

# 2024 State of the City Remarks by Mayor Kenneth T. Welch

*Delivered January 30, 2024, at The Palladium*



## OPENING

Good Morning, and thank you, Chair Figgs-Sanders. To everyone here today, Vice Chair Gerdes and our entire City Council, to our:

- City Council
- elected officials
- community members
- community and faith leaders,
- to the business and arts communities,
- and to the members of our St. Pete Team - our dedicated employees

It's an honor to be with you, and thank you all for being here this morning, and for your leadership and partnership throughout the year. First, let's show some love to our students from Jamerson Elementary, John Hopkins Middle (JHOP), and those St. Pete Green Devils at St. Pete High, incredible! To our virtual friends joining us on Facebook Live - thank you for joining us. And thank you to the Palladium, what a great venue, thank you for hosting us today.

All of our elected officials know that when you serve in elected office, your entire family serves. So I'd also like to recognize my family members who are with us today. My mother, Alletha; my wife, Donna; and my sister, Katrina, are here. I know my daughters and other family members are watching on Facebook Live. To all of you, thank you for your love and support.

Look, St Pete, it's an exciting time to be in the best city in America. The opportunities before us, and the challenges before us are truly generational and exceptional, and I believe that our approach to addressing those issues - based on our guiding principles and focus on community impact - is moving us forward with purpose and unity, on the path of Inclusive Progress for all in our city.

## OUR GOVERNING PRINCIPLES

The State of our City reflects those principles - our way of work, how we govern and who we are.

- We are Inclusive - a city of many religions, races, ethnicities, abilities, identities and orientations. We welcome our diversity as foundational to the vibrancy, strength and capacity of our community.
- We Are In Touch - we love to be together, with our gatherings on our downtown waterfront, to the markets and parks and yes, of course, coffee shops across our city. We value the opportunity to come together as an urban village, face-to-face, as one community.

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- We are Innovative - from new approaches to affordable housing, to new technologies and processes to make our service delivery more efficient and effective - innovation is central to the work of our St. Pete Team. From Cloud computing to AI, we will continue to explore the latest technologies to improve our service delivery and our operations.
- We are Intentional - dedicated to the application of inclusion and equal opportunity in everything that we do. We remain committed to inclusion for all. And we will strive to maintain our perfect score on the Human Rights Index, which we achieved last year for the 10th year in a row.
  - Our new Office of Equity, and the newly approved Minority and Women Owned Business Enterprise program were both created within that intentional framework. We respect and recognize the lived history and experience of the residents of our city. We will not ignore nor recreate our history, but rather we will embrace our true history, and learn from it. And with that knowledge we will build a foundation for a better, more equitable future for everyone in our city, strategically and intentionally. That approach has guided our development of the Historic Gas Plant in a manner that honors the history and that land and our shared priorities for our future. We are honored to have several descendants of the Gas Plant neighborhood with us this morning. Let us recognize: Mildred Kennedy, Mary Murph, Andrew Walker, Linda Mack Bivens, Kenneth Mack, Ruben Mayes, Shirley Hayes, Steve Scruggs, Maria Scruggs, Val Haynes, and Gwen Reese. I also see Pastor Jordan and his spouse, as well. Thank you for being with us, and for keeping the legacy of the Gas Plant community alive.
- We are also Informed in our Decision Making - informed by history, data, facts and science. The facts are especially important as we face the challenges of our changing environment, housing affordability, public safety and other pressing issues. We simply cannot afford to be distracted by extreme partisanship or misinformation.
- Finally, we are focused on Community Impact - at the end of the day, every policy, service or initiative must be more impactful with positive action and results for the citizens of St. Petersburg. It is that impact, those positive outcomes, that will move us forward, and achieve Inclusive Progress for our city.

## OUR PILLARS FOR PROGRESS

And that impact should be manifest - it should be tangible, seen and felt, in every part of our city. We categorize our work into five service areas or Pillars for Progress, and together, are foundational to the long-term health and success of our community.

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These pillars are:

- Education and Youth Opportunities
- Equitable Development, Arts and Business Opportunities
- Healthy and Safe Neighborhoods
- Housing Opportunities for All
- Environment, Infrastructure and Resilience

In our city, our planning, budgeting and operations are all focused on those pillars. And our commitment to equity is foundational throughout our work. I want to thank our leadership and team members for embracing our principles and pillars for progress. I'd like to share a few examples of the progress that we made in 2023, in each Pillar.

