

Mayor Melvin Carter's 2022 State of Our City Address

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



Thank you, Council President Brendmoen, and greetings to all of you joining this 2022 State of Our City Address.

Last month, as I renewed my oath of service to this office, I reflected on the great many challenges we've endured over these past several years. I shared then —but it bears repeating —how proud I am to serve among a community of dedicated residents, workers, public employees, business, community, and elected leaders who know well that our city's highest and brightest future can only be built when we all do the building.

Our road has not been easy, nor should it be. Without struggle there is no progress. And still, it seems —over these past two years in particular — that fate just keeps on throwing us one set of deeply troubling and uncertain circumstances after another: the COVID-19 pandemic, record homelessness, hunger and unemployment, the wrongful death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement, a global reckoning on race, rioting and destruction in our streets, the wrongful death of Daunte Wright at the hands of law enforcement, a violent insurrection at our nation's Capitol, a record year for homicides right here in Minnesota's capital city, and the wrongful death of Amir Locke at the hands of law enforcement.

Even now, as the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic finally feels hopeful, we yet everyday experience a visceral vulnerability to violence, both at home and abroad. Just yesterday, Russia ordered troops into Ukraine, the defense rested in the trial of Officers Lang, Kueng and Thao, and our community was sent reeling by another senseless act of cowardice, as gunfire erupted at a funeral home, killing one and injuring three others.

That terrible trauma is a horrifying reminder of the cycles of violence that have gripped our neighborhoods for too long. We will hold the victims' families in our hearts as our officers work to identify those responsible and remain resolved to continue our work to build the comprehensive public safety systems we'll need to end these cycles for good.

We are living in a time that is both critical and complex. Just as news of increased domestic violence, gunfire, and carjackings remind us of the critical need to invest in our emergency response systems, videos of officer involved shootings, high speed pursuits and no-knock warrants keep us grounded in our continued need for accountability and reform.

While the progress we've made within the Saint Paul Police Department has rightfully received national attention and acclaim, our lead cannot be maintained by standing still. We must press forward.

I am proud of the deep investments we have made to grow and develop our police department. And I am deeply grateful for the work of our officers, firefighters, and paramedics, who embody the spirit of sacrifice and service, and stand up in the face of any challenge to serve our public safety mission with dignity and compassion, every day.

Their work does not go unrecognized. Compared to just four years ago when I took office, our Saint Paul Police Officers respond today more swiftly to most types of 911 calls, use less force across the board, suffer fewer injuries to officers and civilians alike, and clear a higher percentage of violent crimes with an arrest. And we are at a 10-year low for legal settlements related to officer conduct. These performance metrics all demonstrate a department that is healthy and functioning incredibly well.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



The performance of our canine unit is of particular importance to me. In 2018, following a three-year series of high-profile accidental bites of innocent civilians, I placed our police canine unit on limited duty pending the outcome of a comprehensive audit.

While I know that some were suspicious of our motives, our community came together through that audit to imagine a unit capable of effective service without the collateral damage and trauma of repeated accidental bites. In the two years preceding that audit, Saint Paul's police canine unit experienced 55 dog bites. I'm pleased to report that in 2021, that number was zero. This kind of progress is made possible not by me, but by residents who lean in to tackle tough questions together, and officers who put service over self.

While some still see reimagining public safety as oppositional to police, our Saint Paul framework is about serving our residents, our officers and our entire community better at the same time, by finally building systems that are designed to keep us all safe. Our vision for a coordinated, comprehensive, and data-driven public safety system starts with a police department that possesses the requisite capacity and credibility to continue serving our city with distinction.

To that end, later this week we will graduate our largest police academy in city history, adding 55 new officers into the ranks of the Saint Paul Police Department. Further, I have already approved the commencement of a hiring process to add a second police academy this spring, and I'm pleased to announce that Saint Paul will accept a federal COPS Grant to bolster the number of officers in that class as well.

Even with these investments, we know that our officers cannot solve all of our challenges alone. With the help of our City Council, this year's adopted budget includes significant and historic resources to enhance our public safety toolkit.

Our Community Advocacy Response Team, housed in the Saint Paul Fire Department, is working to leverage community social workers to engage and assist members of our unsheltered community. This team has launched and will be fully staffed by summer, with capacity to respond to non-emergency 911 calls in a way that better connects residents to supportive resources, while freeing officers to focus on violent crime.

We are excited to welcome Brooke Blakey as director of our newly formed Office of Neighborhood Safety next week and we'll soon be accepting applications to serve on our inaugural Neighborhood Safety Community Council, to bring us together around — and propose meaningful investments in — proactive, evidence-based interventions to make our neighborhoods safer before we ever have to call 911.

