

# Mayor Melvin Carter's 2023 State of Our City Address

Tuesday, April 18, 2023



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Good afternoon, and greetings to everyone joining us here today and watching online, and welcome to the 2023 State of Our City address.

This year, my address comes at a time of enormous growth and opportunity for our city.

Our downtown business district is steadily rebounding as more and more people return to the office. Visitors are coming back to our entertainment venues, attractions, and restaurants, which have reopened their doors to full capacity. We are breaking ground on untapped potential in the form of new and exciting commercial and residential development across our city.

Our Minnesota Wild are in the playoff running and the Saint Paul Saints are back for another summer of fun.

And our population is growing.

A city, in its purest form, is simply a group of people.

It's when the group comes together, when they use their collective voices to drive change, that is when we see true democracy in action.

As a city government, everything we do is from an enterprise approach — striving to work together in such way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We collaborate in innovative ways to expedite results and efficiently deliver meaningful solutions to residents, and add value by extending this enterprise mentality to our partnerships with our county, our schools, our chamber of commerce, and our business leaders.

It was because of this enterprise approach that we were able to effectively prepare for the back-to-back snow emergency in February.

Our public safety leaders, Public Works crews, and department directors, along with our partners at Saint Paul Public Schools and across the river in Minneapolis, wasted no time

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coming together to ensure we were ready for what was one of the largest snow events in state history.

We secured thousands of free off-street parking by opening up downtown parking ramps and community center parking lots.

Our Library and Parks and Recreation workers came in early and stayed late so our youth had a warm, safe place to go when school was canceled. Our plow drivers worked exhaustingly long shifts to clear heavy snow from our streets, allowing our first responders to safely navigate the city in the event of an emergency.

Every day, our public employees find creative ways to improve the lives of our residents and keep our city functioning. But even with the incredible efforts of our public workers, we must respond to 21st century demands with 21st century solutions.

If we are to realize a truly sustainable Saint Paul that can meet the demands of a growing city, we must address decades of disinvestment in infrastructure and our most valuable assets.

Driving around our city, it is no secret that our streets are breaking down. Decades of deferred action by city leaders has resulted in extraordinary disrepair of our roads. Reliable streets are a core public service of our city.

And the economic viability of Minnesota and the twin cities depends on whether people can safely and efficiently navigate our roads. In Saint Paul, we have approximately 1,900 lane miles of city-owned arterial streets. And those streets serve as a vital connection to the regional, state, and federal highway system.

Each day, thousands of people rely on our roadways to get them to and from work and school, to our parks, to doctor's appointments and the post office, to places of worship, and to the grocery store.

Our roads are the lifeline that keeps our city moving forward.

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As we plan for the future, our infrastructure and parks are going to be key in keeping Saint Paul thriving and relevant, and we are poised to take full advantage of that opportunity. That's why our local sales tax proposal – which stands to generate a billion dollars toward our streets and parks – is so vital.

The lifespan of a newly constructed street is 60 years. And yet, we inherited streets on a 124-year replacement cycle. To put that context, the last time Summit was reconstructed, William Taft was in the White House.

In the 12 months of 2022, Saint Paul residents and commuters filed 85 claims for pothole damage to their vehicles. In the first two months of this year alone, that number soared to 250.

The median claim for those repairs is \$800 - far more than a vast majority of contributors would pay in a year as a result of a one-cent sales tax.

These standards are untenable. It's abundantly clear that we have not made the kind of investment our roads require. To be clear, these resources would supplement, and not be used to supplant, our current street maintenance budget.

Our parks facilities also stand to benefit greatly from the revenue of a sales tax. This investment would revitalize aging parks infrastructure, focusing on the parks, community centers, trails, bikeway connections, and athletic facilities most in need.

We are proud to operate one of the best urban parks systems in the nation, which attracts more than 15 million outdoor enthusiasts annually from all over the country. We have over 200 neighborhood and regional parks, 212 miles of bikeways and trails, immediate access to the Mississippi River, and a wide variety of amenities that offer year-round access.

Funding would also provide the opportunity to connect the region with natural resources in new and exciting ways, spurring development along the Mississippi River shoreline and in our Greater East Side.

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Furthermore, an estimated 7 million people come to Saint Paul each year from all over the region to experience our downtown businesses, museums, attractions, shopping, restaurants, and entertainment district.

Until we prioritize the long-term stability of our roads and outdoor spaces, they will only continue to deteriorate at an exponential rate.

