

City of Gainesville State of the City 2025

Good morning and welcome!

Many of you know that I like to think of us as the cultural capital of Florida. Danny Rubin is one of the pop culture icons who comes from Gainesville—in fact, as you just heard, he graduated from Gainesville High School before going on to write the screenplay for a true film classic—the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*. It is THE essential story of doing things over and over until you get them right—something policymakers are quite familiar with. We'll get into that a bit more in a moment.

Let me begin by thanking the Cade Museum for providing this beautiful space in downtown Gainesville. As we go on here today, I will thank a number of people for their contributions to our community. If I call your name, I encourage you to stand so we can show our appreciation.

It is important to first recognize my fellow commissioners. Each one brings a deep desire to serve our community, and it is a privilege to work beside them.

They are, of course:

- Mayor Pro-Tem and District Four Commissioner Bryan Eastman
- At-Large Commissioner Cynthia Moore Chestnut
- At-Large Commissioner James Ingle
- District One Commissioner Desmon Duncan-Walker

- District Two Commissioner Ed Book
- and District Three Commissioner Casey Willits

As commissioners, we rely on our charter officers. These are the key figures whose hard work and expert guidance keep our city running smoothly.

Please join me in recognizing:

- City Manager Cynthia Williams Curry
- City Attorney Dan Nee
- City Clerk Kristen Bryant
- Director of Equity and Inclusion Zeria Folston
- and City Auditor Stephen Mhere.

And I want to give a special thank you to the members of the Richard E. Parker Alumni Band from THE Eastside High School for playing us into this event this morning. In my opinion, this band—with its dedication, diversity, history and heart—represents much of what is best in the City of Gainesville.

The band also represents what I want to talk about today. They learn a piece of music and play it again and again until it's perfect. As alumni and artists, they capture us by creating a moment that's both past and present—and it's almost like time stands still.

This is where *Groundhog Day* comes in. For those few who may not have seen it, it's a movie about a TV weatherman who's caught in—as Danny said—a doom loop. He wakes up and every day is Groundhog Day—until he learns to live with purpose. He develops new skills and confronts his flaws. He looks outward and improves the lives of others. The movie ends when he gets all of that right—wakes up and it's tomorrow.

That has meaning for us here in the City of Gainesville. Like many communities, we have at times found ourselves stuck in old routines—repeating patterns. Going through motions and not quite seeing the path forward. Fortunately, that's the set-up for some mighty progress. Just like the plot of the movie, we learn from our mistakes. We learn to look for ways to make the world around us better. And we have come to recognize the everyday occurrences that are so easy to overlook actually are both the mission and the reward.

So where does that leave the State of our City?

In honor of:

- Groundhog Day itself, coming this Sunday
- the movie
- that cranky weatherman Phil Connors
- and the cultural contributions of Danny Rubin and all our creative Gainesvillagers

today I want to look at our city through the lens of *Groundhog Day*.

And it brings three big lessons.

Lesson number one: recognize what is truly important. It's not power, wealth or status.

Reduce life to its essence, and what's most important is being aware of the world around you and caring for others. That's the oldest lesson from the world's oldest book.

For the City of Gainesville, I consider this the "changing lives" category, and we start with an acknowledgement of the incredible progress we've made in reducing gun violence. Since last May – more than eight months ago – there has not been a single gun-related homicide reported in the City of Gainesville. This is the result of intense and intentional collaboration with our community partners, including Alachua County, Santa Fe College, the University of Florida, the Children's Trust, the Sheriff and many, many neighbors.

I would like to recognize Santa Fe College President Dr. Paul Broadie for his commitment to working with the City of Gainesville and Alachua County to form the Community Gun Violence Prevention Alliance. And I also wish to recognize the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners.

As Gainesville Police Chief Nelson Moya has said, this work is a collaboration. It requires all hands on deck. And it takes a lot of hands. Successful recruitment is a big part of that, and GPD is committed to providing mentorship, training and support. Last year, the starting annual salary for an officer at GPD rose nearly twenty percent to \$60,000. Morale is climbing and hiring is increasing year over year.