## **OUR TEAM / 2023 ACCOMPLISHMENTS (BY PILLAR)**

### ***Education and Youth Opportunities***

- The first Pillar is Education and Youth Opportunities. The City is focused on impactful programs aimed at connecting our youth with opportunities, and developing a well-prepared workforce.
  - Towards that end, we are excited to announce an innovative new initiative - the Mayor's Future Ready Academy, which is an 18-week job training program providing full-time pay and benefits. Cadets can also receive additional certification at Pinellas Technical College, and our hope is that many will choose to seek permanent employment with the city. I want to thank our city leadership team for developing this innovative program that connects young people with public service career opportunities and addresses the city's workforce needs. The first 12 cadets started this month and are here today. Welcome to the team!
- Steering our young people to positive opportunities is a powerful investment. We are expanding and refining our "Not My Child" and Cohort of Champions programs under the Office of Community Impact. These programs are critical, focusing on educational and community support and anti-violence efforts. I'm looking forward to enhancing these and other programs under the direction of our new Chief Equity Officer, Carl Lavender.

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- And we are excited to announce today that we've made a key hire for this important pillar. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Sheron Brown, our city's new Director of Education and Youth Opportunities.
- We are continuing our critical investments in this pillar. In fact, we've added \$1.1M dollars worth of new funding for literacy and youth employment programs in this fiscal year.
- And imagine, or dream if you will, our Enoch Davis Center transformed into an Opportunity and Innovation Center -- a modern hub for education, nutrition, digital access wellness and other services vital to the well-being of the surrounding community and impacted groups, including our seniors and youth. That's what we're working on right now with the feasibility study and project planning that's required for the transformation. In addition to the investment from the City, we have requested over \$1M from federal sources. The Hines/Rays group is including a \$2M commitment through its community benefits proposal, and we've included \$4.75M in our 5-year CIP. This fall, we are planning to hold a community conversation to hear more from the community about what services they want to see at this new center.
- Our Parks and Recreation Department plays an important role in supporting our youth as well, providing comprehensive after-school programs for both elementary and middle school students. including our TASCOS After-School Technology Programs, offering courses in digital videography, photography, graphic arts, and much more.
- We also understand that nutrition is a critical issue for many families, and the city has provided 175,000 meals in our Summer Food Program, and additional meals and snacks are provided through our Parks and Recreation department.

### *Equitable Development, Arts and Business Opportunities*

St. Petersburg is dedicated to driving inclusive economic development that enhances the quality of life for all residents and avoids community displacement. Key initiatives in 2023 included:

- South St. Pete Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) Microfund Program: offering capacity-building, education, mentoring, and networking, along with funding for business improvements. In 2023, \$440,000 was allocated, with 53 business owners completing the first cohort of the program. We received more than 130 applications to be considered for the second, third and fourth cohorts and we're excited that the second cohort launches tonight.
- With the approval of the City Council, we have adopted a Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) Program - this program addresses the documented underutilization of Minority and Women owned businesses by removing barriers, and actively working to expand the

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business opportunities for these businesses. After opening the portal for applications on January 1st of this year, we have 25 applications under review and 4 certified MBEs.

- I'm proud of the work of our Office of Supplier Diversity and we look forward to the success of this office in building access to the city's economic engine to traditionally underutilized businesses.
- As we stand in the Palladium, we know that St. Pete is a city of the Arts, and we are focused on supporting our Arts ecosystem. Last year, our Arts and Culture Grant Program provided operating funds to 30 organizations. And, in collaboration with the City's Poet Laureate, Gloria Muñoz, our City of Writers Poetry Festival celebrated the writing community with 30 events across St. Pete, emphasizing both emerging and established writers.
- As you were driving in and you saw all the cranes in the air, you know we are growing as a city, our Economic Growth remains strong. St. Pete experienced new construction value of \$1.37 billion in 2023, the second highest ever, and issued 32,676 permits. This continued strong growth indicates the city's ongoing development and robust economy.
- And this month, we were proud to celebrate the opening of the ARK Innovation Center in St. Petersburg's burgeoning Innovation District. Developed in partnership with federal Economic Development Administration, Pinellas County, and ARK Invest, and TB innovation center
- This center will be an economic driver, generating an estimated \$28M in economic impact and creating 1,265 direct and indirect jobs by 2026. The ARK Innovation Center stands as a symbol of St. Petersburg's commitment to public-private partnership, nurturing talent, and fostering innovation.

