beautification Grant program that matches investments local businesses make in renovating their properties to enhance the visitor experience in Ashland
- Secured state funding to purchase the property that is housing the 24/7 emergency homeless shelter through March 31 and will be a permanent location for our severe weather shelter. Thirty people are currently staying at the shelter, five of whom are children.
- Revitalized City engagement efforts with Coffee and Conversation events, the City News that comes with your utility bill, and the Let Curiosity Be your Guide Q&A feature on the City's website, where residents can submit questions about city policies and operations. No need to post your question to social media. Now, you can ask the people who actually know the answers!
- Welcomed representatives from our longtime Sister City, Guanajuato, and sent Ashland representatives to Guanajuato.
- Welcomed a new family member by establishing a formal Sister City relationship with the Ukrainian city of Sviatohirs'k. The Ashland-Sviatohirsk Aid Project is leading the effort to support our new sister city and is raising the last bit of money needed to send them a new dump truck next week.
- The City Manager's office worked with the school district, SOU, and an ad hoc committee to develop an early childcare affordability grant program that supported two local childcare organizations in creating affordable childcare slots

for low-income working parents in Ashland.

- It also established the Joint Emergency Operations Center with SOU and the School District, developed emergency preparedness training for City staff, and installed evacuation signs in all ten evacuation zones in Ashland. On the count of three I want you to yell out your evacuation zone. 1, 2, 3! If you made something up when I got to three, you will want to stop by the emergency services table before you leave. They can help you learn your evacuation zone. This is really important, so let's make sure we all know our zone by the end of the evening.

Human Resources

On the staffing side, our three-person Human Resources team had its fair share of wins as well:

We have returned to pre-COVID staffing levels and our turnover rate is back to normal. That good effort required hiring and onboarding over 50 new employees last year. Our HR team also brought back employee health and wellness clinics, trainings, and employee appreciation events – all part of a larger effort to make sure our staff know how much we appreciate their good work and the heart they bring to their jobs. If you are a staff member at the City of Ashland, please stand so your community can thank you.

Community Development

If you have heard someone talk about Comm Dev and didn't know what that meant, they were talking about the City's Community Development Department where all planning and permitting tasks are handled. It is also the home of our work to address the housing crisis, provide assistance to our low-income neighbors, and develop public art projects. Our Comm Dev team:

- Completed the first Housing Production Strategy in the state to identify strategies to meet our housing goals and promoted a climate-friendly and equitable community by removing parking mandates city wide
- Approved the construction of 114 new residential units, including 78 multifamily apartments and 14 accessory residential units. The team permitted 3 new commercial buildings and approved 24 commercial improvement projects
- Partnered with Public Works to complete the first phase of the Marking Ashland Places project with the installation of five historic markers in the Railroad District.

Finally, Comm Dev staff have been actively collaborating in the process to establish environmental cleanup plans for the Union Pacific Railroad Property and the former Croman Mill site. This is a crucial step toward the redevelopment of these properties.

Department of Innovation and Technology

Our new Department of Innovation and Technology focused on inventorying and planning improvements to our technology systems, while enhancing cyber security across the City. They do the invisible work that makes all City services possible, including our utilities and public safety programs. I'm so glad we have such smart people who understand these technology systems and keep our contraptions working. Bless you.

Our Geographic Information Systems (or GIS) team received a coveted Special Achievement in GIS award at the international Esri Users Conference. Esri is the global leader in location intelligence, and our team received this award for its innovative use of mapping and data analytics in support of wildfire risk reduction. Ashland is on the map thanks to their good work. Literally.

Public Works

In addition to maintaining our streets and everything at the City that involves concrete, steel, asphalt, and construction contracts, our public works staff completed the Comprehensive Assessment of Hosler Dam, the Airport Taxiway Rehabilitation Project, and the Wastewater Treatment Plant Outfall Relocation Project.

In keeping with our conservation values, this outfall project will help make sure that the water we return to Bear Creek from our treatment plant does not make the creek too warm for native fish.

With funding from the State of Oregon, the City installed solar trackers at the Civic Center, which will generate energy for our local grid, help us meet our climate goals, and provide backup power to the City fuel pumps in the event of a sustained power outage.

Public Safety

I'll turn now to public safety to share what happened over the past year when we called for help from our police and fire departments.