At GPD's side are the women and men of Gainesville Fire Rescue. We are proud of GFR, which in February 2024 was awarded Accredited Agency Status from the Commission on Fire

Accreditation International. It was the third time the City has received this prestigious recognition, only given to those who provide the best possible service to their communities.

Over the past year, GFR took on the responsibility of leading IMPACT GNV, the city's new gun violence prevention initiative, while GPD pushed forward with its Gun Violence Prevention Unit, a full-time unit that works with partner agencies to cross jurisdictional lines and share resources.

City Manager Cynthia W. Curry has planned and implemented these operational components and others, following the policy direction set by the City Commission. Joining me in championing these efforts is District One Commissioner Desmon Duncan-Walker.

(Take Duncan-Walker Video)

In 2024, we launched IMPACT GNV to reduce gun violence in our community. The initiative pulls a number of programs under a unified banner. It also moves quickly to put boots on the ground, working with neighborhoods, schools, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, grassroots advocates and formerly justice-involved individuals, among other partners.

We then worked, alongside Alachua County, Santa Fe College and other partners, to establish the Community Gun Violence Prevention Alliance. This is where we are building momentum and engaging in strategic planning. The Alliance is focused on three broad objectives: to cooperate and strengthen efforts to address gun violence; to improve

outcomes for survivors and those at risk; and to spearhead a collaborative group of community stakeholders.

We have formed partnerships, like one with the BOLD program, which is hosting regular engagement opportunities at the A. Quinn Jones Center to reach students most at risk of gun violence. This year, they'll continue working to develop similar partnerships with other area schools.

2024 was also the final year of One Nation One Project GNV, our part in the two-year national campaign to improve youth health and wellness through the arts. Gainesville Fire Rescue collaborated with Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs to lead this initiative, with the goal of reducing the incidence of youth gun violence in Gainesville. One Nation One Project ultimately funded 29 programs and an additional 85 artists, organizations and partners. The project connected with 3,605 youth participants, with post-project data analysis showing those young people are reporting a statistically significant uptick in positive feelings of wellbeing.

Thank you, Commissioner Duncan-Walker, for propelling this conversation forward and prioritizing arts for young people across the City.

I also want to thank Artistic Director Marion Caffey. Mr. Caffey received a Key to the City last July. He is a Gainesville native and longtime producer of Amateur Night at the Apollo, the historic theater in Harlem, New York that was just given a Kennedy Center Honor to mark its impact on the past, present, and future of American culture and the performing arts. Mr. Caffey is a big part of the Apollo, and we were incredibly fortunate that he brought his artistic vision

and outside-the-box thinking back home, to make a difference for young people here in our community.

Our Community Health arm in the City of Gainesville continues the work started at the 2023 Gun Violence Prevention Summit, partnering with those who are in a position to help. I would like to recognize Bishop Christopher Stokes of the Willie Mae Stokes Community Center and Jeffrey Weisberg of the River Phoenix Center for Peacebuilding. They and their organizations are out there every day, showing young people how to use peaceful strategies to resolve differences.

We are not finished, however, without recognizing the young people themselves. The Youth Steering Committee has been integral to the work of One Nation One Project. These are the leaders of tomorrow and they were first brought together to address youth gun violence and other critical issues. I have met personally with these young people, taking them out to dinner and getting to know their thoughts and their interests. The committee now serves as a continuing platform for meaningful dialogue and problem-solving around key youth concerns.

One of those concerns, equally shared by parents, is how to best keep our young people safe on city roads. In 2024, the City of Gainesville was awarded an \$800,000 Safe Streets for All federal grant to help assess where better lighting can improve safety. Our Vision Zero initiative is aimed at altogether eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries by 2040. On the frontline of that effort stand our first responders. I'd like to thank the police officers, and firefighters, and EMTs and paramedics and partner agencies who support and protect all of us on our roads and sidewalks, in our neighborhoods, businesses and homes.