### *Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods*

A pillar that hits close home for all of us, is healthy and safe neighborhoods. St. Petersburg is committed to creating safer and healthier neighborhoods throughout our city. From healthy food access, to health care, supportive services, recreation, and crime reduction - our goal is to support and maintain neighborhoods where all of our families are safe, healthy, and thriving. Some of the highlights of this pillar include:

- Community Support Hubs Initiative: Led by The Well and supported by American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, these Hubs will provide trauma-informed therapy, case management, and outreach tailored to community needs. Over 330 community members contributed input for the Hubs' rollout, with the goal of a network established across St. Pete. The first Hub is up and

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running already with a grand opening scheduled for March 1.

- We know that access to fresh food is limited in many of our neighborhoods. The FRESH Pace Healthy Neighborhood Store Program, In partnership with St. Pete Free Clinic, and funded by ARPA, expands access to healthy food in lower-income neighborhoods, with one store opened and five more planned.
- Now, although we are the Sunshine City, we know well that we are vulnerable to storms and hurricanes. Last August, Hurricane Idalia, although its eye was 100 miles west of us, highlighted our vulnerability. Our city team worked intently to protect lives as we faced historic storm surge, activating our emergency operations, pre-clearing storm drains, securing infrastructure, evacuating vulnerable residents, distributing sandbags, and opening shelters. During the storm St. Pete Fire Rescue conducted rescues for residents and pets, and after the storm, our teams assessed damage, and provided recovery support, including seeking and obtaining FEMA support. A special thanks to all of the city teams for helping our city prepare for and recover from the storm, and expediting the recovery and debris removal process. I also want to thank Council Members Gabbard and Montanari for your on-the-ground support for the impacted neighborhoods in your district.
- In 2023, the St. Petersburg Police Department continued its impactful and accountable approach to public safety. The Community Assistance and Life Liaison (CALL) Program continued to exemplify a smart and innovative approach to public safety. The program successfully reached 10,000 contacts, illustrating its effective and community-centric approach to policing by directing certain non-violent calls to social workers. The City Council's approval of a three-year agreement and increased funding for the program have extended operating hours and increased the program's impact.
- We continue to invest in the personnel and infrastructure to keep our growing city safe. Thanks to the work of our administration and our partnership with Pinellas County Schools, we are purchasing land from the school board for a new Fire Station Number 2, which will serve the greater West St. Petersburg area.

## ***Housing Opportunities for All***

Now we live in a wonderful city, however, our city is not immune from the increase in housing costs faced by the rest of the nation. Therefore, it's imperative that we continue our focus on Producing and Preserving houses for those who make average and less than average incomes. Many of these workers are the people who operate our hospitals, colleges and universities, our city services, hotels and restaurants. The people who make our city work.

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- This year, we've begun the development of 282 multifamily affordable housing units, with 834 more units funded or approved. We've preserved or completed 155 units, including the Sixteenth Square Townhomes, Jordan Park Residences, and Citrus Grove Apartments. Our initiatives also include 154 non-subsidized workforce density bonus units.
- Through our Affordable Lot Disposition Program, we've sold 10 City-owned single-family lots to qualified families, paving the way for new affordable homes. We've also created 13 affordable single-family homes for those earning less than 120% of the Area Median Income through various programs. We've assisted 58 first-time homebuyers and provided vital homebuyer education to 222 households.
- Our efforts extend to keeping folks in the houses they're in already. We've assisted 49 homeowners in substantial rehabilitation projects and expanded the Rebates for Affordable Residential Rehabs Program citywide. A total of \$1.8M in funding was expended to support these initiatives.
- In terms of zoning and planning, we've rezoned 2,895 properties to allow for increased housing units on single-family lots, resulting in the completion of 43 accessory dwelling units, or ADUs, with many more in progress. In comparison, only 36 ADUs were completed, so we're making a difference there.
- We are dedicated to protecting and supporting tenants. We've allocated \$5.9M in funding for renter assistance and affordable rental housing construction. Our Community Support Specialist has successfully engaged with 42% of residential eviction cases, and we've forgiven or reduced substantial amounts in liens through various programs.
- This year, we will make substantial progress towards expanding home ownership, through the recently completed Namaste townhome project, and the forthcoming Deuces Rising, Shell Dash and Pelican Place townhome projects - the latter in partnership with Habitat for Humanity of Pinellas and West Pasco.
- Now, our South St. Pete CRA has grown to be an invaluable tool to support affordable housing, particularly in this time of rising construction and financing costs. This year, the CRA will generate \$12M that will be applied to affordable and workplace housing.
- In conclusion, our commitment to housing affordability is unwavering. We continue our focused work to create strong neighborhoods, foster equity, and build a community where every resident can thrive.



