

State of the City 2023 – Seattle: The City of the Future We’re Building Today

Taylor, thank you for introducing me. You represent the hope of our youth and your voice helps me push back against the kinds of cynicism and pessimism which only serve to impede Seattle’s future.

Cynicism is best left to those who are old in spirit. Not you and me. As mayor, I not only need to be the Chief Enthusiast of this City, but I must be the architect of its plans; the convener of great minds and hearts; and always a listener to our youth.

Nobel Prize winner Bernard Shaw said, “Life is not about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.” And so, as I begin speaking about what Seattle is, “finding” Seattle at this moment in time, I am more concerned about what it will be. What are we willing to do to create the Seattle we want to be.

And so I begin by thanking those helping us answer that question.

City Councilmembers, City Attorney Davison, members of the Cabinet, City employees, community members, Dr. Jones and leaders in Seattle Public Schools, all those here today – welcome to the 2023 State of the City Address and thank you for being here.

We’re at Fisher Pavilion at Seattle Center – in the shadow of the Space Needle . . . at the heart of our one-of-a-kind cultural campus.

Today, I want to share where we are as a city, and what we must do to create the Seattle we want to see – the Seattle of the future.

My first year in office was defined by an emphasis on the essentials – a commitment to get back to the basics of good governance. Shiny things are cool; but things that work well are better.

We built our administration from the ground up – building relationships, building teams, building systems, building trust. We demonstrated our commitment to a ***One Seattle*** agenda: Working together to advance our shared values and common goals.

My focus was to redefine our local politics into one of action, decisiveness, collaboration and excellence. I tell my Cabinet one simple message: Outwork everyone and LEAD!

No one is penalized for honest mistakes in my administration. But you do get penalized if you don’t care and you don’t learn from those mistakes.

I just want to say at the top, thank you, Council President Juarez, for sharing this vision of *One Seattle*, and putting it into practice through your strong partnership with us and your leadership on the City Council.

Since taking office, our focus has been on the core City government services. These are the services the people of Seattle rely on every day – we will not stop.

Here's just one example of this work. The Seattle Department of Transportation filled 23,000 potholes last year. That's 50% more than they filled in 2021, and the highest number in the past five years. Potholes might not be your thing, but this is an example of paying attention to the essentials.

However, we must still go further. Improving the things that matter day-to-day allows us to look further out on the horizon.

It's no coincidence that as we envision a better future for our city, we are doing so from this building at the center of the 1962 Seattle World's Fair site. The World's Fair looked not at the city of that time, but boldly envisioned the city of tomorrow. Not at what is, but at what is possible.

A little more than 60 years ago, our city witnessed the design and development of the Space Needle. It was completed in just one year.

The Space Needle is proof positive that when Seattleites put their minds to something and act with urgency and creativity – we can do big things.

Framed by images of Pike Place Market and Mt. Rainier, the Space Needle stands as a symbol of our city to the nation – a pinnacle of a forward-looking vision and trailblazing leadership rooted in our DNA – of a city where innovation is inherent and progress is paramount.

Today, we find ourselves needing this kind of approach and bold vision yet again: a form of *Space Needle Thinking* that will put us on the cutting edge of building our future city.

Downtown

There's no better example of where this unabashed boldness is needed than our Downtown.

When I talk to mayors across the country, they tell me about the challenges they're facing and what's being done about it. My Executive Team can cite chapter and verse about what other cities are trying to do and what is working and not working.

From the remote work revolution to an ever-evolving retail landscape, the issues facing our Downtown are not unique to Seattle.

But what is unique are the resources, energy, and focus we can harness to solve these problems, to transform Downtown, and to write a new playbook for this country for what a downtown neighborhood should be.

Look, I'm bullish on the future of Downtown. Let me say it again: I am bullish on Downtown. 100,000 residents, over 320,000 jobs – the undisputed economic engine and cultural hub of our region. Downtown is a special place.

The problems are not insurmountable, and the opportunities are immense. In the coming months, you will hear more about the Downtown Activation Plan we are developing now – both immediate activation strategies to make downtown safer and more welcoming, along with long-term transformational enhancements designed for residents and workers, neighbors and tourists.

Not a day goes by when either I or a member of my team are not working on this activation plan and talking to those with the resources to help us achieve it. Last year, I announced we were bringing City employees back to the office, and I am very pleased that employers like Amazon recognize coming back to work downtown is a great thing. I embrace the proposition that we must make it safe for them as more employees return.

Last week, I spent time walking 3rd Avenue – from the Pioneer Square Light Rail Station up to Pike Pine. Our plan recognizes that downtown safety concerns are real. If we don't create a safe, welcoming downtown for everyone, everything else we do will fall flat.

