

54th Annual State of Metro Address

As prepared for delivery by Mayor Megan Barry

April 26, 2017

Bridgestone Arena plaza

Thank you, Vice Mayor Briley, for that kind introduction and for your dedication to our city, for your friendship and your leadership. The institutional memory you bring to the council is critical.

I'd like to give a shout-out to CeCe Winans, one of the most powerful singers in Nashville or anywhere, as well as to the TSU Aristocrat of Bands, which makes every event more fun with its joyful dance moves and musicianship. Thanks also to Gray Bulla, our Youth Poet Laureate, for representing the voices of our youth; to another great voice, Ernie Allen of 92Q, our announcer today; and to Charlie Strobel for his beautiful words about what the work of our city is all about: living together in peace and justice.

And let me just say a quick word about where we're standing today: Bridgestone Arena. When the arena opened a little over 20 years ago, it didn't have an anchor tenant. Now it's one of the busiest arenas in the world, and it's home to the Nashville Predators, who sold out every game this season, swept the top-seeded Chicago Blackhawks out of the NHL playoffs and will be back here Sunday for Round 2.

Vice Mayor Briley, members of the Metropolitan Council, our Board of Education, judges, constitutional officers, state lawmakers, and other distinguished guests, including my husband, Bruce: Welcome to the 54th annual State of Metro Address.

I'm honored to be here with you today and every day. I love my job, and I am honored to serve. Thanks to all of you who have made it possible for me to lead our great city. We are all the beneficiaries of the ones who have come before, and I am extremely grateful for Mayors Briley, Fulton, Boner, Bredesen, Purcell and Dean. They all laid a foundation and built upon that foundation with their hard work and dedication. Nashville has been truly blessed.

There's a lot going on internationally, nationally and at the state level. But let me tell you, cities are really where the action is these days, and if you want action, you're not going to find a better place than Nashville. And people are noticing. Our city is growing. Why?

Because we have a talented workforce, fueled by a large and impressive group of colleges and universities.

Because we are the epicenter of the health care industry in the United States.

Because we are a hub of entrepreneurial activity, especially for women, who have made us the Number 1 city for female entrepreneurs. Because that activity has propelled our fashion, food, and film scenes to heights that were unimaginable 10 or 15 years ago.

Because we are a place where everyone pitches in, where everyone participates in the work of building a better city. Because businesses, nonprofits and government are true partners in

improving our quality of life. And these partnerships are the key to so many of Nashville's success stories.

My favorite private-public partnership right now is Opportunity NOW, putting 10,000 of our young people aged 14-24 in paid, meaningful jobs and internships. We started Opportunity NOW because we heard our youth when they said they needed more opportunity and hope.

Nearly 300 employers across the city are making opportunities and hope available, and the private sector has donated almost 1 million dollars to help get this off the ground.

I am so proud of how our community has come together to make this happen. I want to give a special shout-out to Juvenile Judge Sheila Calloway and Criminal Court Clerk Howard Gentry, who co-chaired our Youth Violence Summit, and everyone else who worked with them to bring this wonderful idea to life.

(lead applause)

Nashville is also growing because it's Music City, a city of songs, songwriters and music makers. Just last week we broke ground on the Fifth and Broadway development across the street, which will house the National Museum of African American Music, telling another important part of our music story. We have one of the best brands a city could have – and a TV show that literally tells the world about us.

And, most importantly, Nashville is a warm and welcoming place. We build bridges – not walls – and we welcome and celebrate the diversity that makes us strong.

And diversity is what a vibrant, exciting city looks like – the kind of place people say with pride when asked where they are from, the kind of place where people want to visit, and the kind of place people want to move to. We're fortunate enough to be in that position. We'd much rather be growing than shrinking.

And we are growing. That growth means we have more opportunities for folks who call Nashville home – whether you've been here 60 years or 6 months.

And when you have growth, you can reflect that in the operating budget. So today my administration will recommend an operating budget for 2017-18 of more than 2.2 billion dollars. That represents 119 million dollars of NEW revenue growth over the current year.

