**State of the City**

**Mayor Dean Trantalis**

**October 14, 2024**

**The Parker**

Good evening and thank you for joining us.

 At this time, I’d like to ask you to please rise for the presentation of colors by the Fort Lauderdale Police Department Honor Guard.

Please remain standing and welcome Madison Fraser, a senior at Dillard High School’s Center for the Performing Arts. She will sing the National Anthem.

 Wasn’t that amazing? Thank you, Madison!

 Honor Guard, you may now be dismissed.

 I now invite the Rev. Stephan Tchividjian, founder and president of National Christian Foundation of South Florida, to the stage for the invocation.

Thank you, Stephan. That was beautiful.

 It’s great to be back at The Parker. It is such a wonderful facility and now an officially recognized Florida Heritage site.

 It’s my honor to recognize Vice Mayor Steve Glassman and commissioners John Herbst, Pamela Beasley-Pittman and Warren Sturman as well as Acting City Manager Susan Grant, City Attorney Tom Ansbro, City Clerk David Soloman and City Auditor Pat Reilly. Let’s give them all a round of applause for their dedication and hard work.

Let’s also take a moment before we begin to remember the tragic loss of life and property across the South as a result of Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Our emergency responders and public works crews put in long hours to make sure we were ready for Milton, but thankfully, we were only brushed by the very outer edge. Some of our rescue personnel are already upstate rendering assistance.

2024 has been a year of remarkable progress for the city of Fort Lauderdale. Here’s just some of the excitement that we will discuss in more detail tonight...

 In January, we broke ground on the construction of a new water treatment plant. Now, as we near the end of the year, we are opening the renovated War Memorial Auditorium through a partnership with the Florida Panthers. Wasn’t it great to get a sneak peek inside for our reception?

Soon, we will open the new Las Olas Marina. And on Oct. 18, we will unveil our completely transformed D.C. Alexander Park.

Too often, we don’t pause and recognize the extraordinary successes being made.

The accomplishments can become lost among everyone’s busy schedules or they don’t fit the current mold of media sensationalism. And sometimes, they unfairly fall victim to the increasingly divisive world of gotcha politics.

Let’s celebrate the improvements that have occurred and the accelerated pace at which we’ve addressed challenges. We are FTL. We have become known as a can-do community. Let’s keep up the great work and tremendous progress!

Did you know that in the past six years, we’ve committed an investment of more than $1.6 billion directly to infrastructure upgrades? We listened to our neighbors. Our utility systems and flood controls are being rapidly modernized to bring the best level of service possible to our neighborhoods and businesses.

 In fact, in just the past 12 months, since my last State of the City address, we have launched more than $321 million in water and sewer improvements and $70 million in stormwater improvements alone.

These are serious investments to deal with serious challenges – challenges we will meet and beat.

And, did you know that Fort Lauderdale has led the way in Broward County in addressing home affordability and homelessness? Or that our efforts to maintain clean waterways surpass any nearby community? It’s true.

Also, we’ve added more police officers and firefighters and are paying them good salaries to keep them on the job. And get this. We accomplished all of this without any increase to our property tax rate, now going on 18 years in a row.

 When I meet municipal leaders from around the country, I’m often asked what our secret is.

 Almost every major city faces the problem of aging infrastructure. But we have additional burdens. We are a coastal community impacted by climate change. And, we are part of a state that is attracting 1,000 new residents every day. No. We can’t put barricades at the Georgia border and tell people to stop moving here.

 We’ve been successful because of a shared vision for our community. Also, we have neighbors and businesses who care and get involved. You’ve helped chart this forward-looking course for Fort Lauderdale. And we have had a dedicated city staff and private partners who expedited work and helped find the best solutions — getting projects done faster than anyone thought possible.

Let me delve into the details with you, starting with infrastructure.

It’s hard to say that anything is more important to a community than a solid, dependable infrastructure — the ability to deliver clean water, dispose of sewage and prevent flooding.

Not so long ago, Fort Lauderdale neglected its infrastructure and diverted money from water and sewer reserves to pay for other needs. We put an end to those practices. Now, we’re turning the corner, ensuring we have the infrastructure that meets the demands of a growing city well into the future.

 At the State of the City a year ago, I announced Fortify Lauderdale, an ambitious plan to accelerate stormwater projects across the city. That’s on top of work to improve our water and sewer systems.

Fort Lauderdale’s stormwater system was largely built in the 1960s and ’70s. It was designed to accommodate about 3 inches of rain over a 24-hour period. Large portions of the city were totally dependent on water percolating into the ground and lacked any strategic drainage.

