



City of Charleston

John J. Tecklenburg

Mayor

The following State of the City Address was prepared for delivery by Mayor John J. Tecklenburg on January 26, 2021, at 7 p.m.

Mayor Pro Tem Jackson, members of Charleston City Council, Fellow Citizens and Friends:

Good evening.

Let us not grow weary in doing good, scripture tells us.

Over the past twelve months--as our city was buffeted by the fierce crosscurrents of a global pandemic, a national reckoning on race, and a sharp economic downturn--no one would have blamed our citizens for failing to heed that call. Hearts harden in hard times, people would have said. That's just the way of the world.

But it's not the way of Charleston.

Time and again, as the storms of 2020 raged, our citizens refused to grow weary in doing good. They stayed at home when asked, helped their neighbor when needed, gave to charity when able. And by their example, they reminded us that the true state of our city cannot be measured in buildings and bridges, or dollars and cents.

It's measured in the skill and compassion of our doctors and nurses.

It's measured in the service and sacrifice of our police and firefighters and sanitation workers.

It's measured in the values and perseverance of our business leaders and workers.

It's measured in the decency and devotion of our parents and teachers and everyday citizens.

And it is by that measure -- the measure of our people -- that I can report to you tonight that the state of our city is strong – Charleston Strong.

My fellow Charlestonians, it is that strength that gives us confidence and optimism as we look to the year ahead -- a year in which our city will continue to plan and break ground on new parks and playgrounds, new transportation improvements, new drainage and public safety

infrastructure and more. But tonight, rather than testing your patience with a long laundry list of plans and projects, I'd like to focus instead on four critical questions our city will face in 2021--questions that will likely shape our destiny for decades to come.

First, and most immediate: How can we continue to protect ourselves from covid-19, and when will this pandemic and the associated economic downturn end?

Since its emergence in China early last year, the novel coronavirus has spread across the globe with startling speed and deadly efficiency, claiming the lives of more than two million people--including almost six thousand of our very own right here in South Carolina. And as that heartbreaking toll has grown, it has forced all of us to take extraordinary actions to protect ourselves, our families, our businesses, our community.

Here in Charleston, that effort begins with our healthcare workers--the remarkable men and women of the Medical University of South Carolina, of Roper St. Francis Hospital System, SC-DHEC and many other health providers. Every step of the way, from the closures of early spring through the mask requirements of today, their expertise and advice have ensured that our city's response to this emergency has always been grounded in the best science and metrics available. And they've done this while also providing the most advanced and compassionate care imaginable to every patient affected by this terrible disease. They are the heroes of this pandemic, and we thank them deeply for their service.

And now, with effective vaccines in hand, our path is clear. First, our dedicated city staff--which has been nothing less than remarkable throughout this crisis--must continue to work with our medical and business communities to prepare for the day when large amounts of the vaccine are available and widely distributed.

Second, we must redouble our efforts to follow the rules, and yes, that means washing our hands, watching our distance and wearing a mask.

And finally, we must continue to support our local and small businesses with innovative initiatives, such as our new Central Business District Improvement Commission, our revolving loan fund, the changes we've made to address parking and zoning issues, and more.

If we do these things, we can save lives and help our business community now--and look forward to the simple pleasures of hugging a friend, visiting an older relative, or enjoying a show well before this year is out.

The second question we face is as old as our city and as urgent as now: Do we believe what we say about liberty and justice for all, and what are we willing to do to achieve it?

From our founding in April of 1670 to this very day in January of 2021, the problems of racial oppression and injustice have torn at our city's soul. And we know that to heal that breach, we must finally and fully eliminate the systemic barriers that continue to make the dream of racial equity a dream deferred.

Will this work be quick or easy? Of course not. But for the first time in our long and complicated history, we can begin to imagine that shared future and opportunities for ALL our citizens.

Over the past five and ½ years, since the tragedy of Mother Emanuel, we have seen our citizens come together in large and small groups to think deeply about the issue of racial justice, and to press for structural change in our city and its institutions. Already, that work has paid dividends, with the city’s apology for its role in slavery, the removal of the Calhoun memorial from Marion Square, and the independent racial bias audit of our police department, which is already hard at work implementing the report’s recommendations for reform.

As a result, the stage is now set in 2021 for real and meaningful progress toward equity and inclusion for all our citizens, as our Commission on Equity, Diversity and Racial Conciliation readies its far-reaching proposals for City Council, and the International African American Museum moves ahead with its plan to excavate the forgotten and suppressed stories of Charleston’s Black citizens--and to begin sharing that remarkable history with the world in 2022.

The third question I’d like to discuss with you this evening is, frankly, existential: How will we secure Charleston’s future, as the climate continues to change, and the waters continue to rise?

At this point, we all understand the threat our city faces from flooding. And we know that without bold action, the future can only be one of surrender and retreat.

Currently, we have a sound strategic plan in place and millions of dollars in flood-protection work underway throughout the city, with major projects moving forward in West Ashley, on the peninsula, and James and Johns Islands.

In addition, we have three major decisions ahead of us in 2021 that will set the course of our climate and flooding protection strategy for years to come.

First, we will consider a new citywide comprehensive plan that puts flooding at the center of our future development decisions by implementing the land use recommendations of the Dutch Dialogues.

Second, we will decide whether to move forward with the Army Corps of Engineers’ plan to build a sea wall around the peninsula--a project that would provide protection from storm surge and rising tides, as well as the potential for approximately one billion dollars in much-needed federal flooding assistance.

In that regard, I’m pleased to announce tonight that the city is currently working to add a new drainage component to our existing partnership with the Army Corps. With this initiative in place, Charleston would not only receive the benefit of their world-class engineering expertise for drainage, we would once again have the opportunity to unlock federal matching funds for our long-term flooding and drainage needs.

And third, we are working on our city's Climate Action Plan, a detailed strategy to reduce emissions and help us do our part to mitigate climate change. And with that process now moving forward, we intend to bring our new plan to council this year.

The final question before us tonight is this: How can we preserve affordability in our housing market to ensure that Charleston remains a working city in the years to come?

Like successful cities all across America, Charleston is experiencing what has rightly been called a crisis in housing affordability. In fact, without decisive action, Charleston could one day become less a city, and more a fleeting pleasure for well-to-do visitors, out-of-state students, and part-time second home owners.

To guard against this, Charleston is fighting on every housing front. First, we're directly investing fifty million dollars in affordable housing across the city and leveraging even more to produce a thousand new units. Second, we're requiring all large-scale mixed-use developments to either make twenty percent of their apartments affordable or pay an equivalent fee-in-lieu into our housing fund. Finally, we're cutting bureaucratic red tape and working to enable the kind of infill development that increases the overall supply of housing, which will help hold down costs over time.

Looking ahead, we're working with our local partners to establish and fund several new initiatives, including a countywide affordable housing plan and a regional housing trust. And to ensure that no one is left behind, we've given our Housing Authority the go-ahead to work with the federal government to replace or rehabilitate every public housing project in the city--an initiative that will both increase overall housing supply and give our public housing residents a safer, cleaner, better place to live.

My fellow Charlestonians, as the coronavirus reminded us in 2020, tomorrow is always a mystery. So we cannot say for certain what new challenges 2021 may bring. But because we know ourselves and our city, we can say this: Whatever the challenge, whatever the test, we will not hide, we will not shrink, we will not fail.

And, even more, we will not grow weary in doing good.

Thank you, God bless you, and God bless the great city of Charleston.