City Attorney Ann Davison recognizes this – she's an important partner who listens to the needs of residents and small businesses, and then acts to fairly and justly hold people accountable for their behavior.

Next month, I will be issuing an Executive Order that takes steps to address the public health crisis on our streets caused by the epidemic of fentanyl and other synthetic drugs. Last year, 590 people died from a drug overdose in our city. That's 590 people too many.

On my walk along Third Avenue last week, I saw people using fentanyl. It breaks my heart. These are sons and daughters. Brothers and sisters. Moms and dads. People of our city.

We will lead with compassion and do everything we can to help people suffering from substance use disorder. Working with our public health partners, we will provide access to the help they deserve. That's the right thing to do.

And, for those trafficking these deadly drugs, for those preying on and exploiting our most vulnerable, for those using guns to commit a crime – we will arrest, prosecute, and ensure accountability. That's the right thing to do, too.

No one has been as impassioned a voice for the need for evidence-based, effective treatment solutions than Councilmember Sara Nelson. I appreciate her continued advocacy for people who need our help because we must do more.

Activation and eyes on the street help create safety. That's why our plan will light up our Downtown corners with artists and musicians, pop-up vendors, and social service workers and members of the faith community creating a proactively positive presence for all.

Our Seattle Restored Program has already helped fill 30 formerly vacant downtown spaces with small businesses and entrepreneurs, art installations, and retail. Our plan will go even further to fill empty storefronts, with a special focus on small businesses owned and operated by people of color. We're also working to make it easier and less expensive to start a business and create jobs.

I've had countless conversations with CEOs, union leaders, neighborhood advocates, small business leaders and housing supporters helping with the vision of the new Downtown. As we build and create the assets that help us optimize opportunities for all, many hands will be involved.

Our One Seattle Day of Service proved that we can all play a part in creating a better Seattle. We've got another Day of Service coming this spring too. Save the date – May 20th!

We have a chance to correct the errors of the past – to reverse damaging conditions and reinvigorate our Chinatown-International District and Little Saigon. This historic part of our greater downtown region should be a safe, thriving place for residents and every neighbor who treasures it.

My family's roots in this neighborhood go back almost 80 years. My aunt owned and operated a flower shop at 10th and Jackson for decades. I am inspired by the resilience and strength of this community.

It's the time for bold action. That's why our long-term plans center downtown as a laboratory for the future. The possibilities are endless.

It may mean changing our zoning codes to convert excess unused office space into housing. It may mean allowing greater flexibility in the use of street-level building spaces. It may mean allowing new hotels, restaurants, and entertainment businesses in the stadium area, while at the same time, we protect and grow our industrial-maritime jobs.

In fact, in March, our city planners will launch a design competition around converting office buildings to housing. We need to recognize that downtown's office spaces may never fill up as before, and we need more housing options. Let's make downtown affordable for everyone who wants to live there.

And at the same time, we have to realize that economic activity at our city's core is essential to our shared prosperity. It has been our economic engine that has powered our stability. This balance is what our plan will address.

It may mean a linear arts-entertainment-culture district that connects downtown with multiple neighborhoods or identifying a 24/7 street, a stretch of several blocks where you can find a restaurant, bar, grocery, or your favorite clothing boutique at any hour of the day.

It may mean working with Pike Place market vendors to extend further into our downtown to sell their goods to a wider audience.

We must ensure downtown is once again a destination where people want to be.

The recent opening of the Convention Center. The groundbreaking of streetscape improvements along the Pike Pine Corridor. The redevelopment of our waterfront, connecting it to downtown along with 20 new acres of parkland. The MLB All-Star Game and FIFA World Cup matches. There's a lot to be optimistic about.

Our focus on Downtown doesn't come at the expense of other neighborhoods, in fact, it strengthens them. For example, I'm excited to announce that in preparation for the All-Star Game, the Seattle Mariners are funding and partnering with the City to renovate and restore the Rainier Playfield ballfields. This is a significant, lasting investment in the lives of South Seattle youth and all who enjoy the City's parks.

We couldn't be more excited or more grateful. I'd like to acknowledge and thank Fred Rivera of the Seattle Mariners who is here with us today.

...The truth is the new downtown is going to be different – that's what we want and that's what we need. Downtown must be a place for everyone – a testimony to people at home and around the world of a metropolis not in decay, but ever on the rise.

We are taking a **One Seattle** approach to developing this plan – through public-private-philanthropic partnerships, we are aligning our investments, ideas, and energy toward the common goal of rebuilding downtown Seattle.

