2022 State of the City

“Progress you can see!”

Welcome to the 2022 State of the City! I want to thank you for coming this morning to hear the latest about our city. This past year has been a great time for Guntersville with a tremendous amount of progress you can now see across the city. We have talked about some of these things for quite a while and now you can actually see the fruits of many years’ labor. I am honored to stand before you to give this report.

Before we look at all the progress, I want to thank my family for always standing behind me and supporting me because this is a family affair. They keep me grounded as well and I couldn’t do it without them.

I also want to thank the citizens for believing in Guntersville and allowing me to do the job I love.

This report wouldn’t be possible without the support of the city council. I can assure you that it takes lots of people working hard together to make these things possible. I want to recognize the council. As I call you names, please stand and everyone please hold your applause until the end — Sanchez Watkins, Larry Wilson, John Myers, Carson Ray, Dink Myers, Rich Russell and Randy Whitaker.

As elected officials, we were chosen to make the best possible decisions for our city. Our job is to expand the tax base to be able to provide services to our citizens while minimizing the tax burden on you. I can tell you we work hard as a group to understand what is before us. We continue to do field trips to get away from the desk and learn more about how best to manage the challenges and many opportunities Guntersville has.

If it wasn’t for the city employees, none of this would happen. If you are a city employee, please stand. This leadership group and the many other employees working together are the reason you get to hear about some many positive things going on in our city.

Volunteer boards are also a very important part of running our city. Please stand if you are on a board of the city. These people give their time to make our city better. I can promise the pay isn’t too good but the benefits are worth it.

Last school year thankfully, we did get to have the Mayor’s Youth Council.  They represent our future and I value their input to keeping our city progressing.  This group is on the Youth Council by virtue of their position at the high school or appointment by their council representative.  Each year we teach these student leaders about their city.  We take them to different city departments to learn how the city functions.  We then do a field trip outside of the city.  This group is our future and we want them to have a good understanding of what it takes for a city to operate smoothly. We want to make Guntersville a place they are proud to return to after finishing college, military service or any other learning experiences. We are still in the process of getting all the representatives on the council. I look forward to introducing them at some future point.

As you can start to see, there are so many moving parts of a city – and lots of people moving in the same direction – to enable progress and serve the citizens and visitors alike.

Guntersville is truly a destination location thanks to our beautiful and unique lake, which is one reason our city park system is so important for people being able to enjoy the great outdoors. That’s why we stay focused on our projects to renovate and improve existing facilities. We completed the renovation of Phase 1 of the ballfields at Optimist Park, creating 3 smaller fields primarily for ages 8 and under. These fields have been a great addition to the park system. A restroom and concession facility were also added to not only serve the baseball fields but the tennis courts. For Phase 2 we are currently in the process of completely redoing the Rec Center gym. We took it down to the steel frame and concrete floor. When completed in October, it will basically be a brand-new facility with hardwood floors, air conditioning, new bleachers, renovated restrooms, and improved aesthetics. The new gym will include one large area with 2 basketball courts, 4 volleyball courts, and 6 pickleball courts. Obviously they can’t all be played at the same time but this upgrade serves a much-needed multi-function purpose. This space will also be utilized for larger events. The new facility will have a very attractive look similar to the Phase 1 baseball fields with a stone and timber frame design and we look forward to showing off this new rec space.

Park restrooms are another big amenity being added this summer. There will be a larger restroom at the beach area along with 3 smaller restrooms at the water treatment plant area, across from the middle school and behind the farmers’ market. These will also have the same stone and timber look and be great additions to our park system. We also look forward to adding even more restrooms to other park areas around the city.

We are currently in the final design phase of other Phase 2 renovations at the Rec Center which include completely redoing and reorienting the 2 ball fields beside the gym, a large splash pad adjacent to the pool, and making the parking area in front of the fields safer and much more functional.

Speaking of things you can see, lighting has gotten a lot of attention in our upgrade projects. The soccer fields at Conners Island got lights this past year thanks to a very generous corporate donation from Pilgrims Pride. There are future plans to add restrooms, concessions, and parking for the soccer fields, all depending on funding availability.

