



2021 State of the City Prepared Remarks

Good evening.

I'd like to begin tonight by welcoming everyone who has tuned in.

Our neighbors throughout San Diego, City Council President Jennifer Campbell, members of the City Council, our City Attorney, Independent Budget Analyst, City Clerk, City Auditor, our region's elected officials, military leaders, local tribal leaders, friends from Baja California and around the world, and the outstanding City workers who always go above and beyond... and were truly essential this past year.

Thank you.

In a normal year, I would be speaking in a theater surrounded by hundreds of people who care deeply about our City.

Tonight, I am addressing you from the empty San Ysidro Branch Library in one of the neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19.

This is the newest library in our system and it also happens to be one of the busiest.

It's just one freeway exit from the U.S. – Mexico border and it was built to honor how cultures merge in our megaregion.

San Ysidro residents advocated for years for our library to reflect the character of their neighborhood.

The design, the art, the fact that nearly every sign here is in English and Spanish is a testament to what we can build together when we work together.

During the pandemic, this library had to close its doors, but it didn't stop service.

We opened an outdoor lab for people to access wi-fi and made it easy for patrons to pick up books they reserved online.

City employees stepped up and got creative to get the job done.

This library, and what it means to this community, is a symbol of who we should be as a City.

It is a beautiful reminder of the importance of investing in traditionally underserved neighborhoods and proof of community perseverance during this pandemic.

It's also a reminder that for far too long, this community has been ignored.

Prejudice and systemic racism have long held back the promise of America.

Last week, we saw just how much progress still needs to be made.

The violence at the Capitol and protests across the country are a stark reminder that there are those who seek to undermine our democracy and sow discord.

We need to unite now more than ever as COVID-19 continues to spread.

No one can escape its impact.

This past year, my partner and my father lost their jobs.

My nieces and nephew have been struggling to keep focused on their education.

I have not hugged my mother in months.

It's not lost on me that compared to so many other San Diegans, I'm one of the lucky ones.

Some have been isolated for close to a year. Many don't know how they are going to make ends meet.

Businesses are struggling to stay afloat. Kids cannot go to school.

Our neighbors are dying.

Even civic institutions like our City have not been spared.

The pandemic has exacerbated long-standing City budget problems the last administration did too little to address.

Behind the ribbon cuttings and news conferences, the City faced structural budget deficits.

I've inherited a budget deficit that exceeds 150 million dollars and will require difficult decisions to preserve neighborhood services.

That hole in our budget is greater than what it takes to run our Parks and Recreation Department for a year.

It means that we are left with even fewer resources to fix our crumbling streets, city facilities and stormwater systems.

Due to the years-long neglect of our infrastructure, it will cost nearly \$6 billion dollars just to meet our needs.

And we have no real idea how much devastation climate change and coastal erosion will cost in the coming years.

All of this is underscored by the fact that the City's workforce morale has been battered because they are overworked, underpaid and underappreciated.

Honestly, the state of our City is fragile right now.

But I have faith it won't be for much longer.

At our core, our city is strong because San Diegans are strong.

We are resilient.

We are fighters.

We recognize that we are all connected... even when we are apart.

Together, I believe that we can and will solve the biggest problems of our time.

We will lift each other up and create a future that is better for all of us.

For the City to accomplish this goal, we must first recognize that our battle with COVID-19 is far from over.

We keep shattering single-day records for cases and deaths.

While some call for things to go back to normal as soon as possible... it is clear that we cannot.

This is why it was important for me to take a different approach.

My first executive order was to protect our hospital system and save lives.

We need to hold accountable those who choose to blatantly and egregiously defy public health orders.

The arrival of vaccines has given great hope but the reality is that it is going to be months before we can possibly let our guards down.

I know it is hard to keep going.

But in this darkness, there are true heroes among us.

I want to take a moment tonight to thank Jonathan Gurr-o-la... the clinical nurse at Sharp Memorial Hospital who led the pledge ... along with all the doctors, nurses, and frontline workers who have done everything in their power to defeat the virus.

You have done so much to protect lives under unimaginable circumstances.

We can show them our gratitude by avoiding large gatherings, wearing our masks, and staying home as much as possible.

We must continue to abide by the public health orders.

And we must do this to protect people and the economy.

The City is taking an active role to get the vaccine out to as many people as quickly as possible.

Working alongside County public health officials, some San Diego firefighters are now authorized to administer vaccinations.