The alternative is placing the cost of repairs entirely on the shoulders of Saint Paul residents through another increase in property taxes. Our residents should not be the only ones paying for road repairs, especially when non-residents account for over 130,000 jobs in our city and roughly 45% of visits to our regional parks and trails.

Instead, our proposal provides the opportunity for all who enjoy what Saint Paul has to offer the chance to contribute to its continued success.

None of this critical work would be feasible without adequate, predictable funding. One way or another, we'll invest one billion dollars into our streets and parks over the next 20 years.

And the longer we wait to act, the more expensive it will be.

I want to thank Sen. Sandy Pappas and Rep. Athena Hollins for carrying our sales tax proposal forward at the Capitol.

As our city grows, our work to build a future-forward Saint Paul must center around sustainability, which is the cornerstone of our newest commercial and residential development at Highland Bridge.

What was once the vacant former site of a Ford assembly plant, is the future home of 122 acres of mixed-use commercial and residential development and lush park spaces. This vision was brought to life through the tireless work of Councilmember Chris Tolbert, who ushered us through the most critical phases of getting this 21st-century project off the ground.

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In addition to laying the groundwork for reinvesting in our infrastructure and sustainability, we continue working to build the most coordinated, comprehensive, and data-driven approach to public safety our city has ever endeavored.

For decades, we've known all too well that our first responders alone can't address all of the challenges we face. Our officers, firefighters, and EMTs run toward danger when we need them most, providing critical life-saving support.

The loss of Pope County Sheriff Deputy Joshua Owens who was shot and killed in the line of duty this past weekend is a tragic and painful instance that demonstrates how these dangerous situations we call on officers to run toward can also lead to tragedy.

That's why our Community-First approach engages not only our officers, firefighters and EMTs, but an array of Community-First partners to address the broad continuum of situations that lead to these tragedies, and other public safety challenges in our community.

No one is better at responding to emergencies than our firefighters, paramedics, and police officers.

Last year, we lowered the average EMS response time by one life-saving minute. In times of crisis, every second is precious. We are fortunate to have been able to hire and train 65 new firefighters, bringing the department back to its authorized strength.

And this year, we will leverage grant funding to send 18 firefighters to paramedic school, purchase new PPE, conduct safety and survival training, and provide enhanced health screenings to firefighters in an effort to help prevent or detect early onset of cancer, cardiac events, and behavioral health issues.

We will also expand the capacity of our Basic Life Support unit, which currently handles 9 percent of all Fire Department calls for service. This critical expansion will allow our firefighters and paramedics to maintain a posture of readiness to respond to our most acute emergencies.

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Today, with the historic investments we've made in our fire response, our Saint Paul Fire Department is stronger than ever.

When it comes to ensuring that perpetrators of violence are held accountable, our Saint Paul Police Department continues to fulfill its mission to deliver trusted service with respect under Chief Axel Henry's leadership.

Early this morning, Saint Paul police arrived on the scene of a double homicide where two of our neighbors in the East Side were tragically shot and killed. All of this senseless violence traumatizes our community, the victims, and our officers, all of whom need our continued support.

Last year, we leveraged over \$1 million in American Rescue Plan funding to support the Police Academy Pilot program, which allowed our police department to offer a second police academy to increase the number of deployable officers.

This year, through remaining ARP dollars, the federal cops grant, and department savings, we'll once again have the funding to support two academies, further bolstering our department's ranks.

We've been pleased with how two academies in 2022 and two slated for 2023 have supported police department staffing and operations. We have yet to find a permanent funding source to support multiple police academies each year, but I look forward to bringing this discussion to our community as we engage in the upcoming and future conversations around building our city budget.

In the meantime, we can rest assured that our police department remains committed to engaging in critical recruiting strategies.

With the addition of a full-time recruiting sergeant and programs like our Law Enforcement Career Path Academy, we are doubling down on our effort to support the hiring of future officers and law enforcement leaders from within our community.

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Our most recent graduating class was 70 percent diverse, further reflecting in our police department ranks the languages, cultures, and perspectives of our residents.

The exceptional work of our investigative unit is proven through clearance rates that regularly exceed national averages.

Last year, at a time when caseloads increased across our department and around the nation, our police homicide unit achieved a clearance rate of over 80 percent, about 30 percentage points ahead of the national average.

But this is only possible because the partnership that exists between our officers and members of our community isn't just an idealistic vision, but it is also a foundational element of our Community-First Public Safety strategy.

