

I am happy to say that this is my ninth time presenting the state of our city to the council and the citizens we serve.

During my tenure as mayor, Versailles has both endured unparalleled challenges and taken advantage of some tremendous opportunities. Even with the peaks and valleys along the way, I truly believe each passing year has been better than the last. 2021 is no different.

I don't want to minimize what we have faced because of the pandemic, especially the losses our community and many families have suffered. You have to go back to the early era of the Greatest Generation to find a period where so many were tested by so much.

And yet, I believe we are following their example of rising to the challenge. On the whole, the adversity we collectively face has united us more than it has divided us, no matter what social media and 24-hour news channels would have us believe.

I am proud of the spirit of cooperation I have seen within and among our local governments as well as the resiliency shown by our citizens and business community. I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes from Winston Churchill, who said that "the farther back you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see."

No quote better sums up who we are. The grit and values that defined Versailles for generations is the same grit and values making it possible for us to succeed today as well as tomorrow.

History will largely see this period of our lives through the lens of the pandemic, and on that front, our community has found ways to provide relief for those in need while moving this city forward.

We continued our individual assistance program through Community Action, for example, and that has helped local families to the tune of \$140,000 since the pandemic began.

We assisted nonprofits, many of which were forced to cancel their typical fundraising activities throughout the year; 26 of those entities have since received almost \$130,000. We also completed another round of small business grants to help our local employers remain in operation.

We used some of our ARPA allocation to award premium pay to our city employees who put themselves and their families at risk of exposure to COVID-19 while providing essential services.

Beyond that well-deserved hero pay, we also overhauled our personnel policy so that it is more employee *and* community friendly. That, in turn, will improve our recruitment and retention efforts and the city itself.

Among those changes are expanding our leave policies to promote volunteering and to encourage blood donations. We also now have paid parental leave for our employees when they have a new child.

In addition to investing in our personnel, we also spent 2021 investing in our fixed assets. Here, the list is especially long.

We completed the walking path between Crossfield and Douglas and successfully lobbied the state to have South Main St and the U.S. 60 bypass resurfaced.

We have continued to move towards the start of construction on the High Street sidewalk.

We entered into a contract to purchase a new and long-overdue fire engine.

We have taken the necessary steps to move forward with replacing the windows at City Hall when inventories are available, a move that will increase energy efficiency, safety and comfort.

We adopted a neighborhood grant program to invest in smaller projects to improve the spaces where people live and spend most of their time.

We sold the old police station and anxiously await the private investment that is soon to replace it.

We renewed our certification as a Work Ready Community and officially started down the path of earning designation as an Age Friendly Community.

We partnered with the county through the Parks & Recreation Department to see the opening of the Hunteertown Community Interpretive Park.

We promoted awareness for breast cancer through a partnership with Pink Sisters that displayed banners of breast cancer survivors and those who lost their battles with the horrible disease.

We also reduced our property tax rate while still maintaining a healthy fund balance at the end of the fiscal year.

Finally, and in true spirit of the season, we solicited private donations and saw the first-ever county-government investment that helped us have the best Christmas decorations and programming this community has ever seen.

That brings me back to the strong relationships Versailles has with our community partners. Those include Judge Kay and the Fiscal Court; Mayor Vandegrift and Midway City Council; Public Health Director Cassie Prather and Woodford County Health Department; and Superintendent Danny Adkins and the Woodford County Board of Education.

Without them working alongside us, we would not have had the type of success in 2021 that I just described. These partnerships will be even more vital as we move forward on an ambitious agenda for 2022.

One long-anticipated action we should see in the coming months is the federal EPA designating Versailles as an MS4 community. This will require the city to develop a comprehensive storm-water management program.

This isn't something we will rush into. Our first step will be working with our GIS director Kenneth Johns to finalize a complete inventory of our stormwater infrastructure around the community. We will then do what is required by the federal government to reduce pollutants into our streams and groundwater sources.

Another infrastructure focus for 2022 is the continued rehabilitation and growth of our sidewalks. Kenneth has already mapped the city to determine where we are lacking sidewalk connectivity.

After that analysis and prioritizing where the need is greatest, we will begin filling in our sidewalk gaps. I am pleased that there is consensus on our council to do this, and to create a cost-sharing program.

Although supply-chain issues have been a problem, we will finally see our new smart meters being installed sometime this spring. These meters are geared toward providing better and more accurate service to our utility customers and allowing leaks and other unknown usage to be detected well before bills go out and a large balance has accumulated.

