

2025 State of the City Remarks

by Mayor Kenneth T. Welch

Delivered February 4, 2025, at The Palladium



OPENING

Good morning, and thank you, Chair Gerdes, for the introduction. To Vice Chair Hanewicz and our entire City Council, to the dedicated employees of the best team in the business – our St. Pete Team, elected officials, community members, faith and community leaders, the business and arts community, and everyone assembled here today: thank you all for being here this morning, and for your partnership throughout the year. I want to thank everyone who's participated in the program to this point, Deneen Wyman, Poet Laureate Gloria Muñoz, and the Shore Acres students. They have been through so much in their neighborhood, yet they're here uplifting us. And a special thanks to Paul Wilborn and the Palladium team for hosting us once again. We look forward to the unveiling of your upcoming renovations!

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 wife, Donna, and my youngest daughter, Kenya, here at the Palladium; and to my daughter Keonna, my mother, Alletha, and my sister, Katrina, who are joining us virtually (hopefully on Apple devices). To my family (wherever you are), thank you for your love and support.

As Chair Gerdes said, 2024 was no ordinary year. The past year produced great achievements and extraordinary challenges. Hurricanes Helene and Milton, specifically, produced significant flood and wind damage, and heightened awareness of the potential impacts of storms to our economy, infrastructure and quality of life.

These challenges also highlighted what makes us strong: our ability to adapt, collaborate and innovate. The strength of neighbor helping neighbor, of community organizations, businesses, and our local, state and federal partners working together to help our community recover and rebuild. It was uplifting to see that spirit of purpose and partnership in action, and it is with that mindset that we will move forward.

As we enter 2025, the State of our city is Strong, Unified and Resilient.

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We are strong, not in spite of, but because of, our Unity. And our shared community values are essential to our success as a city. Our shared commitment to Principled and Inclusive Progress, rooted in our belief that as our city grows, develops, and prospers, that we should plan and act in ways that encourage and empower everyone to be a part of that progress.

This is a time of change, debate, anxiety, and even fear in our nation. And in this time of political strife, it's vital that we, as a community, remain resolute and clear-minded about who we are. And we must remain unified around our principles – principles that define our community and reflect our shared values.

For my administration, we continue to work according to our *Principles of governance*, which include:

- In Touch Leadership
- Inclusive Governance
- Innovative Solutions
- Information-Based Decision Making
- Intentional Equity
- Impactful Service Delivery

Through our policies, investments and services, we will continue to apply these principles to produce meaningful Impacts in our five core service areas – our *Pillars for Progress*, including:

- *Education and Youth Opportunities*
- *Equitable Development, Arts and Business Opportunities*
- *Neighborhood Health and Safety*
- *Housing Opportunities for All*
- *Environment, Infrastructure and Resilience*

Together, these pillars are foundational to the long-term health and success of our community. Everything we do – our planning, budgeting and operations reflect these pillars. And our commitment to equity is foundational to our work.

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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 2024 in each Pillar.

2024 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Housing Opportunities for All

St. Petersburg is a wonderful place to live, but like other urban cities, we are experiencing the same challenges with rising housing costs. It is essential that we maintain our focus on creating and maintaining affordable housing options for individuals and working families with average and lower incomes. These are the dedicated individuals – the essential workers who keep our hospitals, schools, city services, hotels, restaurants and other entities running smoothly; they are the backbone of our community.

Through strategic partnerships, St. Petersburg continues to expand affordable housing opportunities, including a few projects that I'll highlight:

- Whispering Pines Apartments, a 20-unit apartment complex developed with Boley Centers, and providing housing for special needs families
- In collaboration with the St. Petersburg Housing Authority, we broke ground on the Edward White Campus – a 71-unit complex being developed to serve low-income seniors
- Partnering with Blue Sky Communities, the City celebrated the completion of Bear Creek Commons, an 85-unit complex for seniors
- In 2024, we helped bring 281 affordable units online in the City of St. Petersburg. In my first three years as Mayor, we have brought 855 affordable and workforce housing units online.
- Our team helped Homeowners gain or maintain stable housing through City efforts and assistance, including:

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- 193 homeowners who received help with safety, accessibility, and critical repairs like roofs and HVAC systems.
- 87 first-time homebuyers achieved homeownership through the City's Down Payment Assistance Program. In the first three years of my term, we have helped 185 owners with down payment assistance.
- Our team expanded efforts to create more Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), and I thank Council for your leadership on that, with 42 units completed and 93 in progress in 2024. To support the process, we launched an ADU Wizard – a tool to help residents know if their Zoning allows them to build an ADU. We also expanded Rebates for Rehab, which financially supports building an ADU, citywide.
- The city continues to address homelessness and provide wraparound support to ensure housing stability.
- We launched a Renter Utility Relief Program, allocating \$3 million in funding to assist nearly 7,700 households with past due utility bills.
- We have also been innovative in our Codes Compliance efforts, launching our Codes Compliance Assistance Program (CCAP), providing up to \$10,000 per eligible property owner to resolve code violations for low-income families.
- As you can see, our Housing team is very busy and very talented – they are focused, innovative, and skillful – and this is just a partial list of their impactful work to provide housing opportunities for all in our community. Thank you to Administrator Amy Foster, Dr. Avery Slyker, Mark Van Lue, and the entire Housing team for your unwavering commitment to this essential Pillar for Progress.

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Education and Youth Opportunities

In St. Pete, we are focused on impactful Educational and Youth programs aimed at connecting our youth with opportunities and developing a well-prepared workforce. Key components of this pillar include literacy initiatives, mentorships, digital inclusion, internships, wraparound services, and skills training.

Literacy is key to educational success, and the literacy gap, while shrinking, still stubbornly persists in our community. So, we are investing in impactful literacy programs to reduce that gap.

- We are excited about the City’s new partnership with the Shirley Proctor Puller Foundation – a \$1 million, four-year agreement that will expand their M.A.S.T.R. Kids® Program, located at Gibbs High School, in partnership with Pinellas County Schools and Juvenile Welfare Board. I was excited to cut the ribbon with Vice Chair Lisset Hanewicz, our Education and Youth Opportunities Director Dr. Sheron Brown and our partners at Gibbs High last week!
- We are also excited about our support of the Prosperity Pathways program with the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Suncoast, and our renewed mentoring initiatives in partnership with Pinellas County Schools.
- We are also continuing our investments to empower youth for the workforce and career opportunities. I’m so proud of the work our team has done with the Mayor’s Future Ready Academy is an innovative job-training program providing full-time pay, benefits and additional certification at Pinellas Technical College. In the first two cohorts of 12 each, 21 cadets have graduated from the program, with 16 of them being hired into full-time positions with the City.
 - I want to thank our city leadership team City Administrator Rob Gerdes, and Administrators Tom Greene, Claude Tankersley, Amy Foster, and Mike Jefferis and their teams, along with Chris Guella, Faithe Silver, LaTania Barnes, and our partners at Pinellas Technical

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College. Working together, they developed this innovative program that connects young people, not just with a job, but with career opportunities in public service, and for the city, it helps us address our workforce needs. I'm so proud of these cadets and our new permanent employees. We are now working with our third cohort of students!

- Connecting our young people to positive opportunities is a powerful investment, and providing safe places for young people is especially important during the summer break. In response to this need for safe spaces during the summer, the Office of Equity, partnering with Parks and Recreation and the St. Pete Police Department, hosted the first-ever Safe Summer Fridays series. This was a response to the community's call for "safe places and activities" for teens after some of the violence we witnessed on our streets. Young teens enjoyed an open gym, video games, movie nights, and refreshments throughout the summer.
- These important initiatives were all developed by or in partnership with the Office of Equity. I want to thank our Chief Equity Officer, Carl Lavender, for coming out of retirement to establish the Office of Equity and lay the foundation for integrating equitable best practices across our City teams. Carl, your leadership has been instrumental in securing funding, strengthening partnerships, and driving impactful initiatives that will benefit St. Pete for years to come. And yes, Carl even brought back the FAMU Rattlers for the MLK parade (where they belong!). Carl, on behalf of our city, thank you for your leadership and for your service.
- Carl leaves tremendous shoes to fill. And we've found the right person. I am excited to appoint Economic Development Manager George Smith as our next Chief Equity Officer. George brings a wealth of experience from his work in the South St. Pete CRA, where he has led efforts in affordable housing, small business support, and workforce development. George *knows our city government*, and as a native son, born at Mound Park hospital, he *knows our community*. And he is committed to our Governing

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Principle of Intentional Equity, rooted in education, partnership and economic opportunity. Congratulations, George!