The Ashland Police Department:

- Handled 32,753 calls for service up from 29,000 in 2022.
- The Department's violent crime rate clearance was 69%, which is well above average.
- Brought on 1 new officer and 1 community service officer
- Engaged with local youth through a cornhole tournament organized by students at Ashland High School and launched the SpyderTech program to get service feedback from Ashland residents who call for help
- Established the Ashland Street business corridor as a new targeted patrol area.
- Here in Ashland, we love our parades. Our police officers made sure we could frolic in the streets safely at the Fourth of July, Halloween, and Festival of Light parades

On the other side of our public safety efforts, Ashland Fire and Rescue crews:

- Responded to 5,557 calls – up 8% from 2022 and offered mutual aid to Mercy's Ambulance Service Area 137 times, up from 44 the year before
- Hired the first Single Role Emergency Medical Service teams to meet growing demand and keep our firefighters closer to home. We also secured the Ambulance Service Area contract with Jackson County for 5 more years.
- Expanded the Wildfire Risk Assessment Program by training 28 new volunteers and supported our local CERT volunteer program. Ashlanders involved in these programs gave over 2,500 hours of volunteer time last year.
- Hosted the Green Debris Drop Off day and continued to help Ashland residents address wildfire risk through FEMA's Pre-disaster Mitigation Grant
- Updated the Smokewise Business Workbook for the Ashland Chamber of Commerce to help local businesses deal with wildfire smoke and shared our cutting edge Smokewise work at conferences in New Jersey and Washington DC
- Completed prescribed burning on 544 acres in the watershed and 35 acres adjacent to 100 homes for wildfire safety

- Donated a fire engine to the Greensprings Rural Fire District in support of our mutual aid efforts with the Greensprings Fire Department
- Took after bark mulch in a serious way by producing an outreach video: “The Real Dirt on Mulch – Lessons from the Alameda Fire” – check it out before you make any landscaping decisions this spring

Our public safety programs rely heavily on community volunteers. If you volunteer with either Ashland Fire & Rescue or the Ashland Police Department, please stand and receive the appreciation of a grateful community.

Electric

Over at the Electric Department, the team had another banner year. The City's average service availability index – or ASAI – for 2023 was 99.995%. This means on average the City's electric service was available 99.995% of the time. That would be plenty for electric department accomplishments, but wait, there's more. The department made great progress implementing strategies to reduce wildfire risk, got our Electric Master Plan that had been delayed by Covid underway, and successfully negotiated with Bonneville Power Administration to avoid rate increases.

All while adding four Level 3 EV charging stations.

Finance

In addition to securing another clean audit, our Finance Team:

- Took our annual budget report fully online for the 23-25 biennium, making it easier for Ashlanders to engage with the budgeting process. The Department also changed how it is managing cash investments, which is resulting in an additional \$1M for this fiscal year
- And... now, Utility Billing... over the course of 2 years since the pandemic, Utility Billing has fluctuated tremendously in staff numbers. At one point, the Department lost all but one of five employees due to retirements and resignations. Imagine that - losing almost an entire division and having to carry the load of billing, service connections and disconnections, collection, and customer service for the City's 5 utilities and services.

I pay my utility bill too, and I understand it has been hard to be patient as the Department regains its footing. Add to it a required system upgrade, and I can

absolutely understand the frustration, as does our Utility Billing staff. Please know that Finance has hired, and is busy training three new billing clerks, made process improvements, and is working diligently to re-open phone lines and add additional in-person customer service hours. The Finance Department also continues to reorganize itself to help mitigate staffing issues in the future.

Parks & Recreation

In addition to managing our parks, open space, and recreation programs, Parks and Recreation also hosts our senior services programs. The Ashland Parks and Recreation Commission and parks and recreation staff were very busy in 2023. They:

- Purchased 38 acres of land to protect existing trails and provide additional open space, and adopted a new Alcohol Ordinance to allow limited sales of alcohol in parks to encourage new community events for residents and visitors alike
- Launched a new docent volunteer program in the Japanese Garden
- Replaced the liner at Daniel Meyer Memorial Pool and
- Rehabilitated the Oak Knoll Golf Course

On the conservation front, Parks and Recreation:

- Continued upgrading to “smart” irrigation systems throughout the entire parks system to conserve water
- And the Ashland Parks & Recreation Commission is partnering with Salmon Safe to protect the ecology of the Ashland Watershed

Senior Services provides a suite of important programs for our seniors, including providing COVID-19 and flu vaccination clinics that administered 459 shots, an important service given barriers many older adults face when trying to access vaccines.