Like I've already said, no one is better at making every second count than our emergency responders in Saint Paul.

But we know that how we respond in the moments after something terrible happens is only part of the solution. For decades, we've understood public safety to be how quickly we can rush to the scene of a crime, chase someone down, lock them up, and throw away the key.

But when these tragedies unfold, entire communities are left traumatized. Individuals and families involved experience the devastating ripple effects of lives lost to violence or incarceration – a perspective which our traditional model of public safety too often neglects.

The vision of public safety that we're leading is about how we wrap our arms around all those who are impacted by these traumatic events.

It's about using data-driven methods to identify and support those who are most likely to commit and fall victim to a crime and interrupt the all too predictable cycles that end up devolving into violence in our neighborhoods.

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Our Community-First Public Safety framework is grounded in research and deep public engagement and collaboration. This is more than just about investing in public safety resources and personnel.

It's also about building capacity and implementing a holistic and humanizing approach to helping our community. It's about the proactive actions a city can take well before anyone has to call 911.

Over the past several years, thousands of residents have leaned in to inform our Community-First Public Safety framework. Last year, as we established Saint Paul's new Office of Neighborhood Safety, we welcomed Director Brooke Blakey to our team.

To help shape the strategies and investments and center the voices of our residents in perpetuity, we also established the Neighborhood Safety Community Council, which opens us up to the longstanding community and elder wisdom that has always told us: sometimes all our young people need is a job, a tutor, or a mentor.

And when our young people feel supported, then our neighborhoods can be more secure. And when we prioritize the safety and well-being of our neighborhoods, then we can see less violence, fewer guns on the street, and better outcomes for the next generation.

But access to that wisdom is not a solution alone.

Along with Chief Henry, Chief Inks, and City Attorney Olson, and their incredible teams, our Office of Neighborhood Safety efforts have reshaped not only the ways our public safety system supports our community, but it's also reshaping how we work together.

In collaboration with our Saint Paul Police Department and Community-First partners, the Office of Neighborhood Safety launched Project PEACE, a methodical, individualized gun violence intervention initiative that connects victims of gun violence with evidence-based resources, community-led programming, and wraparound supports.



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As part of Project PEACE, our Saint Paul officers created the ASPIRE Unit, within which dedicated officers engage in focused outreach and engagement activities with members of our community who are at-risk for being involved in gun violence.

Project PEACE and ASPIRE leverages the resources and knowledge of our optimal response teams and community partners and directs it toward supporting one person at a time. And we're already seeing how these programs are working to improve outcomes.

Over 130 referrals to Project PEACE have come from the ASPIRE Unit. These requests come to our officers from those concerned for our youth, including parents, family members, and victims of gun violence. That's over 130 individuals who've been connected to new, safer housing, city or county support resources, and community-based organizations.

This work has also led to nearly 120 gun seizures, and as of February 2023, gunshot wound victims have decreased by half and are on pace for a 43-percent decrease for the entire year, compared to 2022.

These numbers are moving in the right direction, but there is always more we can and we will do.

In my last State of Our City address, I asked the City Council to take up an ordinance that would prevent unsecured guns from falling into the wrong hands.

Tomorrow, the city council will review a proposed amendment to a legislative code that, if adopted, will require all firearms to be safely stored and secured, and away from ammunition, to reduce incidents of harm caused by unlawful discharge of unsecured firearms.

We're asking that responsible gun owners do their part to protect our community, because we know that loose guns falling into the wrong hands can have a devastating effect.

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In the last year, we have encountered far too many moments of almost unbearable heartbreak, which is why this work is so critical. We've experienced a vivid, heart wrenching example of that violence just as we turned the page on the new year and learned that a shooting had occurred outside of this very rec center.

Never in our city's history has something like that happened.

I ordered a comprehensive audit of policies, practices, and resources pertaining to public safety training and discipline, and systems for support in our Saint Paul rec centers to ensure that nothing like that will ever happen again.

While those efforts will ensure we are doing everything in our power to keep our rec centers safe, at a time when guns are the leading cause of death among our young people, we'll continue to advocate for local authority to ban guns in our rec centers.

Leadership is about using your power to bring people together and demonstrate the ways in which the government can be relevant to our everyday lives.

As communities across our nation continue to rebuild from the generational impacts of the pandemic, the Biden Administration's steadfast leadership, and tireless advocacy of Senators Klobuchar and Smith, has brought new opportunities for how our federal government can support us at home.