That is no longer is acceptable.

We are increasingly targeted by intense storms, storms we were only supposed to see once in a thousand years. Under our new design standards, our stormwater systems are designed to handle 10 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. That’s more than tripling the system capacity!

 Projects include a wide variety of infrastructure features — more catch basins and connected underground pipes, larger pipes, tidal-control valves, pollution control baffles, water-quality devices, enhanced swales, pump stations and better seawalls.

A lot of attention is focused on the low-lying neighborhoods that endured heavy flooding in April 2023. We took immediate action and now are working on the future.

When water rose up the walls of people’s homes and many houses had to be abandoned, we acted quickly. We brought to bear the resources of the county, state, and the federal government to help the folks most in need. FEMA wrote checks to those who had no place to live and no funds to rebuild. That took direct, bold action. I got on a plane and personally met with White House officials to make sure our community was prioritized. We got the attention, resources and manpower needed right then, not weeks and months later.

I remain deeply grateful to the state and federal government officials who swiftly answered my requests and gave us the help we needed.

Now, we are working on the future.

Improvements in Edgewood and River Oaks are substantially complete – an investment of more than $56 million. Underground systems in River Oaks have been updated and the completion of new pump stations will occur within 60 days.

Osceola Creek, which overflowed into surrounding neighborhoods, has been dredged to reduce flooding risk. Still, more work needs to be done to ensure the creek does not flood in the future and again threaten nearby residents. I call upon Broward County to improve the drainage system at the international airport and the state to redirect drainage off of I-595 rather than flood our adjacent neighborhoods. It needs to be done.

Another $46 million in construction is ongoing in the Durrs and Dorsey-Riverbend neighborhoods and will be completed in the next year. The replacement of six seawalls in the southeastern Isles area is substantially complete. Over the next 12 months, we will go out for bid on upgrading stormwater systems in Progresso Village, the Southeast Isles and Victoria Park, while we complete design engineering of capacity improvements in Melrose Manors and Riverland.

As part of the Fortify Lauderdale initiative, we’ve started initial work on a second set of neighborhoods and are fast-tracking the plans through design, permitting and construction. Once completed, this initiative will provide a majority of the city, including our most flood-prone neighborhoods, with significant stormwater capacity upgrades.

I know that the design and construction of these projects can seem frustratingly long, particularly when you don’t know what tomorrow’s weather will bring. In that regard, our city public works department has stepped up its disaster-preparedness strategies to respond faster and more efficiently.

We’ve been tested twice this year – the June storm that dumped nine inches of rain in 24 hours and last week’s Hurricane Milton. Our public works crews flew into action both times to protect our community.

They identified issues and deployed resources, including temporary pumps and vacuum trucks to protect our most vulnerable neighborhoods. The new pumps proved effective in supporting our response.

We are moving as fast as possible and have reversed the attitude of indifference to a can-do momentum, making us now one of the most resilient coastal cities in the nation!

Our water and sewer systems also continue to undergo major upgrades. Since I became mayor six years ago, the city has constructed more than 19 miles of water pipe and 17 miles of sewer main. The city also is boosting sewer capacity by better preventing the infiltration of stormwater runoff and groundwater into the pipes.

At the beginning of the year, we broke ground on one of the most significant components of our effort to upgrade our utility infrastructure — the construction of the Prospect Lake Clean Water Center to replace the aging and outdated Fiveash plant.

This state-of-the-art facility will provide clean, clear, high-quality drinking water to our community for generations to come. To be more clear: no longer will any resident have discolored drinking water. It is time – and we are getting it done.

This plant is designed to withstand the winds of a Category 5 hurricane. It will also remove contaminants that health experts and scientists have become increasingly concerned about, including PFAs and other toxic chemicals.

And Prospect Lake is another great example of how the city has leveraged innovative public-private partnerships.

We teamed up with companies that have international expertise in water plant construction and management. In addition to building the plant, they will operate it under strict city supervision for the next 30 years.

We expect construction to be completed within 36 months. In fact, we are already a third of the way there!

Another major improvement underway is the replacement of more than 58,000 old water meters with modern, solid-state technology. These meters will be more accurate and will provide customers the ability to monitor and control their water consumption. And if there is a leak or some other anomaly, we will know immediately instead learning about it when it’s too late.

As important as infrastructure is, so is the safety of our community. We have made strong strides in improving our police, fire and EMS services.

Public safety has been a huge concern nationally, but did you know that serious violent crime is actually down in our city? According to our Police Department, there has been an 8 percent decrease in robbery and a 28 percent decrease in homicides over the past five years.