The biggest driver of this growth is all the new buildings coming on line. We've seen the value of building permits skyrocket in the past few years, reaching nearly 4 billion dollars in 2016. Now we are going to see the benefits of all that construction activity as buildings are opening up and going on the tax rolls.

And there's more to come. Just look up!

(Look at the skyline)

As we are going through the countywide property reappraisal that captures changes in values every 4 years, the burden of taxes is now shifting more toward commercial property and away from residential. But overall, property values have gone up an average of 37% across the county. This means some people will see higher tax bills, while others are going to pay less as a result of the adjustments in values.

We can't profit from a reappraisal, and we don't want to make it more difficult for hard-working citizens to meet their budgets each month. So we won't be increasing the property tax rate beyond the expected new combined rate of less than 3 dollars and 16 cents per 100 dollars of assessed value. That will be the lowest tax rate in Metro's 54-year history.

Metro Trustee Charlie Cardwell and his staff have seen nearly 2,000 more applications for the property tax freeze and tax relief programs this year. Thank you to everyone who got the word out to our seniors, our disabled citizens and our veterans who qualify for these important programs that will help them stay in their homes.

I especially want to thank Davidson County Property Assessor Vivian Wilhoite and her staff for all their hard work to reassess every property across Davidson County's 532 square miles. They kept citizens informed, and they mailed notices to every property owner.

Much of the property tax growth we've seen and that we'll continue to see comes from the cranes and towers that are coming up. Our downtown is solid, attractive, and vibrant – perhaps more so than any other major city across the country – and it's a huge source of property tax and sales tax revenue that we can spend all across Nashville. But as we talk about making sure our prosperity results in jobs and opportunities for all Nashvillians, we also want to make sure this growth reaches every corner of Davidson County. That's why we aren't just investing in downtown.

Good development comes with intention and it comes with planning. So our economic development efforts this year will be focused on fostering growth in East Nashville, Donelson, North Nashville, Bellevue and Antioch. And each of them will be driven by private-public partnerships.

Let's take Donelson, for example. We have an opportunity to generate transit-oriented development around the Music City Star station while also investing in a new library for the Donelson community.

We'll continue to invest in Antioch by building new roads and infrastructure to enhance a fast-growing area where major Nashville companies such as HCA, Bridgestone, Asurion, and Community Health Systems have already invested.

We'll be partnering in expanding a redevelopment district on the East Bank of the Cumberland River, where a new 120-acre site will lead to more parkland and connectivity from East Nashville to the river, creating a whole new neighborhood.

We're going to build a regional community center and 2 ice rinks in Bellevue with the Nashville Predators and the developers who are turning what used to be a dead mall into an exciting mixed-use development, which Metro has already helped with tax-increment financing.

And we're investing in North Nashville, too. We're putting a pocket park on Jefferson Street, we're going to expand the Hadley Park tennis center, and we'll be investing in a new branch library at Hadley Park.

Connectivity is really important to me, and I've heard the calls to make it easier for college students and other North Nashvillians to go back and forth to downtown, to the Farmers' Market and to the Gulch. So we're going to extend the free Music City Circuit bus route to go down Jefferson Street past Fisk and Meharry and into the Tennessee State University campus. This investment in transit will promote economic revitalization on our historic Jefferson Street corridor.

These are the kinds of services and infrastructure that growth makes possible. Each one of these investments will make our city stronger, and I believe each of them will lead to additional partnerships and more growth.

(Pause)

Growth and new revenue create new opportunities, and I'll talk about some more of those in a moment. But we can't spend all of the new money that we have on new things. We also have to be responsible and meet our obligations. One of those obligations is debt service to pay for all of those new schools, parks, sidewalks, police precincts and other infrastructure we've already built to improve the quality of life across Nashville. So this budget includes money to cover our debt service obligations today and also into our future.

Another obligation is making sure we take care of our Metro employees. If we want to have the best workforce we can find, we have to take care of our people.