Some cynics may demand the exact blueprint for our entire new downtown immediately. We need to do this right; it has to be sustainable; and we're working seven days a week to deliver.

Public Safety

We also need immediate action and innovation to respond to the public safety issues that are far too common in our city. Following national trends, Seattle saw a 4% rise in reported crime last year.

In the fourth quarter of 2022 we did see an encouraging decline in crime – an early indicator that our tactical decisions are effective. However, we know there is still much more work to be done to continue this trend and build a city where everyone feels safe – our City's primary Charter responsibility.

Under our administration, our public safety framework is centered around five pillars:

One, a holistic approach – we know police actions and arrests alone cannot solve our safety issues. We need to integrate a wide-ranging approach to address criminal behaviors. That means removing the barriers to success that have existed for so long – racism, poverty, and a legal system too focused on punishment instead of on restoring people to be valuable, contributing members of society. It means investing early, as we

do with the Seattle Preschool Program. It means making sure everyone has a fair chance at a living-wage job.

It also includes the activation of public spaces to put more eyes on the street and feet on the ground. It requires community-driven policing focused on problem-solving and partnerships with community-based organizations.

Two, enforcement and investigations – we're not afraid to enforce the law and make arrests when people cause damage to the fabric of our neighborhoods. We must continue to improve investigations and systems, as we've done recently with the Police Department's sexual assault unit.

Third, is our efforts around recruitment and retention – we need more officers to address SPD's staffing crisis, relieve pressure on current officers, and enable more tactical options, like the successful emphasis patrols on 12th and Jackson and on 3rd Avenue. We have made significant changes to hiring systems that have been at constrained capacity for years, cutting the length of time it takes to apply by 50%.

Now, we are ramping up marketing spending fivefold, using modern digital advertisements to reach a diverse array of applicants from communities across the city.

I want to thank Councilmember Pedersen for his unwavering support for a police department with the right number of officers and the right kind of officers.

I attended every single patrol rollcall to meet with officers – a modern first. I needed them to know how much I appreciate their strong public service.

I also needed to let them know my expectations as their mayor. And I needed to let them know that they can be the biggest recruiters as we rebuild the department in a **One Seattle** way. This is a journey they are on with me to restore public trust and confidence.

Which leads me to the fourth pillar: cultural excellence – ensuring our public safety leaders prioritize de-escalation, lead through a lens of cultural competence, and embrace values of accountability, justice, compassion, and empathy.

Finally, we must be a learning organization – using data, being receptive to feedback, driving innovation, and exploring new technology.

This framework will inform a suite of legislation I plan to send to the Council this year – ensuring we are aligned on the number of officers we need, a comprehensive strategy, and a vision for the future of public safety.

We know police officers cannot solve every problem. By expanding our public safety toolkit, we can better meet the needs of our residents, especially those with behavioral and mental health needs.

Seattle has set this kind of innovative path before at the intersection of public safety and public health. In 1970, the City founded the Medic One Program – training firefighters as paramedics in partnership with Harborview Medical Center and the University of Washington.

Now is an appropriate time to remember Dr. Leonard Cobb, who passed away last week at the age of 96. Dr. Cobb was one of the founders of the Seattle Medic One program. Together, Dr. Cobb and the Seattle Fire Department helped set the standard for excellence in pre-hospital emergency care – a standard that remains a national model today.

Applying lessons from nationally proven programs, and locally pioneered solutions like Health One and the Police Department’s mental health crisis response unit, we can do this again through the foundation of a third public safety department working alongside our police officers and firefighters.

I recently appointed Director Reba Gonzales as the new leader of the Community Safety and Communications Center, our 9-1-1 call center. Working together, we will expand the Community Safety and Communications Center, increasing responsibilities beyond answering and dispatching 9-1-1 calls.

Staffing this newly envisioned department with behavioral health experts, emergency dispatchers, and other necessary specialists beyond traditional first responders, the department will be a **Civilian Assisted Response and Engagement Department – a CARE Department**.

In the coming weeks, we will be sharing with the City Council a comprehensive white paper envisioning what this third department may look like. I sincerely appreciate Councilmember Andrew Lewis’ consistent push for more options to help more people stay safe and healthy.

While advancing the work of the CARE Department will require bargaining and partnership with our City’s public safety labor unions, we will also demonstrate our commitment to diversified response through the launch of a dual response pilot program later this year.

We are committed to embedding public safety in everything we do to broaden our approach. This year we will hire 26 Park Rangers – a massive expansion of the program proposed by our administration. These rangers represent another form of diversification, serving as ambassadors and guides at the same time they help connect residents to the support they need.