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## *Environment, Infrastructure and Resilience*

- Our development of policies and dedication of funding for environmental protection and infrastructure continued last year. Facing the challenges of sea level rise and extreme weather, we have prioritized protecting our environment, modernizing infrastructure, and increasing the resiliency of our community.
- Hurricane Idalia, and the no-name December storm highlighted our increasing challenge with Sea Level Rise and the increased flooding impacts on neighborhoods across our city, including Shore Acres, Riviera Bay, Coquina Key, neighborhoods around Lake Maggiore and in other parts of the city.
- In response, we will continue to seek ways to enhance our investments in our stormwater infrastructure, and continue our discussions with FEMA, the state, the Tampa Bay Regional Planning Council and other agencies for legislation, funding and property owner assistance. We will continue our collaboration with Council, and our impacted neighborhoods. I fully support Council Member Gabbard’s request for seed funding for an action plan for flood mitigation and adaptation, in partnership with the TBRPC (as you mentioned at the Council Budget priorities work session).
- As we’ve known for some time, and I see Commissioner Janet Long who led this effort a decade ago, we’ve known that the development of adaptation measures, including elevating structures and facilities and the other things we must do, is a substantial cost. We cannot simply raise the roads without elevating nearby properties. Our approach has to be holistic based on science and fact, and holistic for the entire community. We are committed to addressing this issue as the critical issue that it has evolved to become today.
- We have been making progress in hardening our infrastructure.
  - We celebrated the completion of the new safer, more accessible 40th Avenue Northeast Bridge.
  - We’ve increased our efforts to secure grant funding, securing a \$20M grant award from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Resilient Florida Program. This funding allows us to enhance water infrastructure and address stormwater flooding at Lake Maggiore.
- And Lake Maggiore is looking much better, you can actually see it! I want to thank Claude and his team for removing cattails so you can see the lake.



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- The St. Pete Youth Farm is an impactful program touching several pillars including youth, education and wellness and resiliency. In addition to urban agriculture, the Youth Farm focuses on sustainable farming methods and serves as a learning space for students to understand food production and to build business skills. The youth farm is a special place and is a blueprint for addressing food inequality while engaging our youth in an impactful program.
- In summary, our St Pete Team is focused on resiliency, embracing innovation, environmental protection, and community engagement. The long-predicted challenges in this area are now becoming evident for our community, but together, we are working to make St. Pete a resilient, vibrant, and sustainable place for all.

## A LOOK AHEAD

2024 will continue our pursuit of progress and I would like to recognize the people I work with every day. I'd like to thank our Cabinet for driving world-class service to our community in each administration: Administrator Rob Gerdes; Tom Greene, Assistant City Administrator; James Corbett, City Development Administrator; Amy Foster, Housing and Neighborhood Services Administrator; Police Chief Anthony Holloway; our new Interim Chief Equity Officer Carl Lavender; Community Enrichment Administrator Michael Jefferis; City Attorney Jackie Kovilaritch; a 50-year employee of the St. Pete Fire Rescue Department, Fire Chief Jim Large; Communications and Community Engagement Managing Director Alizza Punzalan-Randle; Public Works Administrator Claude Tankersley, and Chief of Staff Doyle Walsh. And two ladies, we can't do anything without, my Special Assistant Rita Wesley, and Kali Dambeck, Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff. I'd also like to thank our City Clerk Chan Srinivasa and City Council Administrative Officer Cindy Sheppard.

We also have several longstanding projects that will achieve major milestones this year. The largest of course, is the redevelopment of the Historic Gas Plant District. Last year, at my State of the City address, I announced the selection of the Hines Rays group as the development team to develop the district. And our team has been working very hard and effectively since then. Our team has met every project milestone, and today we are working diligently with City Council, and our partners with the Hines/Rays group and Pinellas County, to finalize agreements that will bring this 40-year saga of the Historic Gas Plant, and the future of the Rays, to a positive conclusion. So, I'd like to convey a few thoughts.