To ensure our children have access to safe, positive activities during non-school hours, I am proposing a three-year pilot utilizing American Rescue Plan funds to add targeted Saturday hours at five recreation centers – El Rio Vista, Hayden Heights, Hazel Park, McDonough, and the Martin Luther King Center — and to eliminate athletic participation fees for youth 10 and up at recreation centers located in areas of concentrated poverty.

To help stabilize our downtown skyway system as we rebuild, we have already added police patrols to our skyways, partnered with our Downtown Alliance to staff up to 25 Street Team Ambassadors by May to help welcome workers back downtown, and will start reactivating public spaces, beginning today, by assigning staff from City Hall to work temporarily in vacant skyway storefronts. Our skyway system is not designed to be empty, and no one is better equipped to welcome workers back than our dedicated city staff.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



We are also fortunate that President Biden and his administration recognize that our work to realize safer outcomes requires balanced investments in policing and comprehensive strategies to address root causes of crime. We'll continue our work with the Biden Administration, in partnership with County Attorney John Choi, to leverage every dollar we can in our drive to develop the most coordinated, comprehensive, and data-driven approach to public safety our city has ever endeavored.

In the coming months, we will move forward with selecting new directors to lead our Parks & Recreation Department, and our Department of Safety & Inspections, as we thank Director Ricardo Cervantes and Director Mike Hahm for their decades of public service and wish them well in the next season of their work and life.

We will also face the bittersweet challenge of a transition in our police department's leadership team. While Chief Axtell and I have publicly agreed and disagreed on a range of issues these past several years, his lifetime of service to our city and the strong current state of our police department demand our utmost respect and appreciation.

Few decisions are of greater consequence than selecting a Chief of Police. It would be foolhardy, among the deafening cries for a global evolution of policing culture and tactics, to suggest that speed should be the ultimate priority that controls this process. We will allow the time necessary to engage our community, to perform our due diligence, and to select the most fitting candidate to lead our department through the next 6 years.

While this process is an exciting opportunity to continue the momentum, and legacy of leadership within our police department, it also creates an opportunity to lock in the improvements our current police administration has made. To that end, I will work with our City Council and police department leadership to consider administrative policies to formally codify changes our police department has already begun around outdated practices like non-public safety stops, vehicle pursuits, and no-knock warrants.

The proliferation of guns across our country continues to be a challenge for every major American city. Right here in Saint Paul, we today suffer more gun violence than ever before. The allegation that one of the guns used in the mass shooting we endured this fall was purchased by a straw buyer who bought 33 firearms in just a four-month span, adds insult to that horrifying tragedy.

While we look back and hunger for justice for the deaths of Marquisha Wiley, Loyace Foreman III, Matthew Pettus, Nitosha Presley, Jasmine Sturm and every other promising life we've lost, the interests of justice must always fight forward.

Addressing root causes means our justice system must prove itself capable of holding accountable those who pull a trigger, alongside every individual and company that profits from making guns so readily accessible to them.

A few years ago, I testified to the Minnesota Legislature in support of legislation to reduce gun violence, including a bill that would require a background check for every gun buyer in our state. It's too late for this commonsense policy to undo the nightmare we endured on October 10, 2021, but the need for legislative action remains as great as ever.

While we wait for our legislature to act, however, we must take every action we can to reduce the number of illegal guns in our community.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



While firearms that are safely stored are less likely to end up in the wrong hands or being used in the commission of a crime, research by Johns Hopkins University has found that fewer than 50% of American firearm owners lock their guns securely. A 2019 report issued by the United States Secret Service found that in incidents of gunfire on school grounds between 1974 and 2017, more than 3/4 of underage shooters secured their gun from the home of a parent, relative or friend. And a 2017 investigative report found that the vast majority of stolen firearms recovered by police between 2010 and 2016 had been used in connection with a crime.

To address the number and narrative of stolen guns in our community, I will ask the City Council to consider and pass an ordinance requiring legal firearms be stored locked, unloaded, and separate from ammunition when not under the owner's immediate control, in accordance with recommendations of both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Shooting Sports Foundation. In recognition of the challenging economic situation we are all currently in, I will also propose an expenditure of American Rescue Plan funds to purchase and distribute firearm safes and trigger locks to lawful gun owners in our city.