Homelessness & Housing

Now, I’d like to transition to one of the other critical issues facing our city – homelessness and housing. In the **One Seattle** we envision, no one should have to live outside unsheltered. In our first year, we responded to homelessness like the crisis it is.

That started with our administration pioneering the Unified Care Team. A simple – yet novel – concept that by aligning all of our City departments working on homelessness, we can do better for those living on the street and everyone in our communities.

The facts bear this to be true. In 2022, the UCT delivered over 1800 referrals to shelter in partnership with contracted outreach providers – helping connect those experiencing homelessness with places to go, service resources, and pathways to recovery and permanent housing. In tandem, the number of parks and green spaces significantly impacted by encampments has been reduced by 70%.

Parks are among our city’s greatest amenities and resources for our residents. This year we’ve worked to make them clean, open, and accessible to all – a needed change after the pandemic reminded us that without proper care and attention, our parks can fall into disrepair.

The UCT has created new systems to keep city public spaces clean, address trash and debris, and engage directly with community members.

We also created the One Seattle Homelessness Action Plan website and a centralized constituent service hub, providing new levels of transparency to our residents regarding the scale of the crisis and what we’re doing to address it.

And, we have significantly reduced tents on downtown streets, aligning the UCT’s efforts with those of the King County Regional Homelessness Authority.

Working with KCRHA, King County, the We Are In collaborative, private businesses, and philanthropic organizations, we helped launch Partnership for Zero and the Housing Command Center, innovative approaches to swiftly match people with needed housing. Councilmember Herbold’s leadership as a KCRHA governing board member inspires me to continue to push for new ideas and measurable results to support communities in need.

Despite this important work from the City and KCRHA, more unhoused people died outside in King County in 2022 than before. That is simply heartbreaking.

Change begins with housing, with shelter, and with services. We must bring people indoors. With urgency. With compassion.

This year, you will see our administration's launch of new neighborhood-focused teams for the UCT. The first teams will launch next month, and as we expand this type of coverage to neighborhoods across the City, their work will be defined by relationship building and continuous improvement.

I want our workers to know everyone around them and feel as though they are part of the collective solution.

We'll also deliver continued support for the KCRHA in the form of renewed investments – nearly \$97 million, a 25% increase – toward outreach, new shelter options, and other critical homelessness services.

We must also be relentless in our push for more housing – and housing that is more affordable. Our affordable housing crisis is not one that can be solved in a single year, or a single budget cycle, but we are putting in place necessary improvements.

I'm proud of the fact that we helped produce more than 2,200 units of affordable housing in 2022 – a significant percentage of the nearly 13,000 units of overall housing produced across Seattle. We can't let up in 2023.

We put forward a \$250 million investment in the budget – the largest of its kind ever – toward affordable housing; we led with improvements to design review; and we founded a housing subcommittee. These represent cornerstones in our efforts to build more housing. This year, we will advance even more commonsense improvements – from permitting reform to our Comprehensive Plan update – to ensure we are making it easier to build needed housing.

Further, my administration is making great strides in developing the City's next Housing Levy. This work to develop the details of this tried and tested program for growing our housing stock is critical. Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda, a tireless advocate in the affordable housing space, has been a strong collaborator in this effort.

Candidly, my direction on our housing levy is simple: We must give the voters of Seattle the ambitious – and achievable – plan that lives up to the scale of the housing crisis and does more than ever to prevent homelessness.

A bold pledge and proven method to build thousands of units of housing; delivery of rental assistance to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place; and resources to stabilize our workforce – the incredibly dedicated, relentlessly committed workers who sacrifice to help those in need. That's the forward-looking vision we seek to realize in this effort.

Transportation

I want to talk about transportation. An area where we have seen trends go in a wrong – and tragic – direction is traffic fatalities and serious injuries.

In the Seattle we want to see, no one should have to worry about being hurt or killed by a crash or collision. This is why we've recommitted to strategies that protect vulnerable users as we work towards our aggressive Vision Zero goals of ending traffic deaths and serious injuries – aiming not for what is easy, but for what is right.

In the coming days, we will share alongside SDOT Director Greg Spotts early actions we're taking to get back on track with this goal. **In our administration we lead with people, and we lead with safety.**

It's for that reason that we worked hard to receive a \$25 million grant from President Biden and Secretary Buttigieg to implement safety improvements in underserved neighborhoods.

With help from our federal delegation, we were successful because we centered equity and a clear plan.

Councilmember Tammy Morales has been a strong voice for pedestrian and cyclist safety in South Seattle and across the City – I look forward to working with her to make these investments real.