I've asked Metro departments to present 3-year budgets so we can plan more effectively. Metro employees deserve the same. I'm proposing a 3-year pay plan so employees will know what's in store and be able to plan for their futures. Under this plan, employees will get a 2% across-the-board raise for the budget year starting July 1st, and then they'll get 3% increases in the second and third years. My budget also includes fully funding increments and includes a percentage for open-range increases for qualified employees.

It's also time – actually, it's past time – to create a new benefit for Metro employees: paid family leave. When you come into office as Mayor, you get to take a look at things with fresh eyes, and you get to see what the city has, what it doesn't have and what it needs. We saw that Metro lacked a policy to support employees who have a new baby or a seriously ill spouse or child or parent. Employees should be able to take care of that family member without taking unpaid leave or having to quit. Just in my office alone, 6 employees have become new parents in less than 2 years – so if you come and see me, don't drink the water! Seriously, though, we need to support workers throughout the government.

The paid family leave policy was recommended by the Metro Council and the Mayor's Council on Gender Equity. It's the right thing to do for the health and well-being of our employees, and it's the right thing to do for their families. It's also the smart thing to do, because we want to attract and retain the best employees.

(Pause)

You know, I'm often asked what sets Nashville apart from other cities – and I believe it's our quality of life, and we have to celebrate it and build upon it. Here are a few highlights of the things we're going to do in the next budget to maintain and add to Nashville's great quality of life:

Metro Arts will get new money for grants to arts organizations and neighborhood improvement projects. The Metro Parks budget will include money to open the Smith Springs and Madison community centers, and we're going to create a fund to help conserve open space in Davidson County.

Historic preservation is also very important to me. This year we're going to do something new: a grant program that's very similar to Metro's small business incentives that will help property owners access capital to preserve historic structures.

We also want to do everything we can to make Nashville greener and cleaner. I've heard the frustration so many of you have expressed about property inspections and enforcement of codes standards. Metro Codes will receive nearly 1 million dollars to enforce codes and respond to complaints.

We're also going to fund a roving trash truck that will be able to respond quickly to areas throughout the county where trash has piled up. And we're going to take the hundreds of thousands of glass bottles that have been going from our downtown bars and restaurants into the landfill, and we're going to start recycling them.

Arts, parks, and strong neighborhoods are just a few of the essentials to a good quality of life, and we're going to continue to invest in them and more.

(Pause)

Budgets are about priorities. Giving our most vulnerable citizens more chances to succeed and to live healthy lives and feel safe is one of my top priorities.

So we're going to fund a proposal from our Public Investment Plan program that will help people who need mental health services to prevent them from entering the criminal justice system. By expanding the capacity of our 24/7 Mental Health Crisis Services Center, we'll be able to provide better and safer emergency care to people experiencing acute psychiatric symptoms.

Another proposal, called Steering Clear, will implement a diversion program so that eligible participants don't get trapped in a cycle of debt, arrest, and deeper debt because of a driver's license violation. Steering Clear is a collaboration of the Public Defender, the Sheriff, the District Attorney, the Presiding General Sessions Judge, the Criminal Court Clerk, the Circuit Court Clerk, and the Traffic School Director. This is a great example of a team seeing a problem and coming together to solve it.

We'll also be giving free, local bus passes to chronically unhoused citizens who are actively working with our housing navigators. Now it'll be easier for them to get to services around town that reduce barriers to housing. And unhoused veterans will be eligible for Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing vouchers, which encourages landlords to rent to them. After sacrificing so much for the rest of us, our veterans deserve a place to call home.

Caring for our indigent population and our senior citizens is critical. We have a moral responsibility to care for low-income citizens who need access to health care. That's why we'll continue to fund Nashville General Hospital with a 35 million dollar subsidy. We also will allocate a 4.5 million dollar increase to Knowles Home and Bordeaux Long-Term Care to keep our promises to low-income seniors who need a safe, quality, affordable place to live.