Why Equity Matters

When I ran for Mayor, I promised you straight talk. Now, let's talk for a moment about what Equity actually means in St. Pete. There has been a lot in the news lately about Equity and DEI. But we should not retreat from our principles, because some want to *politicize, demonize, or change the meaning* of that principle into something that *it never was* and was never *intended to be*, with respect to its *meaning and implementation* in our City. We Have to Know Who We Are.

Knowing Who We Are, for example, means understanding the history of the Historic Gas Plant, the institutional redlining, the impact of the interstate's targeted disruption of Black communities (including the Gas Plant and the Deuces) and the decades of institutional discrimination documented in the City's 2021 Structural Racism Study, the history of the St. Pete Police Department's Courageous 12, the clear findings of the 2021 Disparity Study on Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprises utilization, and so many other historical facts. Being informed of that history doesn't demonize us *today*, or separate us, or harm us, or cause airplane crashes. Let's be real about this. To the contrary, having that knowledge of our history educates us, it empowers us, helps us understand our current circumstances and understand the root causes of our disparities so that together, not divided, but together, we can overcome those challenges and disparities more effectively, and build a better future for all of us.

In St. Pete, it has never been about harm or ridicule. And yes, it is about merit. Merit being defined as "the quality of being particularly good or worthy" is a good thing. We believe in merit. The merit of truth. The merit of equal opportunity. The merit of a community keeping its word even 40 years later, to a community that was promised economic opportunity and inclusion in the Historic Gas Plant District. The merit of learning from a sometimes dark past, in order to build a solid foundation for a bright future of opportunity for all of us.

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And, as my daughter, Kenya, would say, “If you don’t know, now you know what equity means in our city.” Equal opportunity, informed by facts, data and history, building a path for us to move forward together. As long as I’m your Mayor, we will not abandon or retreat from this principle.

Neighborhood Health and Safety

Let’s talk about our great neighborhoods. Our approach to Safe and Healthy neighborhoods is responsive and innovative, including key investments in pedestrian and bike safety, Public Safety, Parks and Recreation, Sanitation services, and more.

In 2024, our team continued their focused work to make our neighborhoods healthier and safer.

- A great example is the Community Assistance and Life Liaison (CALL) Program. A partnership between St. Pete Police and Gulf Coast Jewish Family and Community Services, the program began in 2021 and continues to provide an effective and strategic approach to policing by directing certain non-violent calls for assistance to social workers. In fiscal year 2024, the city increased our investment by \$400,000 per year, to provide more staffing and coverage on evenings and weekends.
 - And that investment is paying off, it’s making an impact. In 2024, the program handled 4,220 contacts and 1,872 clients served, with NO injuries or incidents of violence. This is a smart and effective approach to public safety and is setting the standard for innovation and community impact.
- Reducing youth crime and redirecting youth who get into trouble, back to a positive path, is essential for Safe Neighborhoods. Through the FY25 budget development process, our citizens voted to allocate \$1 million towards a new program, aimed at reducing teen crime, called “Forward Together, A Youth Crime Prevention Program.”

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- This initiative focuses on addressing the root causes of youth involvement in crime, targeting individuals aged 12 to 17. The program emphasizes intervention through mental health and human services, deploying social workers to collaborate closely with families and providing police and tutoring support. The goal is to ensure that St. Pete's youth have achievable pathways to get back on a path to success and off the path that too often leads to future crimes.
- These are two examples of innovative and impactful public safety leadership in our city. Thank you, Chief Anthony Holloway, your Command Staff, and the St. Pete Police Department for setting the standard for professional and accountable law enforcement.
- Another essential element of neighborhood safety is Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services.
 - We continue to invest in the personnel and infrastructure to provide world-class Fire and EMS services. We also need *forward thinking leadership* to lead our Fire Department. Chief Keith Watts is that leader, and I was honored to appoint him last October. Chief Watts, thanks for accepting the job, and for your leadership of a great department.
 - In support of our safe neighborhoods, we are investing strategically in our Fire and EMS infrastructure. We are in the final steps to complete the zoning requirements for Fire Station # 2, which will serve the greater West St. Pete area, and we continue to acquire key equipment, including Engine 1 and an additional High Water Rescue vehicle, as well as continuing to invest about \$800,000 per unit, to replace fire engines with *clean-cab* vehicles to reduce firefighter exposure to carcinogens.
 - We've also entered into the design phase for upgrades and expansion of the SPFR Training Facility to provide a long-overdue modernization of our training facility. We are also making progress on finding a new

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location for our Police K9 facility.