We have added 37 sworn police officers and 47 firefighters in that timespan. Within the 2025 budget, we fund an innovative recruitment program in the Police Department to assist with filling vacant positions. And with the additional firefighters, we can deploy more three-person rescue units to increase EMS coverage.

Just this past month, we had some really good news about public safety from two of our members of Congress. Representatives Jared Moskowitz and Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick announced that they had secured for Fort Lauderdale a $11.4 million grant for Fire Rescue. This funding will support the hiring of 28 more firefighters – that's on top of the personnel additions we’ve made on our own.

This is a significant investment in the safety and well-being of our residents. According to the fire chief, these additional firefighters will improve the department’s level of service and ensure higher survivability for our patients.

Please join me in thanking Representatives Moskowitz and Cherfilus-McCormick for their assistance in making this happen.

The budget also funds a pilot program to use new technology to catch speeders in school zones. We want our children to be as safe as possible as they go to and from school.

Every corner of our city should feel safe, and we are determined to end a rash of shootings in our Northwest neighborhoods. I’m pleased that our new police chief, Bill Schultz is taking aggressive action to end this unacceptable level of gun violence.

 He has reorganized the department to prioritize this fight. A new Gun Intelligence Unit works alongside other divisions in employing cutting-edge tools including the ShotSpotter gunshot detection system as they seek to bring this evil to an end.

The chief is also launching new partnerships to tap knowledge in violence interruption and intervention. These groups work to build community relationships and intervene before young individuals engage in crime.

And our Police Department is building better bonds with our residents. As a result of my participation in a leadership program run by the Kennedy School at Harvard University and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s charitable foundation, the city has been working on an initiative on improving the public’s perception of safety – and making it a reality.

I’m proud of our Police Department and the men and women who work hard every day to protect our families and our property. They soon will have a new home.

Construction of our new police station is well underway and will be completed next year. Flaws made by the design firm are being fixed at their expense, and the new facility will be as safe as possible for our law enforcement personnel.

The new facility will meet modern public safety needs with updated technology and better access to training. The old headquarters was 60 years old and considered obsolete. I can’t wait to cut the ribbon for this long-overdue improvement.

Our response capabilities in Fire Rescue have continued to improve as well.

Fire Station 13 on the barrier island has relocated to a temporary home while a new station is built next to Birch State Park. A new Station 88 serving Rio Vista and other areas south of the New River is entering the design stage. Work is set to begin in early 2025 on Station 117 just off Las Olas Boulevard.

Any discussion of public safety is not complete without addressing the problem of homelessness. No one can look around South Florida and not be concerned.

The city has worked for years to deal with homelessness compassionately by identifying housing options and enhancing opportunities to help the less fortunate of our society overcome the underlying reasons for their situation.

 Frankly, we have gone much further in our efforts than any surrounding community. But we are at a crossroads where public health and safety are being impacted negatively despite our best efforts.

Last year alone, the Police Department and Fire Rescue responded to more than 11,200 calls related to homelessness.

I share the public’s frustration with the aggressive panhandling and the number of people camping on the streets, bus benches and outside businesses. No one wants to criminalize homelessness, but a get-tough approach is necessary.

The city of Fort Lauderdale has made substantial progress on a bold new initiative in recent weeks. The state has mandated municipalities across Florida to become more assertive in dealing with this national crisis, and we are determined to lead the way.

Let it be known that we will help those who want help. But… we will not tolerate behavior that harms our overall community and threatens neighbors and businesses.

Our approach combines an elevated effort to provide assistance with an increased power of law enforcement. Along these lines, we have passed new ordinances prohibiting aggressive panhandling and camping on public property.

In fact, our camping ordinance is tougher than what the state sought cities to do. The Legislature wanted overnight camping banned, but our regulation applies 24/7. Our approach is common sense – if something is a problem overnight, it is the same problem during the day.

It’s not that we are looking for conflict. But if people disobey and reject offers of assistance, we will use all options possible to safeguard this community. Even then, our goal would be to get them the needed help after they’ve been detained.

A key part of this is the expansion of our current Community Court program.

In it, homeless individuals cited with minor offenses can be diverted from the normal legal process and receive critical social services such as mental health assistance or substance abuse treatment. It also avoids their having a criminal record, something that would otherwise plague them as they seek gainful employment.

As part of our new initiative, we are discussing the opening of a full-service homeless assistance center to coordinate help. And we are leading discussions with the county, nonprofits and religious organizations about how to increase the amount of shelter space as soon as possible.