And we know Nashville's not immune to the opioid epidemic that is sweeping our state. Opioid overdose deaths have quadrupled in the last 15 years. We will provide resources to the Metro Public Health Department to lead efforts to monitor and prevent opioid abuse.

From our seniors to our unhoused population to our low-income citizens, we have to look out for those who don't always have the resources to get by on their own. Nashville has always cared for the least among us, because that's what a caring community does. And we'll continue to do so.

(Pause)

Now it's time to talk about where we need to go as a city. Growth is a good thing that makes good things possible, but it has to be balanced with livability. We have to grow with intention. We have to keep the quality of life in our city front and center at all times so Nashville will feel like home to everyone who chooses to live here.

What does it really mean to be a "livable" city?

It means you feel safe – and it means you are safe.

It means you have faith in our public schools to provide a high-quality education for all children, regardless of their ZIP code.

It means you feel good about the natural environment around you, and you are confident we're doing everything we can to protect the air you breathe and the water you drink while preserving green space and adding to our tree canopy. In fact, our plan for becoming the greenest city in the Southeast is called Livable Nashville.

And it means that if you want to live here, you can afford to live here, and you can move around the city efficiently and effectively and get where you need to go.

Nashville is one of the most livable cities anywhere. But we have a lot of work to do to keep it that way.

Underpinning everything we do is public safety, and when I think about public safety I use the following as my guide:

Every Nashvillian deserves to live in a safe community.

Every Nashvillian deserves to feel safe in his or her community, regardless of economic status, skin color or what country he or she may have come from.

And I trust our police department to protect and serve all Nashvillians equally.

Nashville has an excellent police department, led by Chief Steve Anderson. The men and women on the force engage with citizens across the city at every opportunity. And they keep us safe. But we can always do better.

One of the things I've heard overwhelmingly is that Nashvillians would like more community policing. Many of us remember a time when we knew officers' names and could speak to them directly while walking down the sidewalk. We want to see that happen again.

And community policing represents much more than just policing. When we talked to residents of the Napier-Sudekum community, the conversation quickly moved from policing to livability and pride in where they live. These things are all wrapped up together.

So my budget proposal will include money to hire 22 new police officers for foot patrol. These officers will increase the familiarity between police and citizens across the city, which is essential to reducing crime and enhancing public safety.

We're also a growing city. Since 2010, Nashville's population has grown more than 9%, but our police force has grown just 5%. We're trying to close that gap. We need more officers so we can reduce call times and deal with situations more quickly. So we're going to hire 48 new officers to serve in the 8 precincts. Combined with the 22 foot patrols, this will add 70 new officers to make our police even more engaged with the neighborhoods they serve and protect.

We also need to give our officers another tool for transparency. I'll be allocating money in my capital spending plan for police body cameras, dashboard cameras and new laptops. Once these purchases are approved by the Metro Council, my office will work with Chief Anderson to ensure officers are using this equipment as quickly as possible.

(Pause)

When we think about the future of our city, we think about the quality of our schools and what they do to prepare our children for college and career.

The operating budget I'll submit to the council will include a 36 million dollar – or a 4.3% – increase for Metro Schools. That's a bigger increase than last year's. This budget is about preparing our young people for the future, both short-term and long-term. We want all our kids to read on grade level. We want to make sure New American students learn English and become multilingual citizens. We want to retain more of our best teachers, and we want to teach kids the social and emotional skills that are critical for success in life.

We're lucky to have Dr. Shawn Joseph as our director of schools, and we're here to support him and all the educators in Metro. My office and other community partners will continue to work with Metro Schools to increase access to high-quality pre-K; to give new teachers more housing options; to boost struggling schools, and to increase college-going rates.

If we can do these things right, if we can match our aspirations with our execution, there is no limit to what we can do for this and future generations of students.

(Pause)

Growth has brought many exciting opportunities to our city, but it's also made it difficult for many residents to stay here. Companies that are looking to come to Nashville have noticed, too, and they often ask me if enough housing will be available for their employees.