We are also working with the County to open vaccination centers – like the one we opened this week at Tailgate Park – to provide easy access for all when the vaccine becomes more widely available.

Until then, we must continue to take steps to protect the most vulnerable among us.

One of my first actions after assuming office was to extend our program for people experiencing homelessness -- Operation Shelter to Home.

This program saved countless people from being exposed to the coronavirus thanks to the collaboration between the City, the County, the Housing Commission, Regional Task Force on the Homeless, the Convention Center Corporation and our service providers.

San Diego was among the first cities in the country to convert our unused convention center into a place to provide sanctuary from the streets.

Since it opened in April, we've been able to connect nearly 1,200 individuals and families with long-term housing.

The convention center shelter is a short-term solution that will not continue indefinitely.

I want to speak directly to all of you who are staying at the convention center right now: I am proud of you.

I've seen your courage in taking the first steps to get off the streets and I am committed to your future.

We will work with you to make sure you are connected to housing or continued shelter when we wind down the program in March.

San Diego cares about you.

We've already started moving some folks into recently purchased hotels that have been converted into housing through Governor Newsom's Project Homekey.

I am working with local, state and federal partners to secure funding to purchase more housing units and invest in supportive services.

We have to not only help people get off the streets but stay off the streets.

No longer will San Diego be a place that buys indoor skydiving facilities that house no one and claim it will solve our crisis.

And no longer will we expect our police officers to serve as the first point of contact for unsheltered people in need.

Many of our neighbors living on the street struggle with serious mental health and addiction issues, which puts our officers in impossible situations.

As a region, we lack a true strategy to provide these neighbors with the help they so desperately need.

We need mental health clinicians to be the first points of contact, so our officers can focus on policing.

I'm working closely with Chair Nathan Fletcher and the County Board of Supervisors to increase support and access for behavioral health services.

We need medical professionals out on our streets, in our canyons, and on our beaches to provide on-the-spot assistance.

Getting this kind of care means little if people don't have anywhere to call home.

So, I'm pledging a renewed focus on housing-first solutions for our City.

That means creating permanent supportive housing with wrap-around services for people who are unsheltered.

San Diego can be a leader on combatting homelessness. And, now, we have the political will to do it.

We don't need another plan that sits on a shelf; we need to move beyond talk and into action.

It's why I moved homeless services into the Mayor's Office; it's a top priority and needs to be treated that way.

Tonight, I am proud to announce that one of the United States' leading experts on homelessness, Matthew Doherty, is going to help us launch into the next phase.

Matthew was appointed by President Barack Obama's administration as the Executive Director of the United States' Interagency Council on Homelessness and has a deep understanding of our City.

Matthew will work alongside City leadership for several months, helping us to improve our plans based on best practices and put them into action.

We will also be implementing increased transparency for ourselves and our service providers using data to hold everyone accountable.

Let me be clear, we must change the status quo on homelessness.

Some people want quick, easy solutions to one of our most complex and pressing issues.

But there are no shortcuts to end homelessness.

Instead, it will take steadfast, unrelenting tenacity.

We will stick to proven strategies and deliberately carry them out.

Because that is the path that creates real change. And the people depending on us... deserve it.

We can end chronic homelessness in San Diego.

We know that our homelessness crisis will not be resolved without tackling our housing crisis.

The median home price in San Diego continues to rise to levels that are not remotely achievable for a family making the median income.

This is not sustainable if we want our children and grandchildren to be able to stay in our city.

A San Diego for all of us is a City where people at all income levels have a place they can afford to live.

You should be able to have a roof over your head without worrying about putting food on your table.

It can be difficult to find a place to rent – let alone buy – because we simply aren't building enough homes.

For years, development hasn't kept up with natural population growth and job growth.

You can't fix what you don't measure.

So, my administration will develop new tools to monitor the housing pipeline and ensure we are on track to meet our production goals.

We will prioritize new housing construction in all neighborhoods, especially focused near transit and jobs.

This means accelerating the pace of community plan updates and engaging with community members to meet those goals.

We're going to focus on creating more housing that middle- and working-class people can afford.

We will incentivize middle- and low-income housing development so San Diegans have a pathway to put down roots and build generational wealth.

We know that real estate is at a premium in San Diego, which is why I will implement plans to incorporate housing when we redevelop or build new City facilities.

This could mean building apartments on top of new libraries and fire stations.

I will take a thoughtful approach to make sure our transit system and infrastructure can support these new units.

This year I'll be working with my colleagues at SANDAG to approve the 2021 Regional Plan known as the "Five Big Moves."