There are only 612 shelter beds available countywide, but the county’s own data shows that there are 2,487 homeless individuals in Broward. So, homelessness is not just a Fort Lauderdale problem, it’s a Miramar problem, a Sunrise problem, a Lauderhill problem and a problem for all the rest of Broward’s 31 cities. We must come together and do better.

Regrettably, we bear a larger burden than other communities.

As the county seat, we are home to the main jail and the main hospital so homeless people from throughout the area are discharged onto our streets regardless of where they came from.

We must put an end to this process, now.  When homeless are discharged from the hospital or the jail, there should be ways to ensure they return to their point of origin rather than land in Fort Lauderdale’s neighborhoods.

Make no mistake about it. We will get it done! When I came into the office of the mayor, one of our first actions was to close the homeless encampment by the main county library. We will get it done again — this time citywide.

We are up to the challenge. With tenacity and determination, we will make sure our streets are safer than ever.

It’s important because our community has so much to offer.

Our motto has long been that Fort Lauderdale is a great place to live, work and play. What we have to offer residents and visitors is truly remarkable.

 We are far more than our beaches and warm weather. We are becoming known around the world as a cosmopolitan community that has so many amazing things to enjoy.

We started with the construction of our soccer complex with the Inter Miami professional soccer team.

The stadium was built at no cost to the taxpayers and is now owned by the city. The project included not just the stadium and facilities for the team, but a youth soccer academy and a football field for our high schools — all funded by the team as well. Construction will soon begin on an adjacent city park, with a dog area, playing fields and a community center. We are finishing the design as we speak.

Then came the reconstruction of our world-renowned aquatic center and its new iconic dive tower. It is the tallest regulation tower in this hemisphere. Best of all, the center is open to the public seven days a week. While I might take a dip in the pool, I’ll leave the tower to others who are a bit more daring.

Now, look at what has occurred in the past year beyond those signature projects.

We’ve entered an agreement with the Orange Bowl Committee to upgrade the Jimmy Evert Tennis Center in Holiday Park. Their financial support combined with money from our parks bond program will build a stadium court with seating, upgrade other tennis courts, install LED lighting and add an electronic scoreboard.

The next phase of the aquatic center renovation is set to begin. A new International Swimming Hall of Fame museum will complement the award-winning, world-class Aquatic Center and bookend the peninsula in stunning fashion.

Construction is almost complete on a major pickleball center in response to the sport’s growing popularity. The center will feature 43 professional courts and a dedicated pickleball stadium along with a fitness-recovery center, locker rooms, pro shop, and 14 weatherproof courts for casual and competitive play. It also reclaims a once-abandoned water-filled rock pit to create a beach for recreation as well as a beautiful restaurant. The place will be amazing.

 This project is being built on an unused portion of Snyder Park bordered by Interstate 595 and does not impact its magnificent natural areas. The center is completely financed privately with no use of our tax dollars.

And of course, there is where we just were for tonight’s reception – War Memorial Auditorium and the adjacent Baptist Health IcePlex.

We opened the IcePlex earlier this year and soon will have the official grand opening of War Memorial. These major undertakings came about through a unique arrangement with the Florida Panthers hockey team.

The Panthers built the IcePlex to house their training facility along with two ice rinks that are available to the public. Since the start of summer, the popularity of the center has been beyond our imagination. Hundreds of kids and families have come to skate and participate in amateur hockey leagues. It’s also where I saw Game 7 of the Stanley Cup and witnessed our team win. Where were you that night?

As Phase 2, the Panthers transformed the 70-year-old War Memorial Auditorium into a state-of-the art event and performance space. Didn’t they do an incredible job remaking one of our iconic gathering spaces and giving it new life and new purpose?

In many ways, it surpasses its original luster. It will be home to graduations, concerts, garden shows and other family-friendly programming for decades to come. And yes, the orchid show will be coming back. I can’t wait to see the first event!

Just as is important is the cost of operating the building. In the past, the city was hemorrhaging almost $1 million a year to operate the building. Now, the Panthers and LiveNation will run the facility and bear the costs.

All in all, the city has leveraged its real estate assets and by joining with private partners, our community is now the beneficiary of more than one-third of a billion dollars worth of improvements that children and families will be able to enjoy for generations to come.

Isn’t that all incredible progress for our community?

Who would have imagined 10 years ago that Fort Lauderdale would be the place where Leo Messi and a team owned by David Beckham would make the Major League Soccer playoffs and where the Florida Panthers would celebrate their first ever Stanley Cup victory.

Let’s pause to take a look at a short video of that wonderful moment.

Wasn’t that an amazing parade on Fort Lauderdale’s beach?