Ensuring safe, stable neighborhoods for children and families to thrive is our number one job. We will continue our work to build — and to fully fund — the most comprehensive, coordinated and data-driven approach to public safety our city has ever endeavored. As we keep our focus on safer outcomes in our neighborhoods, we are going to go to work creating work for our residents. We have real needs across our city that create real opportunities for our residents to add real value in our community.

Last year, we announced a partnership with the Saint Paul Port Authority to put residents to work cutting down, breaking up and hauling away trees impacted by Emerald Ash Borer, and replanting our diverse urban forest for the future. Similarly, we have partnered with the Downtown Alliance and our Downtown Ambassadors to demonstrate how neighbors who are willing to work hard can add value by keeping our city clean, painting over graffiti, and helping visitors find their way.

Next, I will propose a partnership with City/County Workforce Solutions and Saint Paul Regional Water Services, fueled by a significant investment of American Rescue Plan funds, to put our residents to work replacing the lead pipes that still connect thousands of homes to city water mains, so all of our neighbors can live without fear of lead in their water supply.

I will propose a collaboration among city departments and local artists to enliven the mostly blank canvas of our public infrastructure with vibrant public art that reflects the rich interculturalism that Saint Paul uniquely has to offer. And I will propose a partnership with Ramsey County and our fantastic web of public, private and nonprofit employers to expand Right Track Plus to offer employment opportunities for every single Saint Paul teen who wants one and eliminate youth unemployment in our city.

There exists opportunity for meaningful work all around us. Our goal isn't simply to get these jobs done, but to unapologetically create opportunities for residents of all ages to find financial security through gainful employment, personal development, and promising career pathways. A healthy economy must work for those who work it. Still, too many roadblocks exist for too many families to achieve their full economic potential. Our People's Prosperity Guaranteed Income Pilot has proven effective at helping families overcome these barriers.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



Over these past 18 months, we've provided 150 families with \$500 per month in unconditional cash transfers. Our initial findings demonstrate that the majority of the payments were spent on immediate needs like rent, groceries, gas, bills and baby supplies. We heard from parents who used the funds to buy winter clothes for their children, and one who enrolled in a training program to learn software coding, and eventually found a better job for themselves. Our participants reported that our People's Prosperity Pilot was like a "life raft" for their family; like a big weight "just kind of lifted."

While we await the final report from researchers who have been studying the program, we know that continuing this investment will propel these game-changing outcomes across our community. That's why today, I am announcing that we will propose a 2nd phase to expand and continue our People's Prosperity Guaranteed Income Pilot with American Rescue Plan funds, serving 300 families for a period of 24 months.

When we funded our first phase with CARES Act dollars back in the fall of 2020, Saint Paul became the first city to leverage public funds for a guaranteed income pilot. Dozens of other cities have since followed suit, and I am excited for Saint Paul to continue our leadership in this area.

Even with our efforts to realize safer outcomes and bolster economic stability in our city, our housing crisis continues to demand our urgent attention. I'm proud of our prioritization of housing needs in American Rescue Plan investments, and our partnership with Ramsey County to allocate \$ 74 million to fund a thousand deeply affordable units for our lowest income neighbors. That work must continue and expand.

I'm proud of our ongoing conversation about ensuring our local housing market works for the renters, who now make up a majority of our city's residents. And I'm proud of the work we started to establish codified expectations for safe, affordable, fair and equitable housing for all, including protections against housing discrimination that often locks returning residents and others out of housing. That work, too, must continue in the coming months.

Most immediately, we are working hard to iron out the details of implementation, as well as suggested improvements to the rent stabilization ordinance which Saint Paul voters approved this past fall. Last week I announced our collaboration with the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban & Regional Affairs to engage a group of 41 diverse stakeholders to provide recommendations that will shape the future of our rent stabilization ordinance. Our entire community is indebted to co-chairs Phillip Cryan and Tony Sanneh, as well as each of the individuals who've stepped forward to serve in this important capacity.

Just as Saint Paul has proven ourselves capable of bringing together union members and business leaders to craft sensible minimum wage policy and charting our public safety course with police union leaders and Black Lives Matter activists at the same table, so too will we prove that renters, workers, landlords and developers can work together to craft a future where all can live with dignity in our city. I invite members of our community to view these meetings via livestream, starting with today's first meeting at 1:00 p.m. Please visit stpaul.gov/rent-group for more information on this process.

As mayor of a city with persistent housing inequities, where low-income children switch schools a half dozen times in one school year as their parents seek stable housing, and where 5 people perished last winter simply because they could not find a safe & warm place to sleep, our status quo is unacceptable. We must be ready for change.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



As mayor of a city that is growing fast and already faces a shortage of housing units for families at all income levels, I also know that our shared goal of keeping housing affordable for all is simply not achievable in a city that cannot build new units. Just as doing nothing is untenable, we must also keep a watchful eye to ensure that the impacts of the policies we pass never inadvertently undermine our real goals.