It will create a transportation blueprint for our region that is equitable, sustainable and improves the everyday lives of millions of people.

The 2021 Regional Plan is more than a vision for how people get around San Diego.

It's a job creator, a way to fund and build projects to support our climate and housing goals and a strategy to provide more safe and viable mobility options.

As we build this transportation network, we cannot ignore that it will cost our city billions of dollars to close our infrastructure funding gap.

I am overhauling the way we prioritize road repairs to use data to drive our decisions be more equitable and focus on quality, long-term fixes on San Diego's most used streets.

As we repair these long-neglected roads, I will work with the City Council to create a citywide policy for complete streets.

That means we'll reconfigure roads when appropriate to support more walking, biking, and transit opportunities.

These streets will help us with our Vision Zero goal of having no traffic-related fatalities or severe injuries by 2025.

We can also reduce risk by repurposing our streets to be for people instead of cars.

There are two projects coming soon that I'm especially excited about.

We are going to transform Fifth Avenue in the Gaslamp Quarter and Normal Street in Hillcrest by closing portions of them to car traffic for San Diegans to enjoy.

High-quality public spaces like these promenades will encourage walkability and enhance the quality of life for all.

I want every San Diegan to be proud of their neighborhood and that means keeping all of our neighborhoods safe.

But we must acknowledge that not all of our community members feel they are treated equal in their interactions with law enforcement.

George Floyd's murder, and the continuing protests since his death, have made it very clear injustices must be addressed more aggressively.

That starts with acknowledging clearly and definitively that Black Lives Matter.

We can't just say it. Our actions must prove it.

We already make a concerted effort to hire officers who reflect the diversity of our city.

And the department has updated its policies and procedures to reflect best practices and emphasize de-escalation.

This is a good start, but we must – and will – do better.

Chief David Nisleit and I agree that to create and maintain trusting relationships, we need clear expectations and strict accountability for those we rely upon to serve our communities.

Those expectations include ensuring SDPD is committed to a policing culture that seeks to improve community interactions through fairness, transparency, impartiality, and giving a voice to the voiceless.

And my administration will ensure accountability by working with the City Council to implement a new, independent police review commission that will address allegations of police misconduct.

Together, we will continually evaluate and update the department's policies to ensure they reflect our values and align with state laws.

First responders choose public service because they care deeply about their communities.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge and thank our firefighters, lifeguards and police officers for all the work they do and the sacrifices they make.

We must serve everyone in San Diego more equitably.

As such, I have begun building the new Office of Race and Equity at City Hall, working alongside Councilmember Monica Montgomery Steppe with input from social justice leaders.

We have already launched a national search for its first director.

This office is positioned to ensure that everything we do at the City is viewed through the lens of equity.

One area we must improve is prioritizing environmental justice in our urban neighborhoods.

This year, I will be establishing a Climate Equity Fund to pay for sustainability projects in historically underserved communities.

These investments will help improve environmental health while supporting the City's Climate Action Plan.

When I authored the plan seven years ago, I dreamt of a sustainable future with good-paying green jobs for generations to come.

There has been some progress, but it hasn't been nearly enough.

We must do more to fully and faithfully enact our landmark Climate Action Plan.

The first step is to update it.

We have learned so much over the last several years.

We will use these lessons to set aggressive new goals and implement strategies to achieve them.

It is also time to look at our metrics and ensure that we are following best practices.

We are going to have to take bold steps if we are going to meet our targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

And the City must lead by example.

We are taking steps to better track our energy consumption and reduce waste at City buildings.

I will accelerate the adoption of electric vehicles in our fleet and incentivize City employees to continue working remotely and use alternative modes of transportation.

And most importantly, we are going to commit to have City facilities to use 100 percent clean energy through San Diego Community Power.

Having a reliable water supply is just as important as having sustainable energy.

This year, construction will ramp up on our Pure Water project, the largest water recycling program in California and the City's biggest infrastructure project in its history.

It will create thousands of good-paying jobs and will provide a third of our drinking water when it is completed.

When San Diegans think about clean water, it is about more than what comes out of the tap.

We know we have to curb the pollution spilling into the Tijuana River Valley and onto our beaches.

Thanks to our congressional delegation, we secured 300 million dollars to address the sewage.

But we know the real work is just beginning.

Our friends in Baja California, regional leadership and I must continue working closely with Washington D.C. and Mexico City to deliver on the promise to improve the health of our ocean and our people.