The outdoor pickleball and basketball court and skate park also received lighting, extending the usable time at these popular locations. The tennis courts also received new lights, and we look forward to getting a new timing system for the lights and completely redoing the tennis courts in the next couple of years.

Last year the large swimming pool was completely redone and this year the lap pool and baby pool were redone to better serve our community. We also installed new water slides for the big pool, and those large bright blue slides are a fun improvement that’s definitely easy to see.

The pool pavilions and pool building will also be getting new roofing to match the new gym roof, along with the Senior Center, addressing leak issues there and also giving the entire Rec Center campus a more unified look.

Lighting improvements actually extend way beyond the Rec Center. We finally finished the extended portion of the walking trail from the Chamber of Commerce building to the bridge, with new asphalt thanks to the public works department and lighting thanks to one of several excellent partnership projects with the electric board. The new lights along the Lurleen Wallace Drive trail are a beautiful and functional addition to our city, again extending the hours that our recreation areas can be used. Another major Electric Board project on Highway 69 to remove the utility poles on the east side of the causeway not only improved the street lighting and enhanced the electric system, it also provides a dramatic, uninterrupted view of the lake and river bridge.

Something you DON’T see now and almost don’t see– and it’s a good thing – is having the utilities moved underground on Taylor Street beside the courthouse and at the northern tip of the peninsula. This will be an asset to downtown and the entrance to the city. That project is continuing in the old Harbor House area to get all utilities there underground. That project will also improve parking in that area, and everyone knows that a convenient parking space is always a welcome thing to see. The new parking lot between Gunter and Blount at Scott Street provides additional parking for town hall, downtown and city court, as well as the harbor. That new lot was prepared by city forces with the help of the electric board and finished out by the contractor.

The plans to continue the walking trail along the lake to go under the river bridge are still being developed. We have reversed course and decided to start work on the harbor side going to the river bridge, connecting to the Lurleen Wallace side at some point in the future. Hopefully you will see construction start on this project in the winter.

Another nice addition to the harbor area is the new Railroad Avenue road beside the new brewery in the silo structure. This property was purchased from the railroad which allowed the water board to do a sewer upgrade to their system, as well as improve traffic circulation around city harbor and enhance the safety of drivers accessing Blount Avenue and Highway 431. There is on-street parking on Railroad Avenue as well.

The pocket park between City Hall and Fant’s is a work in progress you can see. We anticipate completion of this project this fall. We look forward to citizens, employees and visitors enjoying this great little area which will be a very nice addition to downtown.

One of our citizens’ favorite services is roadside pickup of limbs and debris. No one probably thinks about where it goes once it leaves your property, and city crews work hard to make sure limbs and debris are not something you see for long. The city has an inert landfill on Highway 79 South – one that’s not for household garbage – that was previously 40 acres. This past year the city purchased an additional 56 acres to ensure landfill capacity for years to come.

While seeing is believing, we are proud of one upgrade that’s a good thing to hear about. The City started using the new P25 radio system that allow interoperability between many organizations. This was a crucial communication upgrade to ensure the safety of both public safety employees and the public.

One thing the City has made easy to see is the budget and planning process for equipment replacement needed by each department. New equipment is always needed to provide services such as mowing, patrolling the streets, and picking up garbage and limbs – those services where it’s truly easy to see the benefits in our beautiful town. Thanks to a well-planned program the council and city departments have implemented, we are able to keep the equipment fleet current within our budget means.

We are very close to starting construction of the new recycling center at Conners Island, and the pad for the new facility has been prepared by city crews. Guntersville enjoys an excellent recycling program and this project has been a long time coming. Besides providing needed room and improving efficiency, it will allow ample parking for recycling employees which is very tough at the existing facility due to lack of space. This new facility will also get the sanitation and recycling departments close together to improve efficiency.

Another nice infrastructure improvement, thanks to a Community Development Block Grant, was a drainage project we completed in the East Lake area. Along with improved drainage streets were also paved, all of which was very helpful to the residents and also helps our city look much nicer.