Like many other Saint Paul residents, I voted “yes” this past fall, despite real concerns, to jumpstart an important conversation about rent stabilization and housing affordability in our city. While some of our votes were intended as itemized approval of details in the draft policy, and others as endorsing a conversation and shared goal, I have every confidence that we all are united in our desire to field a city where families of all incomes can live with stability and dignity.

Every single city that we can find with a rent stabilization policy in place provides an exemption to incentivize construction of new housing units, and so should Saint Paul. I publicly asked the City Council to send such a policy to my desk back in November and continue to believe that it is critical to do so as quickly as possible. We cannot afford to lose the thousands of housing units currently on pause while we wait for bureaucratic processes at City Hall to run their course.

Working with my team, we have drafted a policy to provide a rolling exemption for new housing less than 15 years old. If passed, this policy would apply just the same for a neighbor hoping to build a duplex down the street as it would for a large developer looking to build an apartment building downtown. This draft ordinance that we’ve developed will be sent to the City Council before the close of business today, and I encourage them to take urgent action.

To be clear, there are many other critical questions that must be addressed about the future of this ordinance. We must define a “reasonable rate of return”, assess the impact on small, local landlords, and determine if 3% is a long-term fixed target or simply a starting point. As effective policy can always withstand thoughtful questioning, these inquiries should not make those who are passionate about the fate of renters in our city feel threatened, but reconfirm that in Saint Paul, effectively helping our neighbors still takes precedence over defending our rhetoric.

While our stakeholder group works to hone its recommendations on the universe of variables surrounding rent stabilization, I will welcome any thoughtful policy that arises from City Council deliberations around our new housing exemption proposal. Because time is of the essence, we cannot accept excuses for inaction or delay.

Simply stated, we’re in a housing crisis because we have more people than homes, at every income level. And our population is growing fast. Anything we do to slow the production of new units will only make the problem worse. As the stakeholder group engages in their development of long-term recommendations, and the Council takes up new housing exemptions, my team remains engaged in working toward a May 1st implementation date.

City leaders from our Planning & Economic Development, Office of Financial Empowerment, and our City Attorney’s Office are working collaboratively to develop the policies, procedures, and systems we will need to have in place as we implement our rent stabilization ordinance. Their immediate focus is on establishing definitions, as well as crafting petition processes, monitoring, and evaluation, staffing needs, and operational considerations.

**Mayor Melvin Carter's
2022 State of Our City Address**

Tuesday, February 22, 2022



By May 1, we will be ready to accept petitions from tenants, accept petitions for exemption from landlords, and process hearings. While there is much work to do, we are diligently moving forward. Members of our community can visit our City of Saint Paul website for additional information and updates on this process at stpaul.gov/rent-stabilization.

While I know we are all weary of the public health protocols we have had to follow throughout the course of this pandemic, I am grateful to serve a community that cares enough to protect each other's well-being by masking, distancing, and getting vaccinated. I encourage you to continue to do so. Our vigilance and sacrifice have saved lives. I am forever grateful to the frontline workers, first responders and health care professionals who never clocked out but carried us through every day of the pandemic.

As we begin to stabilize from the Omicron wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is time to begin sensibly winding down from the constant state of emergency that has controlled our lives these past two years. We are working with members of the City Council to evaluate every emergency order from these past two years, including the ongoing state of emergency.

While we all look forward to the opportunity to expire some of the temporary safeguards we've put in place, others enhance our ability to serve in a pandemic informed environment. Our commitment to constituent engagement and due process means that the policies we intend to make permanent must be publicly presented and vetted through our normal policy-making process.

Like communities across the country, we are working closely with our Saint Paul-Ramsey County Public Health professionals to track rates of COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, deaths, and on our local ICU capacity, to determine a safe timeline to sunset masking requirements in Saint Paul. I am hopeful to rollback this measure in the near future, as we continue weighing how best to care for our community's health and well-being.

While there is much work ahead, today I stand confident that the State of Our City is strong enough, resilient enough, and bright enough to continue lighting the path forward. Together, we will continue our drive to bet on each other, we will continue our unending pursuit of building a better community for our children and grandchildren, and we will continue building a city that truly works for all of us.

Stay safe, and please continue taking care of yourselves, just as we continue taking care of one another. We need you in this work now more than ever. Thank you.

###