But that’s not all. There are improvements occurring across our park system.

An overhaul of D.C. Alexander Park will shortly be unveiled. With the assistance of world-class designers and an amazing construction team, the park will host an iconic structure that is intended to be an observatory overlooking our beautiful beach. Let me tell you – it will be a real head-turner.

Construction has commenced on a re-imagination of Huizenga Park. This will be a distinctive gathering place used from morning through the evening. There will be a civic lawn, a picturesque fountain, terraces and a river overlook. There will be a new fine dining restaurant – adding to the city’s growing reputation as a center of great cuisine.

We’re also adding 230 new canopy trees, flowering trees and palms, 58 new plant species and more than13,500 new plants. That’s tripling the amount of natural shade.

This project celebrates the legacy of Wayne and Marti Huizenga as well as the generations of community leaders that set the stage for downtown’s renaissance.

Huizenga Park Reimagined will be downtown’s signature park — for everyone, forever.

Through the parks bond program that voters approved in 2019, we have already upgraded many parks citywide. Bond improvements in 47 other parks are in various stages of design, permitting and construction.

We also have purchased land to add parks for the Bal Harbour and Sailboat Bend neighborhoods And, I am proud to report that we have now successfully negotiated the reopening of Dottie Mancini Park with the Broward Health system.

We have a truly tremendous parks system.

While we add all these new amenities, we cannot lose sight of what has always made Fort Lauderdale special — its environment.

We are the Venice of America and are known around the world for our beautiful waterways. Our tourism advertising talks about a vacation paradise from the sawgrass to the seagrass. We have to do our utmost to be the best environmental stewards we can possibly be.

Did you know that Fort Lauderdale has earned national recognition for its environmental practices, honored with LEED Gold certification?

In fact, we have put in place the most aggressive waterway cleanup program of any city in the region. Using a boat that operates five days a week, we service our 165 miles of waterways every single month.

But we are going even further. Beginning this new budget year, we have signed a contract with a stated target of removing 50 percent more debris and hitting hot spot areas every two weeks.

Among our recent environmental accomplishments are implementing of National Pollution Discharge Elimination System requirements, expanding our weekly water quality monitoring program to 12 locations, dredging the Himmarshee Canal and adding six new water quality structures in critical locations. We also have to funded a chief waterways officer, who will coordinate our efforts to maintain and improve this precious part of our environment.

But there’s more!

When it comes to our beloved tree canopy, we have been recognized by Tree City USA for 43 years for our commitment to community forestry and have obtained the Tree City USA Growth Award nine times. We just passed an ordinance to better preserve our canopy. And, I have challenged us to plant 10,000 net new trees over the next decade. We are well on our way.

 At our executive airport, we have committed to a plan to reduce lead emissions. And the city has set a goal to achieve net zero on greenhouse emissions, becoming a truly sustainable city.

Just as important as our environment is the preservation of our neighborhoods.

Even as the city grows and matures, we must maintain the great feeling of community that we have in our neighborhoods. Our neighborhoods bring people and families together with their quiet, peaceful environs. Each offers its unique characteristics and history.

Don’t we all love our amazing community?

This year, we ensured our neighborhoods were protected from the prospect of unregulated vacation rentals.

We helped lead the fight in Tallahassee to persuade the governor to reject a controversial piece of legislation. If it had become law, the city would have lost the little authority that we already have. The city must be able to impose sensible regulations to protect year-round residents from party houses.

The City Commission will soon vote on new regulations to better protect people from the impact of loud music and other amplified sound from nearby residential and commercial settings. We are determined to strengthen these requirements as residents have asked.

We’ve approved a strategic historic preservation plan, won state aid to improve Breakers Avenue, are working on safety improvements on Galt Mile Street and are collaborating with the state and county to add new crosswalks downtown.

We have upgraded the streetscape along State Road A1A on the Central Beach. We also are adding dozens of new streetlights around the city.

In conjunction with residents living there who came up with the money, we have completed the undergrounding of utility lines in the Las Olas Isles neighborhood. It’s part of our effort to build a more resilient city and protect neighborhoods from the advent of climate change and more intense storms.

Along Las Olas Boulevard, we are moving ahead with plans to beautify the corridor. And yes, we are committed to finding ways to incorporate the tree-lined median while improving the experience for customers to the shops and restaurants.

 Finally, the city is working on a comprehensive plan to upgrade our sidewalks. We will find ways to fund this needed work. Walkability in our neighborhoods is important, and we will improve it!

Let us turn now to a couple challenges that we face as a city — starting with traffic and transportation.