The demand for housing has raised prices throughout the city, and we've responded by attacking the problem on multiple fronts. We are trying to fund, build, preserve and retain housing options. People who want to live here should be able to live here.

In keeping with my promise to put 40 million dollars in the Barnes Fund for Affordable Housing over 4 years, I'm recommending that we put another 10 million dollars in the coming year's budget. But 10 million dollars is not just 10 million dollars. In January the Housing Trust Fund Commission and the Metro Council approved applications from not-for-profit developers to take this year's 10 million dollars and leverage that into more than 55 million dollars in non-Metro funds to create or preserve 381 units. We now have more than 900 units in the pipeline.

I believe Nashville is ready for more innovation in the housing field, and we're going to do two things. The first is a 25 million dollar general obligation bond fund that the city will use to buy and rehab low-income housing that's at risk of becoming unaffordable. This fund would also let Metro build or preserve affordable housing on city-owned property.

The second piece of this will let Metro offer property tax abatements to incentivize developers to build affordable units or rehab existing units. Along with the Housing Incentive Pilot Program, which started this year, we believe there's a need to go deeper to preserve and build new housing for lower-income Nashvillians.

Income diversity within neighborhoods is a kind of diversity we need more of in Nashville. I know you all have heard of NIMBYism, right? That means Not in My Back Yard.

Well, we need YIMBYism in Nashville, and we need it now. That means Yes in My Back Yard.

It means yes, I want to live in a mixed-income neighborhood.

It means yes, I want workforce housing on my street for the new Metro police officers, firefighters, teachers, and creatives who make our city tick.

It means yes, I want to live next door to people who may look different from me or speak another language.

And it means yes, I want transit-oriented development in my neighborhood.

(pause)

So now let's talk about transit. Because I know you're already talking about it. If I go to a meeting and someone doesn't mention transit or transportation or traffic in the first couple of minutes, then I know I'm not in Nashville.

We're all talking about it, and we all need to be, because we're all in traffic together. And we're all in the fight to fix it together. If we don't fix it, the growth that I've been talking about, the growth that makes so many things possible for our community, can slip away, and it's going to be really difficult to get it back.

Because in a city where many people want to live, some will always want to drive. Some will want to bike, walk, ride-share, or use city transportation to get back and forth.

Our job is to accommodate all of them – and it will take all modes, working together, to make any of them succeed and make it easier to get around. There is no stand-alone fix.

We have to support many Nashvillians going in many directions, and it's a long process to make sure that this happens. But there are things we can do today that will help, and we've already started. We've already synchronized 550 traffic signals on 18 major pikes and corridors. I heard you when you said how maddening it was to keep running up against those red lights, and since we synchronized those lights, I've heard back from you about how much this has helped with your commutes – and your sanity!

Metro Public Works' data confirms what you've already been telling me. The average travel delay on these pikes and corridors has been reduced approximately 24%, and Nashville drivers will save an estimated 830,000 gallons of gasoline in the next year. That's more than 1.8 million dollars that you're not going to have to spend on gas.

We've also started working to make the most dangerous intersections safer and install more crosswalks in the middle of blocks. We've also made equity and safety part of the formula for deciding where we'll build sidewalks first.

Equity also has to be the lens through which we look at transit. I'm announcing today that we're going to help the people who need transit the most by eliminating the transfer fees MTA riders pay when they have to change buses to complete a trip. We need to provide more access for the many citizens who depend on our bus system to navigate their daily lives. We have to make it easier for people to get around when it's the only way they can get around.

We'll also invest in updating our bus system. And we're going to give MTA the largest single-year increase it's ever received. If we're going to have a big-city transit system, we've got to get the basics right. We've got to provide easy, clean, and efficient transit.

Many of you who are watching or listening today may have no plans to ever use transit. But the point is to create options for all residents that improve the transportation network, no matter how you get around.

My capital spending plan will include 65 million dollars for sidewalks and road paving; an additional 3 million dollars just for sidewalks to make it easier for children to walk to schools, and 2 million dollars for bikeways, which will double this year's amount.