- We are also excited to spark the interest of the next generation of firefighters in our city. Camp Ignite is a three-day immersive program hosted by St. Pete Fire Rescue to introduce young *women* ages 14-18 to careers in firefighting and emergency medical services. Through hands-on training, participants learn essential skills such as operating fire hoses, using rescue equipment like the “Jaws of Life,” and participating in rope rescue exercises. They also earn CPR certification and engage with professional firefighters, gaining valuable insights and mentorship. I want to commend Fire Chief Keith Watts and his team, who developed this program in partnership with the Pinellas County Urban League’s “EmpowHer” initiative.
- Keeping our community clean is a huge part of neighborhood health, and it’s the core mission of our Sanitation department. The Sanitation team provides essential services to our community, and we are excited about the progress that has been made on the construction of our new sanitation department complex – a much-needed facility that will replace 50-year-old buildings and aims for net-zero energy consumption, enhancing operational efficiency and supporting our vital sanitation team. We look forward to cutting the ribbon on the building this May.
- Now the reality of our pillars is that they are all interconnected. Youth and Education Opportunities, Housing, and Equitable Economic Development all impact the quality of life in our neighborhoods. And of course, our natural environment has emerged as a powerful determinant of neighborhood health. So, let’s turn to the next Pillar.

Environment, Infrastructure and Resilience

- Our administration, and the Kriseman administration before us, has invested substantially and strategically to ensure the integrity of our operations, and the resilience of our community.

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- That investment continued in 2024, and those investments must continue at an increased pace to match the increased impact of storms that were made manifest by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. As we know, these storms uprooted lives, and the record storm surge, rainfalls and hurricane force winds caused unprecedented property losses.
- These storms are undeniable evidence of our new reality: extreme weather and climate change will affect our quality of life and our ability to provide and maintain critical services. The clock on climate change and its impacts has sped up exponentially, therefore, our resiliency actions must accelerate as well, starting now. This is not a time to panic, but to focus and to act.
- The St. Pete Agile Resilience Plan, also known as SPAR, represents an aggressive, accelerated approach to strengthening the city’s infrastructure, ensuring long-term resilience in the face of our climate challenges. At its core, “SPAR” reflects the City’s commitment to data-driven and accelerated resiliency actions.
- Working with City Council, we will accelerate projects by prioritizing and fast-tracking infrastructure initiatives that will provide immediate and lasting impacts.
- We anticipate advancing at least \$750 million in additional investments over five years. We are exploring multiple options to fund these efforts – including grants, issuing bonds, reallocation of general fund dollars, and adjustments to utility rates. Once complete, a funding plan will be presented to City Council for approval. This effort is already underway. Projects approved by council include:
 - Flood proofing critical buildings
 - Installation of an AquaFence at Lift Station 85 near Albert Whitted Airport

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- A \$70-million Northeast Water Reclamation Facility Improvement Project, which will increase the plant’s ability to operate in higher levels of storm surge – with a 15-ft target, increased from the current 7-ft capacity. That project is already well underway and is being accelerated.
- Our Citywide Private Lateral Rebate Program is set to launch this summer, to address and repair privately-owned sewer laterals, reducing inflow and infiltration into the city’s sewer system. This initiative helps prevent system overflows, improves overall sewer performance, and promotes environmental sustainability.
- Our recovery will be a costly endeavor. However, St. Petersburg remains in a strong financial position despite the significant impacts of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. In fact, last week Fitch Ratings reaffirmed our AA+ (plus) credit rating with a Stable Outlook recognizing that we are well positioned financially for recovery.
- With an estimated \$247 million in costs for recovery including debris management and damages to our facilities, the City has proactively secured resources to support recovery efforts, including FEMA reimbursements expected to cover at least approximately \$200 million, state contributions, and insurance payments, including an advance payment from insurance companies in the amount of \$7.6 million for Tropicana Field repairs. While the reimbursement process takes time, the city’s responsible fiscal planning—demonstrated by a temporary \$50 million loan—ensures continued stability. With strategic budgeting and resilience planning, St. Pete is well-positioned to rebuild stronger while maintaining the city’s long-term financial health.
- 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 self-evident, but

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together, we are working to make St. Pete a resilient, vibrant, and sustainable place for all.