In 2024, our Transportation Department completed the City's Vision Zero Plan and we are moving forward with safety projects for University Avenue and West 13th Street. We also have the Bike and Pedestrian Master Plan. Public Works finished the Vision Zero project designs for Waldo Road at Northeast Third Avenue, the Southeast 18th Street sidewalk, and the Southeast Fourth Place sidewalk.

Public Works had a big role in another life-changing improvement for Gainesville as they prepared the site for the UF Health Eastside Urgent Care Center, which opened last summer. There also soon will be an Eastside transit hub at this location. Our Public Works crews are still completing the \$3.8 million infrastructure project that includes the streets, sidewalks, stormwater facilities, utility infrastructure, street lighting and landscaping in the area. It will support future building in what we call the Eastside Health and Economic Development Initiative—or EHEDI— and will finally bring a wave of opportunity, convenience and business to East Gainesville.

As part of that effort, I want to recognize Dr. David Nelson, senior vice president for health affairs at the University of Florida and president of UF Health, for the exceptional collaboration and investment in our community that made the UF Health Eastside Urgent Care Center a reality.

Of course, all of this is possible because we have a working, balanced budget that keeps our City running. I am proud that through perseverance and resilience, we have capably responded to financial and budgetary challenges with resounding success. Our General Fund

adopted budget for Fiscal Year 2025 is \$1.1 million lower than the year before—even while our organization continues to excel operationally. That is a remarkable fiscal achievement.

Lesson number two: discover where you can make a difference. In *Groundhog Day*, everything gets better when weatherman Phil Connors gradually discovers a desire to make things better for those around him. Nothing changes but his attitude and his focus. To me, this is what local government does. We're in this to improve quality of life for all our neighbors.

The Gainesville Community Reinvestment Area—or GCRA—is working overtime to do just that. I would like again to recognize the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners, our partner in the GCRA. The County is the largest contributor to this \$70.7 million, 10-year initiative to bring transformative projects and development to East Gainesville.

The City Commission set a policy direction to make Downtown Gainesville an economic development priority. We created a Downtown Events Program, established the Downtown Advisory Board, brought in the Downtown Ambassador Program, approved plans to make “The Streeter” a full-time festival street, and launched the Arts, Culture and Entertainment Districts.

At-large Commissioner James Ingle, sworn in earlier this month, is already well-versed on the value and importance of downtown activity.

(Take Ingle Video)

I am honored to serve as the newest member of the Gainesville City Commission – and I begin my term at an exciting time for Downtown Gainesville.

In 2024, the Downtown Advisory Board was formed to bring together the voices of downtown business leaders as we ramp up efforts to beautify the heart of Gainesville and make it more welcoming to visitors and neighbors alike.

Key to those efforts are two new ventures. The first is the Downtown Ambassador Program, launched in December. You may have seen our brightly dressed ambassadors providing directions to visitors, removing graffiti or connecting with local business owners about our new approach to hospitality and safety. I'm proud to say that of the 14 people hired for the program, 11 are local – and nine are individuals who were previously experiencing homelessness and now have employment and a valued role in our community.

The second new project is the upcoming transformation of the Streatery. Last October, the Gainesville City Commission approved a plan to renovate the stretch of Southwest First Avenue between Main and Southwest Second streets into a pedestrian-only thoroughfare. Later this year, improvements will begin so the corridor will be able to better host art festivals, farmers markets, food-truck rallies and more. We heard from our neighbors and stakeholders at a workshop last month and are excited about the future changes that are planned.

Thank you, Commissioner Ingle, and I look forward to working alongside you as we work on economic progress downtown and across the City of Gainesville.

There are many ways of making a difference in a community—solving transportation problems, responding to emergencies, supporting those experiencing homelessness—all and

more are happening in Gainesville. I commend Jon DeCarmine, longtime CEO of GRACE Marketplace. Jon was with GRACE since its opening in 2014, and as the City has continued to support GRACE with funding, Jon has led efforts to provide safe shelter and life-changing outreach to individuals who are without a home.