One big project that is easy to see as it happens is construction of a new high school, a process which has been under way since funding was obtained by the city and school board. City forces helped establish a new parking area to make way for demolition on the existing school and actual construction will start soon. This is an exciting time for our educational system. A new high school will allow a vastly improved environment for learning and also be a great resource to attract people and businesses to our area. We look forward to big things out of the new school.

Conner’s Island Business Park is another area that you can see progress. Currently, Special Touch Restoration is building a building in the east park. We expect the State Forestry office to start construction any time. The Industrial Development Board is showing land in the West Park and has sold another parcel of land that is being cleared. It’s been a long time coming but the Park is seeing progress.

While it’s not always obvious from the highway view, Guntersville Municipal Airport continues to grow and be a tremendous asset to our city. Construction has started on a new large private hangar. The remainder of the unfenced airport property will get fencing thanks to an FAA grant. A new fire hydrant will be installed close to the FBO to provide fire protection to all the new hangars protecting everyone’s investments.

A look at city finances shows that revenues continue to be a bright spot for the city. Sales, lodging and use tax continue to be the largest revenue sources to finance the operations of the City. So far this year, revenues have increased 7% over the prior year. The city has seen year over year revenue increases since 2013, with revenues increasing approximately 124% over that period. We are thankful for those that choose to do business and invest in Guntersville. You are appreciated!

The lake is the heart and soul of our community, and we work hard every day to ensure this precious resource stays healthy and vibrant. Perhaps in no other area is the concept of working together more critical for the future of our city. We continue to work closely with TVA and the stakeholders group regarding stewardship issues on the lake.  The main priority is weed management, but it’s not limited to weeds and includes things like water quality, Asian carp and other issues critical to the lake.  Follow *mylakeguntersville* on social media for the most up to date information.  There was an important piece of state legislation passed that created a funding source through a $5 increase in boat tags that will be able to be utilized as match money (through a grant application process) for TVA.

Partnerships with various organizations are so important for our city to be progressive.  We partner with the utilities, Chamber of Commerce, Marshall County Tourism & Sports, Marshall County Economic Development Council, Mountain Valley Arts Council, Downtown Merchants, The Wholeback Stage, Rescue Squad, and many others to enhance the quality of life for our city — whether it’s bringing in events or industry, all are so important.  We can do so much more together because of these great partnerships!

Working together is not only just inside the city but outside as well.  We work closely with the other cities in Marshall County and North Alabama, and other cities involved in the League of Municipalities.  Our federal and state elected officials are also an important part of working together.

We continue to work with the Veterans for an appropriate location for a Veterans’ Park. Council toured various parks in June to see what other cities have done. We are committed to finding the best location to serve everyone’s needs and to see a proud American flag waving in the lake breeze.

We are working to update our outdated comprehensive plan for the City. With so much progress, we have to update our plan. We need your help in filling out the survey to express your opinion on future land use for our city as a whole. It’s available online and the QR code is on the powerpoint to access it or we have hardcopies available here for you.

To end on the biggest, most visible and most exciting progress you can see in Guntersville, well…

I am so pleased to say you are sitting right here in the middle of that!

There is no doubt City Harbor is a game-changer for Alabama’s Lake City.

City Harbor opened in May with rave reviews for the new businesses and everything is almost open. You can stay a night in the condos, drive your boat to enjoy a lakeside meal, walk out on the boardwalk to swing – or take a quick stroll to enjoy the historic downtown district. There is something for everyone to enjoy and it is one of the most talked about developments across the state. With the City Council’s approval of an agreement to allow the construction of a hotel on the last piece of city owned property at the harbor, a much-need destination hotel for the Northtown area will soon be a reality. We are fortunate to have a developer with such a vision for Guntersville as P Lawler Enterprises, and the ability to bring City Harbor to life in such a magnificent way. We look forward to seeing even more of what that vision produces.

Have I reminded you that all these things that have happened are for a city of approximately 8,500 people? We are so blessed with so many amenities for a small town. Best said by Councilman John Myers 10-year old granddaughter “Guntersville is an inviting and clean city!”

Again, all of this progress you can see would not happen without so many people working together to make Guntersville successful. No matter what part you play, thank you! We must all work toward the common goal of making Guntersville the best place it can be. Thank you for attending today and I look forward to seeing what the next year brings!