I am so proud of the work of our City team before, during, and after these hurricanes. I'll come back to share some observations of their truly heroic work during the storms of 2024.

Equitable Development, Arts & Business Opportunities

St. Petersburg is dedicated to driving inclusive economic development that enhances the quality of life for all residents and provides pathways for all to benefit from our progress, rather than being displaced by it. We embrace public-private partnerships, equitable funding support for businesses and the arts, and a community benefits model that fosters economic opportunity for all.

- Our Economic Growth remains strong. St. Pete experienced new construction value of nearly \$1.4 billion in FY24, a four percent increase from the previous year. Additionally, the City issued 34,761 permits, nearly five percent more than FY23. This continued strong growth indicates the city's ongoing development and our robust economy.

In 2024, we continued to move forward on equitable economic development in several key areas.

- The South St. Pete Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) Microfund Program continued in 2024, assisting a total of 196 small businesses, including 56 home-based businesses and 10 early-stage startups in the CRA. In addition to providing essential business acumen and strategy, over \$1.5M was allocated to assist these businesses in implementing their newly developed business plans, helping to create a more prosperous business environment in South St. Pete. The Microfund Program will evolve in 2025 to ensure continued support for our small businesses throughout the City.
- The City's Minority- and Women-Owned Business Enterprise (MWBE) Program enjoyed a successful inaugural year, attracting significant interest

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from the business community. More than 80 businesses applied, with 47 earning MWBE certification.

- In 2025, our Office of Supplier Diversity (OSD) will launch “Ready Set Bid!” a vendor readiness program that will give hands-on training on how to respond to solicitations and do business with the city. Additionally, OSD will partner with St. Pete Greenhouse to launch a technical assistance program, providing training and assistance to businesses seeking certification.
- Combined with the City’s Small Business Enterprise Program, nearly 350 local firms have been certified by the City of St. Petersburg.
- In August, Foot Locker announced the relocation of its Global Headquarters to St. Petersburg, planned for late 2025, creating over 150 high-paying jobs. Foot Locker will lease over 100,000 square feet of office space and invest at least \$20 million in its new headquarters. This significant addition makes Foot Locker the third Fortune 500 company headquartered in St. Petersburg and the fourth in Pinellas County. Their commitment underscores our City’s growing appeal as a hub for impactful and inclusive economic development.
- We are also a City of the Arts, and we are focused on supporting Artists and Arts organizations. Last year, the City not only increased Arts funding by \$180,000 over the previous year in my Recommended Budget, but also added \$695,000 in additional funds to mitigate the Arts funding cuts by the state of Florida, for a total of \$3.23 million of Arts funding from the city. I’d like to thank Councilmember Driscoll and City Council for raising this issue and our Arts, Culture and Tourism Director Celeste Davis for quickly developing a plan to help mitigate the impact of those unexpected cuts in State funding for the Arts. We will continue to work with City Council and the Arts community and our partners, to build a long-term sustainable Arts ecosystem.

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Historic Gas Plant

Let's talk about the Historic Gas Plant. In my 2023 State of City Address, I announced the Hines/Tampa Bay Rays group as my selection to partner in the redevelopment of the Historic Gas Plant District – 86 acres of critical economic, social and historic importance to our city and our region. In my 2024 address, I shared with you that I was confident that we would finalize development, funding, and other agreements between the City, County, and Hines/Rays, despite the complexity of the deal.

Now, in 2025, after three years – beginning with a new RFP, research, analysis, community conversations, negotiations, COWS (council workshops) and public hearings – both in St. Petersburg and the County Commission chambers, the agreements are signed and we are closer than this community has ever been to a new day for our community, for honoring promises, and charting an amazing path forward.

I am so proud and thankful for the work of our St. Pete Team to achieve this goal – which our community has pursued for decades. Thank you to City Administrator Rob Gerdes and your team, to our Legal Team under Jackie Kovilaritch, and the many St. Pete team members (too numerous to name), who worked countless hours, weekends and holidays, who powered through personal and family emergencies and life circumstances, and who handled all of their regular responsibilities as well – I say “Thank You” on behalf of this city for a job that was unprecedented in scope, and executed with excellence and professionalism.

To our County partners including past Chair Kathleen Peters and our County Commissioners, Administrator Barry Burton and Assistant County Attorney Don Crowell, I offer my sincere thanks as well.