Last April, I brought together friends from local nonprofits and the faith-based community downtown to join together in the complex work of coordinating homeless outreach with a focus on relieving hunger and food insecurity. As our partners in this initiative, I would like to recognize:

- Patrick Dodds with Bright of the Mighty
- Lauri Schiffbauer of St. Francis House
- Barzella Papa of the Community Foundation of North Central Florida
- Nat Nandelstadt from GRACE Marketplace
- And Pastors:
 - Arthur Lee of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
 - Gerard Duncan with Prayers by Faith Ministries
 - Beth Snarr of First Methodist United Methodist Church
 - Scott Stuart of First Presbyterian Church
 - Michael Frazier of Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church
 - Kenyarda Feathers of Williams Temple Church of God in Christ
 - and Chipper Flaniken of City Church

Along with food and safe shelter, we also prioritize transportation that's accessible to all neighbors. RTS is celebrating 50 years in service this year and is continuing its upward passenger trend. We are fortunate to work with the University of Florida as we work to provide our community with reliable public transit. I am grateful to UF President Kent Fuchs for his civic-minded leadership and involvement as a neighbor and innovator in the City of Gainesville.

We also make a difference with our Community Resource Paramedicine program. Today, it is staffed at the highest level in its history with a program coordinator, four EMTs and two paramedics. This program does a great deal of outreach to help houseless neighbors, and we are stepping up those efforts in the wake of the new state law prohibiting cities and counties from allowing camping and sleeping on public property. To follow the law with compassion is our priority. In this vein, we have partnered with Meridian Healthcare to do outreach and to open the new Central Receiving Facility, for which the City of Gainesville and Alachua County each provided half-a-million dollars. We at the city also contributed an additional \$496,000 through a Legislative Budget Request to support the construction of the Central Receiving Facility, completed at last after more than a decade of planning.

And when it comes to improving quality of life, we have big ideas—as big as Shaquille O'Neal. A Very GNV Holiday Parade, championed by At-large Commissioner Cynthia Moore Chestnut, managed in its second year to bring Shaq to Gainesville to serve as grand marshal. This is one of the most famous basketball players in the world, a global superstar. Shaq has a special connection with Gainesville. His daughter is a UF student and member of the Gator women's basketball team. And back in 2016, he surprised a group of neighborhood children in

our community by playing street basketball. When he returned for our parade, as you may have heard, he reunited with some of those children—of course, older now—and gave three of them cars.

We are thankful to Commissioner Chestnut for leading the charge and to our City Manager and staff for creating the parade for our entire community to enjoy.

Commissioner Chestnut is deeply committed to another big project, as well – one that envisions an exciting future of economic growth for East Gainesville.

(Take Chestnut Video)

2024 certainly was a year of progress for development in East Gainesville.

Today, we are one step closer to realizing the dream of transformational economic development at the intersection of Northeast Eighth Avenue and Waldo Road. The vision involves extensive improvement and renovation to what is already a cherished neighborhood facility with a long history of serving our entire community.

The city has 34 acres there, including Citizens Field Stadium and multipurpose fields, as well as the MLK, Jr. Multipurpose Center. With feedback from the public and a design study completed, we expect to see a design plan for renovations this year.

Meanwhile, during the past several years, we've increased the number of affordable housing units in our community by building new homes on vacant lots previously owned by the city.

After a two-year partnership with Bright Community Trust, we donated four empty lots to Bright in 2024 with six more to come.

In August, we attended a ribbon cutting for the first affordable home completed – which is located near Depot Park. The new unit was sold to an income-eligible homeowner last fall. As part of the city’s community land trust, each of the 10 new homes will remain affordable in perpetuity.

The land trust program is a new addition to our comprehensive housing strategy to increase the supply of affordable housing through new construction.

Thank you, Commissioner Chestnut, for bringing focus and expertise to these transformational economic initiatives that benefit our residents and neighborhoods.