Traffic will always be a concern for any growing area.

Unfortunately, Fort Lauderdale is largely at the mercy of other governments that are in charge of our major thoroughfares and highways and mass transit systems. As a city, we have made headway in improving transportation where possible.

We worked with Broward County to undertake an upgrade of traffic signals synchronization, with the county committing money from its transportation surtax for the work.

They plan to deploy new adaptive signal control technology that is more responsive to traffic conditions. Seven such projects are planned in Fort Lauderdale between now and 2026, including Broward Boulevard, Sunrise Boulevard, Commercial Boulevard and Southeast 17 Street.

In addition, the county is retiming traffic signals on key streets, including A1A and Federal Highway. That’s great news and should help reduce congestion.

I’m sure you’ve all seen the new convention center hotel emerging out of the ground. The convention center is also expanding. It is a truly world-class project.

As part of the process and at our insistence, the county is building a bypass road through Port Everglades to relieve traffic on 17th Street. It is expected to open shortly before the hotel. And let there be no mistake about it. That road must be completed and operational before the city will allow the hotel to open.

In our downtown, we have reached the design stage of a concept for turning Andrews Avenue and Northeast 3rd Avenue into a loop of one-way streets south of Sunrise Boulevard. The original idea was that this could improve traffic flow and allow for the start-up of a downtown trolley. But nothing has been approved, and we need your input on whether this project should move forward or not.

We are working on multiple traffic-calming projects, including one on Riverland Road and a major undertaking in South Middle River. We have expanded our LauderGo community shuttle operations — an easy, free and convenient service for our residents and visitors. It’s taking cars off our roads!

Of course, I cannot discuss transportation in our community without providing an update on a matter that I think is of utmost importance to the future of the city. And that is how the planned regional commuter rail system crosses through downtown.

Commuter rail is one of the few options available to making a major dent in congestion across the region. With connections between Miami and West Palm Beach, commuter rail can provide relief to overwhelmed north-south corridors such as I-95.

It could be a real game-changer, a long-term traffic solution — offering easy access to the major ports and airports as well as city centers throughout the three counties.

As I have said for years, the real question is how the train system crosses the New River without harming our vitally important marine industry, increasing street-level congestion or reversing the great successes we have made in building a downtown.

The county continues to want to build a high-rise bridge. Their current plan is for a 48-foot-high bridge for passenger service and two new water-level bridges for freight service.

But let’s get real here. No matter how pretty they make it look, it will decimate the ongoing renaissance downtown that we have spent decades creating. It also will create a permanent wall between communities that for too long have been divided.

I simply do not believe their design. Hey, I’m no Pythagoras. They say it can rise 48 feet over the river at an incline acceptable for trains — 3 to 4 percent — without passing above Broward Boulevard or closing that street. That’s hard to believe.

Moreover, they would use all of the existing railroad right-of-way. Some of our new downtown residents would have rail cars running mere inches from their balconies. And, our historic district? Well, forget about it. It would sit in the shadows of a concrete and steel overhang. We can do better than that.

 So many trains would crisscross Broward Boulevard and other streets daily that traffic would come to almost a round-the-clock standstill. They say: “Oh, we’ll build an underpass later on Broward.” Later? When is that?

They also don’t include the cost of a new train station to service the commuter line. Why not have a real price comparison? All of these new bridges, the underpass, the train station. How much does it add up to?

Another problem: you would need to close Broward Bouelvard for two years for construction. Think about that for a second. Two years?

And the marine industry?

Well, I’m not sure it would survive. Boatyards upriver have told us that they would have major difficulty servicing large boats if the bridge planned by the county is built. If they move their operations to other cities or even other states, there goes thousands of jobs and billions in economic impact.

We deserve better. Let’s keep up the fight for the only real solution — and that is a tunnel.

The consequences of the choice between a tunnel and a bridge are too important for short-sighted, narrow-minded thinking.

We can get it done. Federal funding is available. Members of Congress will help. And there are potential private partners out there who know how to do it.

Just look to our south. The Port of Miami tunnel was built ahead of schedule and less than its projected cost. If it can happen there, it can work here, too! We must stay committed to getting this done!

Another challenge we face as a city is the affordability of housing.

 As with traffic, infrastructure and homelessness, this is a problem for every major city in our nation. I can tell you, though, that Fort Lauderdale has been a leader in South Florida in the creation of housing that is affordable to average workers and families.

Yes, it’s true. Even the county acknowledges that! In fact, we have built more affordable housing in the last six years than all the other cities in the county combined!

We must maintain a diversity of housing.

