

**State of the City**  
**Delivered February 27, 2024**

I am truly honored to be able to bring this State of the City Report tonight. Even though my Mayorship has been non-traditional and limited in time, there are still many things to report and highlight. Bryant has been a growing and thriving city for many years. I am pleased that this has continued even through difficult situations. So, I would like to share my thoughts under four main headings; Collaborating, Constructing, Connecting and Challenging Changes.

**COLLABORATING**

The City of Bryant worked diligently over the past year to successfully complete several major projects in collaboration with municipalities in Saline County. Last week a formal contract was signed between Bryant and eight other municipalities to move forward with the **Saline Regional Public Water Authority**. This effort, to identify and develop a Saline County water source, has been in the works for nearly 30 years. This past week it became a true reality. By joining together, we will be able to supply our citizens with a sustainable source of water with stable pricing. This collaboration will positively affect Bryant and all of Saline county far into the future. Moriah Winkle and Tim Fournier from our Public Works Department were key players in making the contract happen. It has been invaluable to have Bryant so well represented throughout the process.

Additionally, this past year, Chief Minden and Chief Jordan worked collaboratively with the **Saline County Emergency Communications Center** to prepare for and complete a consolidation that is the result of the Arkansas Public Safety Act of 2019, which stated that Public Safety Answering Points (PSAP's) were required to consolidate across the state.

The Bryant Police Department, along with the City Council and Mayor, worked to come to an agreement that would allow Bryant 911 to stay operational, however in September 2022, City Council and the Mayor voted to join the Saline County PSAP and Saline County Emergency Communications Center.

The consolidation will now become official on March 5, 2024. The City of Bryant is working to ensure our citizens have the best possible care and response during a time of need. Working collaboratively is essential for this to happen.

During the past year city personnel were, led by Joy Black, to work collaboratively to **improve data and information systems for the public**. The city financial office implemented a new financial system that allows for better reporting and monitoring, while integrating multiple billing systems that were manual in the past. This will save time and provide for better accountability of resources in the future.

**Bryant Animal Control** worked diligently this past year to achieve the status of being a “No Kill” shelter. This status is now within reach due to the collaborative effort of Tricia Power, Animal Control Director. By partnering with other shelters in state and out of state, Bryant Animal Control has placed more animals in their forever homes. This has resulted in fewer animals being euthanized.

## **CONSTRUCTING**

In 2023 Bryant was busy constructing new opportunities for our citizens. The largest project by far has been the Bryant Parkway. The parkway is on track to be completed by July 2024. When open the parkway will connect the north side of the interstate with the southside of the interstate and will open the corridor all the way to the Saline Regional Airport. This will provide Bryant with new opportunities for smart growth that will bring new resources to our city.

The new tennis and pickle ball courts at Mills Park were completed and named the Boswell Courts in 2023 under the direction of Parks Director Treat. The courts have been used by hundreds of citizens and visitors.

In 2023 we were also able to install a new water metering system along with new meters for each of our direct water clients. The new meters were successfully installed and the new metering system allows clients to access their billing online and monitor their usage in real time.

Our Public Works Department has been busy adding to the amount of work they can do in-house. Last year our staff performed over 2000 feet of pipe bursting in the Stillman/Stivers areas, upgraded street lights, overlaid roads and completed drainage phases in Cambridge Place, Stonepine, Meadow Creek Drive and Dogwood Place. Additionally, they secured funding for two large sewer projects set to begin in 2024.

We still have growth in our city with 96 new residential building permits and 11 new commercial building permits issued. Quality growth is critical in order for a city to have the resources necessary to retain and improve the quality of life.

## **CONNECTING**

One of the critical roles City Hall plays is implementing ways to connect our citizens with each other and with City Officials. Most people would not consider the city budget as a way to connect to the community, but in Bryant this has been the case. Multiple opportunities were offered to the public to give their input into our city budget. I appreciate our Finance Department and other volunteers attending events and meetings to make the public aware of our budget process and to hear their opinions. Our budget book once again earned the Distinguished Budget Presentation award because of its easy to follow format and its public education focus. The budget book is readily available on our city website for anyone interested in learning more.

Another way we connected in 2023 was through the development of a new Master Parks Plan. The process included input from several hundred citizens and out of city limits park visitors. Several community meetings were held to get input on where we want our parks to be in the next 20 years. The plan is available on our city website on the Parks and Recreation page.

Recently the Community Engagement Committee re-grouped and has set a course for engagement between citizens and city offices. This committee started in 2022 but recently gained new purpose and energy. Having a committee focus on the ways we can connect and engage with others will be critical to bringing in the right businesses, developing the most engaging events and identifying new opportunities for our city. This committee is developing their by-laws and goals and I hope will become an official committee of the city by the summer.

Last but not least, the city initiated a new citywide Christmas event in 2023. The new event was very successful and was a collaborative effort between the city, local businesses and the chamber of commerce. The city supports efforts to bring community events to the forefront and provide citizens an opportunity to connect. Additionally, an ordinance allowing for entertainment districts to be developed was passed in 2023. This will allow businesses and organizations to develop events that are structured in a variety of ways.

## **CHALLENGING CHANGES**

While the past year has had many successes, it has also come with several changes that have presented challenges. The changing work environment in the state and nation have placed the burden on many organizations to increase budgets in order to attract and retain personnel. Bryant was no different. In an effort to keep the city safe and secure the pay scales for both fire and police were revised in February 2023. This change led to budget constraints unless additional revenue sources were identified. Two possible solutions were an increase to the city millage and a proposed ballot initiative for an A&P tax. City Council passed a small millage increase for the first time in over 30 years to help bridge some of the gap, but the proposed A & P tax overwhelmingly failed in November 2023. This left the city with the need to adopt budget cuts that include a hiring freeze, elimination of new unfilled positions and COLA pay increases being eliminated to name just a few.

The most significant change of 2023 came in late September when the elected mayor had to resign, leaving the city in a very uncertain position. I was appointed interim mayor by the City Council until a new mayor could be elected. The timeline for a special mayoral election was set in November and that will occur on March 5, 2024.

I am proud to say that while the challenges, at times, have been great, Bryant has risen above and continued to grow and thrive. Much was accomplished this past year and we are now on a path to have new leadership and many great opportunities. A new Mayor will be sworn in on March 8<sup>th</sup> and a new set of “How Tos” will be established. As the city begins this next chapter, I want to encourage leadership to consider a few things:

1. Our citizens should receive our best
2. The campaign is over, bitterness and revenge will get us nowhere
3. Surround yourself with people who have different skill sets and opinions than you
4. Look for the value in every person and group
5. Seek to learn and understand

6. Recognize that in the grand scheme of things you are not very important
7. It is a privilege to serve

In closing, I want to let each of you know that it has been an honor to serve my city and to be a part of setting the stage for the next chapter in Bryant. When I step aside next week it will be with a full heart and new understanding. I appreciate the city staff for educating me and being gracious. You have a special place in my heart. I applaud the Council for leading and for serving. You have been open and supportive. Finally, I thank the citizens of Bryant who have continued to be engaged and caring of our city and each other. I have enjoyed meeting you and hearing from you.

May God richly bless this community going forward.

Rhonda Sanders

Mayor of Bryant