And to our Hines/Rays partners, I want to thank you for the unprecedented progress that we've made. We do have signed agreements and have secured over \$600 million in local support for this transformative project. We have a Community Benefits package approved through a public process with the support of many descendants of the Historic Gas Plant District. The plan is vetted, feasible

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and funded. We've achieved so much together since I selected you two years ago.

The only thing that we need to move forward, to enter a new era for a great city that is emerging as one of our nation's *greatest*, and honoring the promises made both to our city and to the Gas Plant community, is for the Rays to honor the agreements that we all signed just six months ago. I remain hopeful that will happen.

I also believe in transparency, so, to the citizens of St. Pete, let me be clear. As I've stated throughout this process, this plan can only be successful with Partnership. City Council and the County Commission have fulfilled all of the city and county obligations to date. If we still have a willing partner in the Rays - *and we continue to have conversations with them* - then we will move forward, and that is my clear preference. But as your Mayor, please know that we are prepared, and have *always* been prepared to adapt, adjust and move forward if the Rays walk away from this partnership.

If that scenario unfolds, then with the land reverting back to the City, we will have three or four years (depending on when the Trop repairs are completed) to implement another path forward.

We have a carefully negotiated set of agreements that Council approved, and all parties signed barely six months ago. We will not pursue an agreement at any cost. The greatness and future of St. Petersburg does not depend solely on this deal. I am confident that we have given this endeavor our very best effort - and it's an effort and a process that we can all be proud of. Stay tuned - and we will keep working, until the final out.

A LOOK AHEAD

In 2025, we will continue our pursuit of Inclusive Progress in each of our Pillars.

We will continue to provide world-class service to the community in each administration. I want to thank all of my Cabinet members, including one of the

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hardest-working people I know, Chief of Staff Doyle Walsh and his team, my Mayor's office aides, the City Clerk's office, and Council Administration and their teams for the daily work that you do to provide essential services to our city. Your collective work provides that firm foundation for the public and private sector to build upon. A special thanks to the Marketing team for telling the story of our community through video and for pulling together this production.

In addition to the projects that I've mentioned earlier, here are a few other things to look forward to this year:

- We will bring the Municipal Marina recommendations and proposal to City Council, with a target of April.
- The Obama Library is on target to open by late summer.
- We will move forward on exciting affordable housing projects including:
 - Partnerships with Habitat for Humanity to develop affordable and workforce housing, including The Grove, Pelican Place, and Shell Dash.
 - Also, this year, work will begin at the former Ceridian campus and former Raytheon site, with each generating 100 new affordable and workforce housing units.
- We will continue to leverage grant funding, and plan for the use of the \$159 million of CDBG Disaster Recovery funding awarded to the City late last year – dollars that will support housing, infrastructure and other projects to increase our resiliency. Thanks to Aubrey Phillips, David Thompson, and our grants team for continuing to rapidly expand our grants to fund these essential projects.
- We will continue to upgrade our technologies and systems for better operations and customer experience. This year, we will continue the

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development of a critical business technology upgrade – the Tyler application suite. When completed in early 2026, the system will replace legacy systems in multiple departments, including Utility Billing, Permits, Planning & Zoning Projects, Codes Cases, Business Licenses, Work Orders, and other systems. The project will impact 800 internal users and 95,000+ customers and will provide more efficient operation and easier access for our customers.

- As we continue to embrace advanced technologies, it is vital that we explore ways to leverage AI to improve City services for residents. We have established an internal AI Policy Development team that will develop AI policies and ensure that AI technologies are utilized responsibly citywide. We will continue conversations with innovative companies like Ark Invest led by Cathie Wood to improve City processes and serve our community.

HEROES OF THE STORM

I'll close with a few words about the Hurricane Heroes of our St. Pete Team. Our City employees go above and beyond when it comes to serving our community. They are dedicated, hardworking, and set the standard for public service. This past year their efforts were further exemplified when we faced Hurricanes Helene and Milton. While both storm responses were an "all-hands on deck" effort, I'd like to take a moment and tell you about the members of the City's Storm Response And Recovery Team.

- First, I'd like to recognize the City's Emergency Management Team: Manager Amber Boulding and Specialist Megan Orlando. During the 2024 hurricane season, we relied heavily on these dynamic and talented individuals for their leadership and expertise as they guided the City's emergency employees through back-to-back hurricanes. In their roles, they are working around-the-clock to ensure the City is prepared to respond to any disaster or emergency event. They are often the first people in the Emergency Operations Center and the last to leave at the end of the day. Emergency managers play a vital role in our City's overall success and safety, and we are blessed to have two

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of the best on our team. Amber and Megan – thank you for all of your efforts during this past hurricane season.