To City Council: I want to thank you for your due diligence, and your feedback and recommendations on the agreements that will define this partnership. This vetting is what is required and expected under our charter. I have done the same in reviewing agreements for the Blue Jays and Phillies stadiums as a county commissioner. So, I know why you ask the questions, and the people of our city benefit greatly from your fiduciary oversight. My administration and our partners are listening and working every day

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(and every night) to bring you a set of agreements that are responsive and will meet your approval, and move us forward. Thank you for your leadership and partnership.

To our Staff: for your countless hours of work this past year. You've met an aggressive timeline for the issuance of the RFP, the selection process, and term sheet development, and you've been responsive and innovative to my direction and the city council's and community feedback and inquiries.

I also want to thank our County Partners - Administrator Barry Burton, Past Chair Janet Long and current chair Kathleen Peters, and all of the commissioners, and TDC members for your partnership during this process.

To the Community: this has been a long journey - and having witnessed it from the start - I was 19 when it started - I am confident in the agreement we are shaping. With \$6.5 billion of investment, 37,000 projected jobs, significant and much needed office and conference space, 1,200 units of affordable and workforce housing, a \$500M commitment to minority participation, \$50M in additional community benefits, and more - the return to the City and the County for this investment will be substantial. The City's costs are capped and utilize the same revenue streams that we have traditionally used for Tropicana Field, and will use revenues generated by new development where 86 acres of asphalt sits now. The cost is also shared, with the Rays paying more than half of the stadium cost, and Pinellas County paying slightly more than the City. That cost - whether viewed in present day or 30-year horizons, will be exceeded by the benefits - including more than 30 years of property taxes, sales taxes, wages, bed taxes, and the fulfillment of promises of economic inclusion for the Black community and businesses that were displaced in 1978 with a promise and the fulfillment of those promises has immeasurable value. This agreement will be a fulfillment of those promises and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand economic opportunity for all.

I've lived this saga and we've literally waited decades to be in this position and we've never been this close. I believe we have never had, nor will we have in the future, stronger partners than Hines-Rays and the County, nor will we have a better opportunity than this to turn the page and move to a new chapter of the Historic Gas Plant. We'll keep working to bring this deal home.

We have other longstanding projects that we will move forward this year. We will take the Municipal Marina to Council for approval. We will cut the ribbon on a new sanitation complex and continue to press for resolution of other longstanding projects including the Science Center, Sankofa the Manhattan Casino, and Tangerine Plaza. We will also celebrate progress on new and continuing initiatives including the Pelican Place Townhomes with Habitat for Humanity, moving forward on the Stormwater Master Plan implementation, new literacy and education initiatives, and other initiatives related to each of our Pillars for Progress.

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## OUR PEOPLE

I'd like to close by talking about a few of the folks who make this work happen. Our hard-working City Council members, our Cabinet, and our dedicated city employees are invaluable parts of our city team. And as Mayor, I value your commitment, your dedication, your passion for our city. I'd like to tell you about a few members of our team. The five employees who I will recognize today boast a combined 134 years of service.

Our first employee is **Stephanie Lampe**. Stephanie is a Senior Housing Development Coordinator who has been with the City since 1984. A graduate of the University of Illinois, she began her career working with the City's Historic Preservation Commission, the Planning Commission, and the Community Redevelopment Agency. Currently, she is responsible for the management of the City's annual HOME Program allocation, the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, and the Workforce Housing Density Bonus Program. Stephanie is also the staff lead for the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program Affordable Housing Advisory Committee. During her tenure, the City has helped to facilitate the production of more than 2,000 new or renovated affordable multi-family units for very low and low-income households and has leveraged over \$348M in private lender loans and investor equity. We are grateful to Stephanie for her continued work to implement our Housing Opportunities for All Plan. I'm hearing that retirement may be in the cards this year—we wish Stephanie all the best and appreciate her for every minute she has dedicated to making our City better. Thank you, Stephanie!

**Kevin Jackson** has achieved several firsts with the City's Stormwater, Pavement and Traffic Operations department. He was the first African American to: receive Traffic Signal Technician Level III certification through the International Municipal Signal Association; first to hold the title of Traffic Signals Coordinator; and the title of Traffic Operations Manager. He officially supported his fellow employees as a member of the union and served as the West Region Cities Representative of SEIU-FPSU for 8 years. Kevin also uses his time to speak with local students about careers in traffic operations and working for the City. Last year, Kevin graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Management from St. Petersburg College and was recently accepted into USF's Master of Public Administration program. Thank you, Kevin, for your great work Kevin!