I'm proud of the relationship I'm building with Tijuana Mayor Arturo González Cruz and Baja California Governor Jaime Bonilla Valdez to keep advocating on behalf of our megaregion.

Together, we will continue to create efficiencies at the border as well as improve the quality of life for our cross-border community.

We are advocating for the completion of a new port-of-entry known as Otay Mesa East.

This crossing will improve the commercial movement of goods, services, and passengers to boost economic growth on both sides of the border.

But our relationship with Baja is about so much more than trade.

It's about people in two countries who are one family.

For a lot of San Diegans, going back and forth at the world's busiest land border crossing isn't a novelty.

It's just something they do to go to work or see family.

For many of us, the border isn't seen as a dividing line -- it's a bridge that joins our two vibrant cultures.

Here, we share ideas, values, and friendships.

We will live up to our commitment of being a welcoming city, by taking bold actions and speaking up on behalf of new San Diegans who come from all corners of the world.

I am proud to partner with City Councilmember Vivian Moreno on a proposed resolution to reverse federal policies that prioritized border wall construction and limited legal immigration.

With support of the City Council and in collaboration with the new Presidential administration, we can repair the damage done to the environment and sacred tribal lands, while we create a more inclusive society.

Having a City that is welcoming for all means having pathways for everyone to succeed.

Pathways to make sure our children don't fall behind.

Pathways for our small businesses to thrive.

Pathways to preserving jobs for our working families.

We all know local businesses are hurting right now. And job losses continue to mount.

That's why my "Back to Work SD" plan lays out a roadmap to boost our economy and make sure our children don't fall behind.

I authored this plan with a group of civic-minded business and labor leaders, academics, healthcare experts, and fellow elected officials.

Together, we developed recommendations in the plan that provide a roadmap for our economy to bounce back from this pandemic.

This month, we will bring a proposal to the City Council that will extend our current eviction moratorium to keep families in their homes, help folks pay their back rent, and stop small businesses from being evicted.

We must do everything we can to ensure that all that we love about San Diego is still here when we get through these awful days.

And we will.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution to recovery.

Education, the arts, events, hospitality, restaurants and all the other sectors of our diverse economy have unique challenges that must be overcome.

We will continue to have an open dialogue to better understand their needs and work with them to ensure that the City does everything it can to help.

We must come together as a community and support our small businesses.

My "Shop Local SD" campaign will soon launch a new online portal to connect you with local small businesses that need customers.

Many folks are struggling to make ends meet.

For those who have not taken a hit to their incomes, I ask you to buy from small, local businesses as much as you can.

Buying local is how you can best support your community and help your neighbors who are struggling to provide for their families right now.

Another pillar of the “Back to Work SD” plan focuses on our children and their ability to succeed.

We must create opportunity for everyone regardless of what neighborhood they call home.

And close the digital divide that has left tens of thousands of San Diegans with no access to a computer or the Internet.

Within my first six months, I will be expanding internet access at more recreation centers and increasing opportunities for San Diegans to check out items like computers and wi-fi hotspots from our libraries.

Getting our kids back to school safely is what we must do to support our workers and economy.

This means working closely with our schools to prioritize safe re-openings and provide opportunities for kids to have access to technology at City facilities.

With the “Back to Work SD” plan, we will protect families from homelessness, support our kids, and champion our small businesses.

I recognize that the vast majority of businesses are doing the right thing.

Many have been extraordinarily innovative to survive and, in some cases, thrive.

To our local businesses: I want to be clear, I support you and we will build back better.

We will not repeat the mistakes of the past.

We will not let the way we’ve always done things dictate what we do now.

In this new year, with my new administration and this new City Council, we will fight for a better future.

We are a big city and it’s time we started acting like one.

I know we have it in us.

In 1915, we were a small town with a big idea.

We built Balboa Park to host the Panama–California Exposition and brought three million people to our city.

Our crown jewel still stands as a reminder of what we can do when we have vision, leadership and action.

Together, we will get big projects across the finish line.

The sports arena redevelopment. The stadium and river park in Mission Valley.

A transit hub that finally connects the trolley to the airport.

San Diego, I couldn’t be prouder to be the Mayor of our resilient City.

Over the next four years, I look forward to working with people from every corner of our City to improve neighborhoods and tackle our biggest challenges.

It won't be easy, but nothing worthwhile ever is.

Our city has big things on the horizon.

Let's have hope.

Let's rise above being fine and dare to be great.

Let's build a San Diego for all of us.

Thank you.