In this time of change, we must transform our streets and neighborhoods to be places where walking is encouraged and multi-modal transportation is safe. Where our sidewalks are vibrant, and we pursue exciting new options such as outdoor dining, retail, and street cafes, which Councilmember Strauss has championed time and again in partnership with our office.

A transportation system where there is thoughtful calibration and collaboration with our freight, maritime, and small business partners, and where we prioritize infrastructure improvements for the nearly 280 bridges we own, inspect, maintain, or operate.

It was my honor to help get the West Seattle Bridge repair across the finish line – an incredible effort of **One Seattle** teamwork that reconnected our city, including for 100,000 West Seattle residents.

Now, we are focused on partnering with Sound Transit to deliver Light Rail to West Seattle, to Ballard, and right here to Seattle Center as part of Sound Transit 3 – the largest transit expansion effort in the country and largest infrastructure project in our city's history.

In the Seattle we want to see, neighbors and visitors will be able to take fast, reliable transit to make memories at Memorial Stadium or at Climate Pledge Arena, and watch a Storm, a Kraken, and yes, one day, a Sonics game. To enjoy a show at the new Bumbershoot and relish the return of Bite of Seattle.

Thankfully, we don't have to wait *that* long for Bumbershoot and Bite of Seattle – both are returning this year to Seattle Center – something we can all look forward to. I would be remiss not to thank Robert Nellams, our recently retired Seattle Center Director, for his 40 years of service to the City. Robert played a huge role in making Seattle Center the vibrant cultural hub we see today.

Environment

Light Rail expansion is also critical for reaching the ambitious climate goals our city has set. Last year, I issued an Executive Order to take 23 climate justice actions and accelerate emissions reductions by 82% by 2030.

And our work to take on climate change and fight environmental injustice was recognized internationally for our innovation and community building. I have no doubt that Councilmember Sawant's passion for a just climate future has helped inspire many in our community to take action as well.

Now, this year, we're ready to implement some of the strongest building performance standards in the country – helping deliver clean buildings across neighborhoods in the city and hundreds of new green jobs in the process. We'll also continue to support households in replacing unhealthy oil furnaces with modern, clean heat pumps.

With climate impacts and extreme weather part of our city's foreseeable future, our innovative resilience hub strategy is critical – providing communities in need with spaces to stay safe and healthy during heat events, flooding, and cold weather.

We seek a Seattle with 30% tree canopy – a target based on health equity, climate resilience, and a vision for a truly emerald and evergreen city. We have work to do to protect and grow our tree canopy – and in the coming weeks I will share the details of new legislation and an Executive Order to preserve and plant tens of thousands of trees.

Closing

We are at a time of change in our city. A rebirth.

In 1918, a young man in Kumamoto, Japan traveled over 700 miles to Tokyo to become a Sumo wrestler. His family never knew what happened to him. The problem was, he was big man but he wasn't a very good Sumo wrestler. So he decided to leave Tokyo and come to the United States to seek safety and prosperity and found work as a house boy in Seattle's Broadmoor neighborhood, where he learned to speak English from a kind family.

In 1942, he was falsely arrested for being a Japanese spy and put in prison, then moved to an internment camp with his family. His grandson became the 57th Mayor of Seattle.

Despite the fact that he and my mother were treated so badly, he loved Seattle and what it had to offer. As did my mother. Their optimism lives on in me.

We started this speech with Taylor introducing me. The father she spoke of whose death left her in despair, was my best friend. Who lived with me for 8 years after high school. Who helped me in my first run for office and who believed in seeing the best in people and always seeing opportunity.

As your mayor, I cannot let my grandfather or, Taylor, your father down. Their level of optimism, coupled with hard work, is the answer that will allow Seattle's success.

The challenges facing Seattle are real – but the strategies we've adopted are intended to make a difference not just today, but for generations to come. There is no substitution for hard work.

It will take bold thinking and hard work to make a Seattle where everyone feels safe. A Seattle where everyone is housed. A Seattle with jobs and opportunities rooted in equity and fairness. A Seattle with a downtown that's the envy of the country. A Seattle with fast transit and safe streets. A Seattle with healthy air and clean water. A Seattle where you can raise a family and start a business. A Seattle we can all take pride in.

Over 60 years ago at the World's Fair, right here on the Seattle Center grounds, leaders and residents of our great city came together to present a vision of what a strong, vibrant city could and should look like. We now face the same task.

The future Seattle is the one that we're building today. The city we want to see is the city we need to work towards. If we envision it, we can realize it.

Once again, we must embrace the boldness and innovation that our city is renowned for, turn policy into progress, and unite to build **One Seattle** together. The state of our City is that we are ready and willing to put in the hard work.

Let's go do it!

Thank you. **One Seattle.**