The monthly average for all visits, activities and services is now almost 1500 per month. Through a partnership with the Rogue Valley Council of Governments Food & Friends program, approximately 300 meals are served at the Ashland Senior Center and 900 meals are delivered to the homes of older adults in the community EVERY SINGLE MONTH. Service statistics for the 2nd quarter of this year, which ended in December, were higher than any year since tracking began in 2018.

The work of Parks & Recreation also depends on the dedication of a small army of volunteers. If you volunteer for any parks, recreation, or senior programs, please stand and let us acknowledge your good work.

Elected and staff leaders hosted Senator Merkley, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, Governor Kotek, and Dr. Homer Wilkes, the Forest Service Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment.

Council

Your council is on the move as well. We deployed Councilors to double up in their roles as Council Liaisons to the committees that are working on our top priorities, including transportation, climate, social equity and racial justice, housing and human services, and economic development. We also created a new community liaison role, so councilors are engaging directly with other anchor institutions in the community. This helps us know what is coming from their efforts to innovate and how we can help.

We don't do this alone. If you volunteer to help the City in any way that I have not yet mentioned, please stand and accept our thanks for your dedication.

These accomplishments have not come without bumpy roads from time to time. Local government is being called on to address new issues that are outside of typical public safety and infrastructure responsibilities. Issues like wildfire risk reduction, homelessness, affordable housing, and climate all land at the feet of communities like ours – and they arrive without the resources to address them.

So, we get creative, and we try new things that we think have a good chance of working. Sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don't get *exactly* the results we want. But we learn from our efforts, and we keep trying because we live in a wildly wonderful community that will stay that way only if we are willing to take some amount of risk to protect what we love.

We also leverage other resources, including the wide range of expertise in our community and outside funding sources to make progress on these difficult challenges.

One of the ways we close this resource gap is by aggressively pursuing grant opportunities. In 2023, the City of Ashland secured \$3.7 million in grants to help us meet our shared goals.

For 2024, we are setting out to:

- Implement high priority actions outlined in our Housing Production Strategy to support our economy and make it easier for people with lower incomes to live in Ashland
- Expand our spring wildfire risk reduction campaign to help residents protect themselves and their property before wildfire returns to Ashland
- Update our Community Wildfire Protection Plan
- Complete repairs on Pioneer Hall and the Community Center so that we can once again attend events in those venues
- Support community partners in efforts to protect, diversify, and grow our economy including simplifying the permitting process where possible, especially for local businesses and affordable housing developers
- Begin construction on our new water treatment plant to protect Ashland's water supply from wildfire, earthquake, flooding, and landslides
- Add two Single Role Teams to our ambulance service staff and complete the ISO evaluation for fire protection that influences our insurance rates
- Conduct helicopter logging of the dead and dying trees in our watershed to reduce wildfire risk
- Complete a community-wide Homeless Master Plan and a long-term site plan for the shelter property at 2200 Ashland Street as part of regional efforts to address this crisis
- Adding backup power and building resilience for our Talent-Ashland-Phoenix – or TAP - drinking water intertie system
- Hire five more police officers to realize our authorized strength of 31 officers
- Develop the \$10 million USDA Rural Energy Savings Loan Program to provide low-cost loans to homeowners and businesses to help them electrify, weatherize, and

improve energy efficiency

- Host listening sessions to better understand what it is like for brown skinned people to live in Ashland as the first step in taking action to fix what we find out from these sessions
- Launch our new City website and make it easier for you to engage on topics coming before the Council and learn about volunteer opportunities
- Update our Transportation System Plan to provide more ways to get around without a car
- Install new trash and recycling bins throughout the downtown area
- Create a new Ashland Police Department kiosk near Exit 14 to support the targeted patrol area
- Complete a compensation and class study so that we know how our pay and benefits compare with similar communities
- Finish the Ashland Street Rehabilitation Project and start the Mountain Avenue project

There is no shortage of good work to be done, and here in Ashland, we are not afraid of hard work. Thank you for all you do to make Ashland such an incredible place to live, work, raise a family, and retire.