Teachers, nurses, bank tellers and waiters must be able to afford to live here and not grapple with hours-long commutes from distant suburbs. We want to be a place where someone fresh from college can launch a career as well as a place where a senior citizen can retire comfortably.

The city has adopted new regulations that, moving forward, require developers who are building mixed-use projects to pay into a city fund to assist with affordable housing or set aside a portion of the project for affordable housing.

We have offered financial and development incentives to the creation of thousands of affordable housing units, among them the recently opened Seven on Seventh. The Adderley, Arcadian, Gallery at FAT Village and Mount Hermon Apartments are under construction, while the New Hope, Wright Dynasty, Aldridge and Laramore projects are in permitting.

In the past year, incentives have been approved for other projects, including 1435 Art Xchange, a senior rental project by HOMES Inc. and an affordable townhouse project by Habitat for Humanity.

One of the ways that Fort Lauderdale is leading is that we created new and innovative funding incentives to encourage workforce housing. One example is Jeff Burns’ The Era project on South Andrews near Broward Health. It is a first-of-its-kind partnership where we give tax breaks for the construction of affordable housing. We are the only city in the county offering this approach.

And our Housing Authority is doing its part, with the recent opening of Poinciana Crossing. It’s also working toward a new workforce housing development in Broadview Park on city-owned property there.

 In the next year, we will continue to look for ways to utilize community redevelopment money to expand housing opportunities that are more affordable than the market-rate products under construction. We also are creating an affordable housing master plan.

We can do it!

Let me now turn to our robust and growing economy. We have been on an amazing trajectory of economic growth — financial stability at the city, an expanding job base, preservation of our key industries and the attraction of new business.

 This month is the start of the city’s new fiscal year and represents the 18th consecutive year that the City Commission has approved a budget without an increase in the property tax rate. This has been accomplished while still meeting all of the major community goals that I’ve discussed so far — improving public safety, upgrading our infrastructure, an aggressive and proactive stance on homelessness, enhancing our environment, and protecting the unique character of our neighborhoods.

 That’s great news for families who struggle to make ends meet.

In fact, Fort Lauderdale is the only city in Broward County that has been able to avoid a tax rate hike for this length of time. During the same period, tax rates in the other municipalities increased an average of 36 percent. We have one of the lowest tax rates in the state for a city our size!

During the past few years, we’ve implemented solid financial strategies that have allowed us to upgrade our credit rating to Triple A status. This allows the city to borrow money for infrastructure projects at lower interest rates. One key element in allowing this to occur was the elimination of the deeply misguided policy of raiding water and sewer reserves to balance the budget.

We stopped that, and we are we better off today.

Tourism remains one of the cornerstones of our economy and is booming. Fort Lauderdale is benefiting from robust demand as the state overall is reporting some of the best tourism numbers in its history.

 We have a growing hotel inventory — not just on the beach but downtown. Downtown Fort Lauderdale has tripled its supply of hotel rooms since 2018 and is positioned to add more, including the ultra-luxury Whitfield that is now under construction.

Soon, we will be back in the business of attracting national and international conventions. Convention planners everywhere are salivating over the soon-to-open expansion of the convention center and its 801-room Omni Hotel late next year.

Another cornerstone of our economy is the marine industry. We have taken significant steps to preserve and expand this business.

For example, the city had been stuck with a horrible deal with the developers of the Bahia Mar on the barrier island. They had all the approvals necessary to pack the peninsula with apartment buildings.

The future of the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show with its annual impact of $1.3 billion was in serious doubt. The prestigious event — the largest outdoor boat show in the world — was being shoved into a parking garage over the objections of its organizers.

Fortunately, we were able to sit down with the developers and come up with a much better plan. We cut the project in half, added a luxury hotel and permanently created an open green space for the public where none existed previously.

Most importantly, we secured the site as the permanent home of the Boat Show. We also established a revenue stream to help pay for city services for decades to come. Almost $1 billion in revenue comes to the city over the lifespan of the agreement.

I was proud to open the first phase of the project last month — the incredible marina village filled with a fabulous array of restaurants for boaters and beachgoers to choose from.

We also are about to cut the ribbon on a major upgrade of the Las Olas Marina. It’s another example of how the city and the private sector can work together to bring about improved opportunities for economic development and exciting amenities for the community.

More than seven years ago, we began discussing our options with neighbors and leaders of our maritime community. We believed the marina was under-utilized and in need of a major facelift.

The new facility doubles the dockage capacity, allowing more and larger vessels to dock there. There will also be restaurants and other features to attract yachters from around the world. We accomplished this by a unique plan to dredge out an old city parking lot, making room for expansion.