I’d like to take this moment to point out we not only were busy with construction in 2024 but with recovery. Hurricanes Helene and Milton—but especially Helene—brought down trees and power lines and caused significant damage. By the time your curbs and yards were cleared and everything that came down had been removed, Public Works and our contracted haulers had taken off more than 50,000 cubic yards of vegetative debris left by those storms. Did you know that one cubic-yard is about the size of a standard washing machine? That’s the equivalent of more than 50,000 fully-loaded washing machines.

And our parks and public spaces needed to be cleared, as well. That was of particular importance, as quality of life in Gainesville has a great deal to do with parks, programs,

recreational facilities, and wild spaces and public places—all very close to the heart of District Three Commissioner Casey Willits.

(Take Commissioner Willits Video)

Our Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs is doing incredible work in the City of Gainesville.

Over the past year, Parks and Rec introduced new countywide youth resiliency and wellbeing programs. They enrolled nearly 13,000 children in After-School activities. Youth Athletics continued its successful Teen Midnight Basketball and Heat Wave summer programs at the MLK Center. They even added a neighborhood pop-up basketball event that traveled across the City to different locations to give more kids the chance to play.

The One Nation One Project initiative to reduce youth gun violence through exposure to culture and the arts held its grand finale in July at Depot Park. It was one of more than 77 free public events and programs at Depot Park in 2024, which together attracted more than 152,000 visitors.

Cultural Affairs held 26 Free Friday concerts and produced the Downtown Festival and Art Show, bringing 281 vendors and an estimated 40,000 attendees to our historic downtown.

Wild Spaces Public Places gave us Lincoln Yard Park. They also completed universal access improvements at Bo Diddley Plaza, Fred Cone Park, Possum Creek Park, Bivens Arm

Nature Park, Albert “Ray” Massey Park and Lincoln Park. We also gave the name “Abby Wambach Park” to the Forest Park athletic fields.

Projects funded by the infrastructure surtax branded as Streets, Stations and Strong Foundations include road surfacing and bike lane improvements for NE Ninth Street, the SW Public Safety Center, Fire Station 9, the Gainesville Fire Rescue Administration Building, the Eastside Fire Station, the Public Works Hurricane Hardened Building and the Gainesville Police Department Property and Evidence Building.

Thank you, Commissioner Willits. Your dedication to parks, wild spaces and infrastructure continue to help us as a City put our best foot forward.

Now, as we’re nearing the end of today’s event, we arrive at what may be the most proactive lesson in *Groundhog Day*, in the City of Gainesville and in life. **Lesson number three: never give up.** Interestingly, the movie, like city government, is all about learning to see opportunities and use available resources to take big steps forward.

I call this this the “learn from experience” category.

Over the past few years here in Gainesville, we have seen a great recent example of learning from experience. Just look at the work done—and undone, and done again—by successive city commissions to achieve meaningful housing reform. The path to get there may have changed, but the goal has always remained the same: make affordable housing a reality for all neighbors. In 2024, District Four Commissioner Bryan Eastman led the charge for more opportunities to build family homes at all income levels.

(Take Commissioner Eastman Video)

Gainesville is moving forward on housing reform. In 2024, we passed two major policy changes to make housing more available and affordable for all neighbors. The first is a proposal I worked very hard on. It resulted in comprehensive lot-size reform that eliminates the four arbitrary single-family zones we've had for decades and allows up to 12 units an acre across all of them.

This will allow for more starter homes and housing types by reducing the land required to build a single-family home. It protects single-family zoning while allowing more single-family homes to be built. This change has the potential to increase housing density and make our City more walkable, more neighborly, and with home choices that are more affordable.

In 2024, the City Commission also passed an Inclusionary Zoning requirement for builders of multi-family apartments to ensure some of those units will be more affordable. For every new apartment building that's constructed with more than 50 units, the developer has to set aside ten percent of them for people making 80 percent or less than the area median income.

Gainesville is also making progress with Accessory Dwelling Units, or ADU's. These are smaller structures built alongside existing homes on larger lots. We had 23 ADUs built from 2020 through 2024, with 42 permits issued. Building has been steady and incremental, with a large percentage of ADUs owner-occupied.