Originally from Brockton Massachusetts, **Officer Kenneth Seay** began his career in 2016 in law enforcement with the St. Pete Police Department. He has completed various training and certifications in Traffic Enforcement and DUI investigations and is currently assigned to the DUI unit within the traffic division. A recent incident put Officer Seay in the spotlight - reminding us of the risks our officers face every day. Just a few weeks ago at one o'clock in the morning, not far from here, Officer Seay pulled over a car on I-375 for a traffic stop. He was standing in the open door of his patrol car when a KIA Optima drove by too closely, smashed into the open door, and injured his hand. This is the boss part! Despite the injury from the KIA that drove away, he calmly approached the car he originally stopped and gave the driver a warning. We are grateful that the only surgery that was required was to his hand;

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this could have been fatal, it could have been so much worse. Fortunately, officers found the KIA driver later that morning and arrested her. Thank you, Officer Seay, for your service and commitment to protecting our citizens. We pray for your speedy recovery!

After 35 years, Firefighter **Jake Solomon** retired this month from St. Pete Fire Rescue as an engine and truck operator. An outstanding firefighter and mentor, he served on our Marine team at Station 11. A graduate of Plant High School in Tampa, Jake immediately enlisted in the Army as a Parachute jumper. He worked at St. Pete Fire Rescue for 35 years with many official and non-official titles: Engine/Truck Driver Engineer, Technical Rescue Team and Boat operator specialties and St. Pete mentor for new employees. Jake is a humble team player who does not hesitate to step up and help, but if you ask his co-workers they would say he's a life coach. Jake Solomon retired this month - he will truly be missed at St. Pete Fire Rescue but everyone who knows him well cannot wait to see what he does next! Thanks for your service, Jake!

And last, but not least, **Chief James Large**, who retires from the City after a 50-year tenure with St. Pete Fire Rescue. During his 50 years of service, with 18 of those years as Fire Chief, Jim's long list of accomplishments includes obtaining and maintaining accreditation and ISO Class 1 designation for the department, implementing a fire cadet program to help create and diversify the next generation of firefighters, instituting three COVID-19 Strike Team Units, and establishing a comprehensive behavioral health program focused on mental health and well-being to help reduce the risk of post-traumatic stress and suicide within the fire service. In 2022, Chief Large was named Florida Fire Chief of the Year by the Florida Fire Chiefs' Association. Under his leadership, St. Pete Fire Rescue has become known for its dedicated team of firefighters, paramedics, EMTs, and support personnel who deliver exceptional service and high-quality care to the St. Pete community. Thank you, Chief Large, for your lifetime of service and commitment to public safety. We wish you and your family all the best in your future endeavors.

### OUR PARTNERS

I'd like to wrap my remarks with a word on partnerships. We will continue our focus on building relationships - from our ongoing partnership with Pinellas county on economic development, and public safety, to our collaboration with our state and federal partners on resiliency and infrastructure investments.

Our outreach through our Word With Welch, Community Conversations and City Hall on Tour will continue, giving our community diverse opportunities for engagement with their local government.

And we will continue to listen. The follow-up work on the 2023 employee climate survey will continue as our departmental Equity Action Plans are implemented, and for the first time we are surveying our

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citizens through the City of St. Petersburg 2024 Community Survey to get direct feedback on our services.

Our work with the St. Petersburg Chamber, and their Leadership Alliance, and the EDC and Downtown Partnership, will further strengthen and align our economic development partnerships and goals.

And, for the first time in our City's history - working with the City Council we have developed a historic Joint Federal Legislative Agenda for 2024. I want to thank immediate past Council Chair Brandi Gabbard and Council Member Lisset Hanewicz, who chairs the Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations Committee, and all of City Council for their partnership on this effort—and to our partners at the Federal level—we are committed to a unified voice as we advocate on behalf of our City for the resources and policy necessary to move our community forward.

This is a special time in our City's history, a time of tremendous potential, and a time of challenges that require our focus and commitment to Inclusive Progress.

We are St. Pete, and the State of our City is Strong!

God Bless You!