- I'd also like to recognize and thank all of the emergency City employees who are here today and all of those who worked diligently through the storms. Many of these individuals were facing their own personal storm recovery challenges, but continuously put the needs of the community above their own.
- The City's emergency employees are the reason we are able to recover quickly after storms and I sincerely thank you for your hard work. During the storms, some of our emergency City employees were working and preparing City facilities for the hurricanes right up to landfall and resumed working the minute it was safe to do so, which in some cases was as early as 3 a.m.
- I'd like to specifically recognize our teams at the Northeast and Southwest Wastewater Treatment Facilities. These individuals work at facilities that are located in evacuation Zone A, which gave them a very limited window of time to prepare these plants for storm impacts and safely evacuate from the facilities. Despite this, they worked nonstop before, during, and after both storms to ensure City services could be restored as soon as possible. I'm very proud of these teams and all the work they have done for the City.
- We have come a long way in the four months, or 117 days, since Milton, but we have much work to do to fully recover from these storms. The first immediate step was removing an unprecedented amount of debris from our city. The debris was a visual reminder of the destruction of homes, businesses, and loss for thousands of our residents. Together, Helene and Milton generated more than 2 million cubic yards of construction and household debris and vegetative waste. Our team, including teams in Community Enrichment, Public Works, City Development Administration and Housing and Community Services, removed that debris in a record 90 days. The amount of debris collected was more than five times the debris collected

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in Hurricanes Idalia, Ian, and Irma combined.

- The Hometown Haulers program was another innovative response from our team, utilizing small independent haulers from our community to haul nearly 5,300 loads in between Helene and Milton and injecting almost \$1.6 million into our local economy through these small businesses.
- In addition, our team quickly set up Debris Management sites within our city to make the debris removal process as efficient and effective as possible. Thanks to Administrators Mike Jeffries, Claude Tankersley, Amy Foster and James Corbett, and your teams, for a phenomenal effort on this difficult and important task.
- Today, the same scenario applies to Permitting. With damage to more than 15,000 structures, the demand for post-storm permits is like nothing we've faced. The sheer volume of permits means that the process will take longer. But just like the debris issue, we are rising to this challenge. Our team has increased staff – hiring additional plans examiners and inspectors, implemented remote permitting sites and extended hours. To date, more than 7,000 permits have been processed, and our team will continue to work diligently to process permits and get our residents back into rebuilding your homes and businesses. Our team also held two public forums with FEMA, the State's Department of Emergency Management, the Property Appraiser and other agencies to get critical information to our residents and business owners.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the City's Executive Policy Group team. This team works in tandem to represent and guide all of the City's departments throughout a disaster. Consisting of the City's top leadership, they are the first group I turn to when we start to prepare for these natural disasters. I thank the members of the Executive Policy Group for your unwavering commitment to serving the City of St. Petersburg during both blue and gray skies. Thank you to all of the members of the City's storm response and recovery team for your outstanding work during the extraordinary 2024 Atlantic Hurricane Season.

2025 State of the City Remarks
by Mayor Kenneth T. Welch
Delivered February 4, 2025, at The Palladium



CLOSING

As we look ahead to 2025, one thing is clear – St. Petersburg is a city on the rise, unified, and focused on Inclusive Progress. Our progress is built on the dedication of our City team, the resilience of our residents, and the strength of our partnerships. From addressing housing challenges to driving economic opportunity, from enhancing public safety to advancing environmental resilience, we are taking bold, strategic steps toward a more inclusive, prosperous and sustainable future for everyone.

This past year tested our resolve and reminded us of both our vulnerabilities and our strengths. In the face of adversity, our city team, first responders, and community partners stepped up – proving once again that St. Pete is a city of resilience, unity, and strength.

We are stronger because of our commitment to progress, not just for some, but for everyone. And we will continue to hold firm to our principles – leading with integrity, innovation, inclusion, and intentionality.

Our work is far from done, but our path forward is clear. We will move ahead with determination, with purpose, and with the shared belief that St. Pete’s best days are still ahead of us.

This is our city. This is our time. We Are St. Pete, and the State of our City is Strong!

May God bless you and keep you.