If 2020 is the year when the pandemic staggered us economically and 2021 is the year when we learned to adjust, 2022 must be the year when we complete our post-pandemic economic foundation for Versailles. The investments I just described and many others will make that possible.

With that in mind, we have a few sites either online or nearly complete that will attract businesses with good-paying jobs.

In order to distinguish ourselves from other communities, we will finally tackle the ordinances that will create a new round of economic development incentives to lure new or expanding businesses that pay well and invest in our city.

We will also look again at shifting our business tax structure from one based on net profits to one based on gross receipts. I believe this is the most equitable and transparent way.

We also will enact an ordinance showing our commitment to local businesses and allowing for a local bidder preference in procurement.

In addition, we will partner with county government to create a one-stop portal that will let businesses register and pay taxes on a single website.

Lastly, we will look at building standards in business zones and the potential for a new zoning classification requiring certain economic, aesthetic and environmental criteria be met.

Another forward-looking measure we will take in 2022 is partnering with Woodford County to retain the services of a grant writer. There is no doubt we are leaving money on the table because of the lack of this specialized skill and the inordinate amount of time it takes to apply for many grants.

We also will partner with many entities to complete the downtown revitalization that is so critical to our future identity. One I want to highlight is the space between Rose Hill and Court Street, an area that includes Big Spring Park. This site has seen many plans over the years, but we should complete final details of a project soon that will have a lasting impact.

This new location will incorporate one of our signature industries into downtown, capitalize on the unique water feature that exists there, expand our usable public space, improve the aesthetics of the area, and promote our history, all while preserving or expanding the number of public parking spaces.

These past two years have hopefully taught us a lot of lessons, but the one that I pray sticks with us is the acknowledgement that we can't go it alone.

When the lockdowns happened in early 2020, we realized just how much we valued not only the companionship of our close family and friends, but also the sense of community we get from gathering with strangers.

When our local small businesses suffered and teetered on the edge of collapse, we realized just how much they meant to us collectively, and we all did our part to pull them through.

When health professionals told us that vaccinating ourselves against this disease was the best way to help our vulnerable citizens, we rolled up our sleeves and led the commonwealth.

When our fellow Kentuckians were victims of an historic tornado, we gave of our money, resources, energy and prayers.

Our need to interact with and serve our fellow man is strong. That realization should overshadow all of the things that have divided us lately.

As I alluded to early in my remarks, there are strong forces that feed on that division. We see it on the news and, more locally, in social media forums that thrive in a never-ending race to be the most outraged and the most insulting.

As many of you know, I make it a habit to quote Herald Leader columnist Paul Prather in each of my annual remarks. This year will be no different!

In a column almost a year ago, Prather highlighted a theme we should all keep in mind: "*Whatever you believe,*" he wrote, "*you could be wrong.*"

It doesn't take long while reading posts on social media to see the passion of opinions on various topics – some life-or-death and others about the efficiency of local fast-food establishments.

It also doesn't take one long to see the anger and borderline hatred some feel for those whose opinion differs. Prather showed us a better way. He wrote:

“What if we approached dilemmas of all sorts—political, social, marital, economic—from a place of real humility? From a deep sense of our limitations and lostness, rather than from the smug assurance we already possess the truth for everyone? Imagine how much we might learn from one another, and from God, who the Bible says opposes the proud yet gives grace to the weak. Instead, we want our adversaries to humbly acknowledge they could be mistaken while simultaneously recognizing how right we are. It would serve us well to approach differences of opinion with the thought, ‘I know what I believe. I believe it with all my heart. But I could be wrong.’”

The simple wisdom of his opinion has stuck with me. If we would spend more time seeking to understand the point of view of others instead of shooting proverbial arrows at them, we might not only learn something new but would also see the humanity in our self-proclaimed adversaries.

I'm proud of the way we conduct ourselves in this body and among our employees, but we always need to be aware of the temptation of being pulled in the direction of tribalism. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but I still have faith that we will overcome this pull in 2022 and in the years ahead, just as we have during the difficulty of our recent past.

I'll close with another simple Paul Prather-ism from this past June.

“Be nice. As I've written before, after 40 years of studying the New Testament, I've decided this is the gospel of Jesus Christ in a nutshell: just be nice. Give everybody the benefit of the doubt. When in doubt, say something gracious. Be merciful to sinners, because I'm a sinner, too, and need mercy.”

Thank you all again for giving me the chance to sum up our city's past and future. I'm looking forward to working with all of you even more closely in the months ahead.