And now, our Department of Sustainable Development has created "in-house" design plans for Accessory Dwelling Units that we can share with neighbors. Final plans will be available to the public for use in designing their own ADUs with the ultimate goal of reducing cost and technical barriers that impede the creation of more housing.

Thank you, Commissioner Eastman, for your tireless commitment to moving the City of Gainesville closer to the dream of affordable housing for all.

We also are learning from experience as we address climate change and resiliency, making the adaptations needed to develop into a more sustainable city. Last year, the U.S. Green Building Council selected Gainesville as one of 12 cities for the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design for Cities cohort program. We also are proud that in 2024 we secured \$28 million in federal and state funding for environmental initiatives—with \$26 million of that going to RTS to purchase 19 hybrid-electric buses and install a solar facility in the employee parking lot. Those buses should arrive by the end of 2026. Our Office of Climate Change and Resiliency held or participated in more than 70 community events this past year and completed our draft Climate Resiliency Plan ahead of schedule.

Finally, we are bringing in expert opinions and learning from experience to enact transformative financial growth for all sectors of our community. Last May, I joined the City Manager and key staff in an information-gathering visit to Miami-Dade. We were joined by Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce President Eric Godet, who I would like to recognize for his service as a key leader of our business community. As a result of that journey and subsequent actions and research, the City now has an economic development plan on the

horizon. We are promoting business opportunities across the city, with a particular focus on East Gainesville. We are building on the momentum of the past year to improve and strengthen the economic health and vitality of our historic and irreplaceable downtown. Last year, our City Commission advanced investment in downtown by approving the expansion of The Knot Climbing Gym and extending the agreement to develop Lot 10. We also provided business improvement grants to several downtown businesses and supported robust event programming to bring more patrons downtown.

As in all things, the key to success is collaboration. Downtown projects have consistently brought out community partners and volunteers who make lasting contributions, as noted by District Two Commissioner Ed Book.

(Take Commissioner Book Video)

I always like to ask myself, how can we do more? How can we engage the community & work together in a better way?

That's how the Downtown Refresh became a reality just about a year ago. We collaborated with community partners and 100 volunteers joined us together to spend a Saturday planting, cleaning and pressure washing sidewalks, restriping parking, picking up trash, adding mulch and removing graffiti in our historic downtown and nearby creeks and parks. It made everyone realize we can do things as a team that make our downtown nicer. We share the same goal.

When it comes to improving downtown, we also listened to neighbors who were concerned about preserving trees. While working to provide sidewalk accessibility for all users in 2024, we primarily used Tree Mitigation funds to reconfigure parking along Southeast First Avenue and re-plant trees on SE First Street. Shumard Oaks were replaced with more appropriate Bluff Oaks. This aligns with our commitment to nature while making downtown an easier, safer place to walk and drive.

And speaking of “City safety” - that speaks to something called Crime Prevention through Environmental Design. It’s the science of making the built environment safer through lighting, landscaping, construction and other engineering. This way you create an environment where people want to be. Bo Diddley Plaza is a perfect example. It’s continually scheduled with events that bring people downtown to gather and experience music, athletics or seasonal celebrations. When we create those opportunities, we make our city better, safer and more vibrant.

Thank you, Commissioner Book, for emphasizing safety in public spaces and applying those principles to move our community forward.

Listen, as you’ve heard from my fellow commissioners and myself, we all recognize that progress is truly a community effort. And—just like Phil Connors waking up to “I Got You Babe” in Punxsutawney—I think we all understand that each day in this place we share—despite its imperfections, quirks and occasional annoyances—is an extraordinary gift in the end.

That doesn't mean Gainesville is perfect—quite the opposite. It means we each carry within us the power to keep making it better. To catch the kid falling from the tree, fix that flat tire, learn to play the piano—order too many desserts.

My point is that every single day, we get the chance to be here and create positive change.

So I close with this. When you wake up each morning, I ask you to do these three things for yourself and our community:

Recognize what is truly important.

Discover where you can make a difference.

And never give up.

Thank you for allowing me to share this time with you. May God bless you and each of our neighbors, and may God bless the City of Gainesville.