 We will remain the center for the marine industry and yachters for decades to come.

We have been working hard to add another major industry to the mix of the local economy.

Florida had once been a major destination for film and television production, but we lost ground because of policy changes at the state level. We’ve been fighting our way back into the attention of Hollywood.

We surpassed the $80 million mark in film permits issued in our city in the past year.

This remarkable achievement enhanced the city’s position with the industry so we can attract more projects. The local economy also benefited through the creation of job opportunities for 2,825 local crew members. These productions included Bad Boys: Ride or Die and commercials for companies such as Volkswagen and Wells Fargo.

Amazing! Right?

Soon, a project will get underway that will accelerate our move into the media industry, taking us to the next level in what we have to offer producers.

Construction will begin next year on a large-scale, high-tech content creation studio complex for movies, TV, streaming, gaming, e-sports, metaverse, 3D web and immersive experiences. Its sound stages and film sets will attract even more film, television and streaming productions as well as the latest immersive content.

This facility will be developed on the old Wingate landfill Superfund site.  The city cleaned up this property decades ago, but we received no interest in it until a group of entertainment executives stepped forward with a one-of-kind partnership offer.

We announced earlier this year that the primary tenant will be Infinite Reality and that the company will create — at current estimates — more than 1,000 high-paying jobs. Those are jobs for our young people — good jobs that will allow more of them to stay here rather than move away.

Just weeks ago, came an additional announcement — that Infinite Reality has formed a partnership with Google. Google’s tech will be part of Infinite Reality’s studio campus project.

The partnership joins together Google's Gemini AI with Infinite Reality's immersive technology to power a wide range of commercial and entertainment content. This is an incredible and exciting step forward for the movie studio project. The movie studio now will be at the forefront of the rapidly developing use of technology in content creation.

I fully expect that this will open the door for more tech and content creation firms to move to the region with good-paying jobs as they take advantage of the presence of the Infinite Reality team and their relationship with Google technology.

This is truly transformative for our city.

Talking about transformative, what about downtown?

In the past year, downtown Fort Lauderdale has added about 3,200 jobs, a 5 percent increase since 2023. This growth is impressive — something most major downtowns yearn for.

Having housing so close to workplaces downtown has lured companies to locate here and encouraged those that were already here to expand. Companies are looking at satisfying environments for employees. Downtown Fort Lauderdale has that with its walkability, homes, office, restaurants, entertainment options and retail shops.

 Yes. We have emerged out of shadow of Miami and West Palm Beach.

 And downtown is family friendly with its share of families with children higher than the urban core of other rising cities like Tampa, Nashville and Austin.

 The number of children under 5 years old living in large cities across the country has been declining by double digits. But not in Fort Lauderdale. One out three families new to our community choose to live downtown.

The Northwest-Sistrunk area has also made tremendous progress through the efforts of our Community Redevelopment Agency. Not only is new housing being built there as I discussed earlier, but older homes have been renovated and new commercial enterprises opened. The YMCA is significant addition, and we continue to add health care and education options to that facility.

 But… Our work there is not complete. The CRA will soon sunset. We must find ways to continue to invest and finish the vision that we have spent so long on making into reality. Extending the term of the CRA would be one option.

Friends, we have phenomenal progress on infrastructure, public safety, the environment, amenities, housing and economic opportunity. Look at how the world envisions us — we’re listed among the best cities to retire, the most fiscally fit cities, the best places to live and the top 18-hour cities … just to name a few.

 We are a vibrant, diverse and growing city.

As I look around, I see a community brimming with pride, resilience and unparalleled spirit. Our city is not just a place on the map. It’s a living, breathing entity driven by the passion and dedication of its people.

As we move forward, let us remember that the strength of Fort Lauderdale lies in its neighbors.

As your mayor alongside my colleagues on the commission, we are committed to progress. We are committed to results. And, we are committed to providing the kind of leadership that gets things done.

Together, we have overcome challenges, celebrated successes, and built a community that stands as a testament to our collective effort and determination. The road ahead is filled with opportunities. With your continued support and involvement, I am confident that we will achieve even greater heights.

Thank you for your unwavering commitment to our city. Together, we are shaping a Fort Lauderdale that will shine brightly for generations to come.

This is an incredible and unique community. When we say “We Are FTL” it’s with an immense sense of pride in our city, our neighbors, our businesses and our employees.

Here’s what We Are FTL means to us…

We are FTL!

May our city continue to thrive and may we all find inspiration in the journey ahead.

Thank you and have a wonderful evening.