From the enormous impacts of the American Rescue Plan and the White House initiative to curb gun violence, we've been able to bring millions of dollars to Saint Paul to help move forward our vision of building a city that works for all of us.

These dollars are a critical revenue source that has ensured the continuity of government through the crisis we've endured and makes major investments into the longterm stability of our infrastructure.

With a trifecta in our state legislature, we are no longer stymied by those who seek to block common sense legislation that would improve the lives of Minnesotans.

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Things like codifying reproductive rights, providing universal free meals to our students, investing in our public education and public infrastructure, supporting clean energy, expanding voting rights, and, thanks to the leadership of our Saint Paul delegation, we made driver's licenses available for all.

There is always more work to be done, but the era of gridlock we've become accustomed to is over.

We also launched the Inheritance Fund, providing up to \$110,000 in Down Payment Assistance to descendants of Old Rondo to begin restoring the community wealth that was suddenly stripped away by the construction of I-94.

Since its launch last month, thousands of residents have applied for our existing down payment assistance and homeowner rehab programs, with over 400 identifying as descendants of Old Rondo.

When we see this kind of interest and excitement in a city program, it tells us that we've succeeded in identifying and providing a resource that is relevant to the lives of our residents.

I want to thank Nicole Goodman, our Director of Planning and Economic Development, and Tara Beard, our Director of Housing, and the entire PED staff who spent months crafting and recently launching this groundbreaking program, and Councilmember Balenger, whose unmitigated support and advocacy of this revolutionary project ensured it became reality.

Now, our focus is on moving the dollars out the door and into the hands of our residents as soon as possible.

The Inheritance Fund isn't the first program to challenge the notions of what a city government can do for its residents, as we're now in year three of investing directly in low-income families through our CollegeBound Saint Paul and guaranteed income programs.

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What we're seeing is that the direct investments we can make in low-income families does make a difference. And not just for those receiving the benefit.

We engaged independent, third-party economists and researchers who tell us that for every dollar we spend in CollegeBound Saint Paul, we can expect 9 dollars in benefits associated with increased income, improved health, additional tax revenues, and savings to the judicial and education systems.

Initial research from our guaranteed income program shows that those earning the \$500 monthly benefit spend it how any of us would: on basic necessities like food, household goods, and transportation. And soon, we'll see some of their stories play out on the big screen.

In 2021, several Saint Paul families were selected to participate in "It's Basic," a documentary following the lives of those enrolled in guaranteed incomes across the country, which will premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival this June, before a screening in Saint Paul later this year.

We've always pushed the envelope on creative ways to care for our community, and none of it would have been possible without our City Council led by Council President Amy Brendmoen. During your tenure, you have been a true advocate for our residents and further strengthened the City Council as a governing body.

Your friendship has been invaluable, and your leadership instrumental in fostering a collaborative environment that has resulted in more effective decision-making and greater transparency. Thank you for your leadership.

The hallmark of our democracy is the peaceful transition of power, and with a number of our Councilmembers moving on to their next chapter, the upcoming year provides our community with the opportunity to renew its covenant with our government.

We've seen the incredible work Councilmember Jalali has done to bring transparency to the governing process, and her voice has been invaluable as we engaged our community

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around a new Hamline-Midway library. Councilmembers Yang and Noecker have been fierce advocates for affordable housing, public safety, and our unapologetic equity agenda. And Councilmember Prince has been a voice for historic preservation.

It's up for all of us to decide what next year's Council will look like - to renew the charge set for city leaders serving on your behalf.

We decided from the very beginning, when we stood up a community hiring process for my cabinet, that this administration would do things differently. With every big decision we've made, we asked our residents to make it with us.

Raising the minimum wage, building out our Community-First Public Safety framework, and hiring a new police chief, is nothing that could have been done successfully behind closed doors.

This body of work is a result of governing together. Because we've always understood our city budget to be a reflection of our shared values, but that can only be true when we build that budget together.

In the coming weeks, we will announce budget engagement sessions in all 7 wards so you and your families can get engaged.

I grew up in an incredible city - but it isn't the Saint Paul we see today. And therein lies the fundamental challenge we're presented with whenever we talk about what it means to build a city that works for all of us.

Some of us are moved by a sense of nostalgia and want Saint Paul to be like it was when we grew up. And others believe as I do, that our biggest and brightest days are ahead of us.

There is no doubt in my mind that we will continue building a city full of opportunity.

A city that challenges the arbitrary limits on what's possible.

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A city that truly works for all of us.

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