(pause)

On Monday I was thrilled to see the Tennessee General Assembly pass the IMPROVE Act, which will improve bridges and highways such as 440. Most importantly, it will also give voters the chance to decide our transit future. Thank you to Governor Haslam and all the lawmakers who supported his plan, especially those in our Davidson County delegation, for stepping up and getting this done.

What they did was so important, because here's the deal: We can't fund the transit system we need through the normal budget process. We need dedicated revenue that will sustain a long-term investment in a comprehensive transit system, which will be the biggest thing Nashville has ever done. The nMotion plan calls for 6 billion dollars of transit investment across the region. Just to put this into perspective, that is 10 Music City Centers, and it's going to be more complicated than building a convention center.

Before we can build the transit system that Nashville needs, we've got to get the funding, and today is the kickoff. We plan to take a transit funding plan to the voters in 2018. But there's some important work to do before we can even hold that referendum. So we'll be working hard over the next year to ensure the nMotion plan is equitable. And we're going to make sure voters understand we have a strong plan – and that we know what it takes to complete it.

Before you make an investment, you have to know what kind of return you can expect. We're going to make sure voters know so they can make an informed decision, because we simply have to get this right.

One component of the transit system we'll be talking about will be light rail – trains that run on exclusive right of way in high-volume areas, moving passengers faster than cars can. Plans have identified 5 corridors where high-capacity rail is needed to accommodate the population we can expect over the next 25 years: Charlotte Pike, Gallatin Pike, Murfreesboro Pike, Nolensville Pike and the Northwest Corridor, which will go through North Nashville all the way to Clarksville.

All of these corridors are excellent candidates for high-capacity transit, and building all of them will be critical to improving transit in our region. We're working on preliminary plans for all of them.

But we cannot break ground on every corridor simultaneously – and we cannot wait another year to start the process of building our first light rail.

And we can't wait for a referendum before we start designing high-capacity transit. The time to get started is now.

So I'm very happy to announce that today the work begins to create light rail service on the Gallatin Pike corridor. I'm excited to have the city start the process of making light rail available to our citizens. I'd drive across the river and put a shovel in the ground this afternoon if I could – and I might just do it anyway!

We are ready to start on Gallatin Pike today.

I know we could spend the next year studying and debating where to build first. But there are many good reasons to start on Gallatin Pike. It already carries the most mass transit riders in the region. Development along that corridor has demonstrated a market for the mixed-use, transit-oriented type of development that will be necessary to make light rail successful. Many of the neighborhoods that surround Gallatin Pike have extensive sidewalk networks. And the nMotion planning process showed those neighborhoods support comprehensive mass transit along the corridor.

We have plenty of work to do before we send that first train down the line. This process won't be quick or easy. It will involve detailed planning and land acquisition. There will be some arguments, there's going to be some hiccups, and there's going to be some headaches. We'll have to have honest conversations, and some people aren't going to be happy with every decision.

But it's time to get moving. We have to move forward. We have to act now to prevent congestion from threatening our prosperity and compromising our quality of life.

Nashville cannot wait any longer to embrace our future. We will be a 21st-century, transit-oriented city, and we are not going to look back 10 years from now and say we failed when we had to succeed.

We've always embraced the future, and it's time to do that again. We're confident we'll do it again.

We have nothing to be afraid of! Nashville is really good at this. We are a community that looks forward. We are a community that accepts challenges, takes risks and makes the right decisions.

Whether it was creating a new kind of government, saying no to the forces of hate and division, or becoming a major league sports city – when given a chance to vote, Nashvillians have said yes, we will do it.

I say this all the time: Metro Government cannot do this alone. To get this done, we need everyone: Metro Council members, transit advocates, every chamber of commerce, neighborhood leaders, people sitting in traffic, and all of you.

When faced with decisions about Nashville's growth, we've always made the right choice, and we will do it again – together.

Thank you.