

Mayor Julie Akins 2022 State of the City address

(As prepared prior to delivery at Jan. 18, 2022, council meeting; speech as actually delivered may vary from this version.)

Good evening and welcome to the State of the City for the City of Ashland. We are yet again in virtual, two-dimensional space due to the Pandemic.

I thank all of you willing to let us into your homes, and I thank you for coming into mine tonight. I thank the council and staff for the good work they do. And I thank the tireless many who volunteer across our small city to care for each other and this place--this biodiversity hot spot which is vital to the overall wellness of our planet.

Despite the good being done, it's difficult to feel a sense of community in such times, but we are a community. And my friends and neighbors, community is the cure to the wounds we have all witnessed and experienced in this past year. So many of us have lost or nearly lost people we love, we've feared for our own financial security and we've wondered aloud if we will survive the divisions of ripping and clawing at each other over Covid, Identity politics and the desire to place ourselves above another.

The lie of the great individualistic society is breaking down.

For the first time in our lives we have heard the question of whether America, this great nation, can survive.

As it is across our country, so it is in Ashland.

We must first acknowledge the harm we have done by looking the other way, by our policies of exclusion and our fear to address them.

I spoke to a young mother of two children. She told me that she's given up. She spent her childhood in Ashland and hoped to offer it to her kids. But she lamented, It's too expensive. I cannot find a way in, she told me.

We've let her down and so many like her.

Here's why in terms of math:

The average price for a one bedroom rental is 1,573 dollars per month. The average annual income is 29,658 dollars per year. That mom would have \$10,000 left over per year, or roughly 800 dollars per month, for everything else: food, clothing, medical care, school expenses, transportation and life's emergencies.

She's right. With that math--there is no place for her or her children---or your children--or mine.

Our work is clear: we must solve for that problem.

Housing is critical.

Community Development will work with us to set policy which makes housing people with dignity possible.

We will change policies that make building livable, sustainable and affordable housing “onerous” in Ashland, as Eco Northwest described.

And we’ve begun.

We’ve approved in concept building above the Hargadine Parking Garage. It’s a good idea first put forward by resident Allen Sandler and revived by a coalition of designers and builders.

Columbia Care is building new housing on Ashland Street for people below the poverty line and the Jackson County Housing Authority recently opened it’s second phase of family housing off of Clay Street.

Ashland has had success in housing. We’ve annexed areas for building more homes too. But we’re behind. We must be thoughtful but also clear.

We must house that young mother, that average Ashland household. Family housing, workforce housing is what we need. We do not need more condos priced in the 400 thousand dollar range--it’s with respect that I say--we need to diversify how we build and for whom we build too.

We lost a housing complex designed to sell at less than \$200,000 per home. That project went to Medford. I’m happy for the families who will get to take part.

But, next time we won’t let such a chance go by. We will work together to continue what we’ve begun.

We need housing and we need jobs. In that order.

I spoke to a textile manufacturer recently who wanted to relocate to Oregon. He looked at Ashland but took a pass. He couldn’t find a way to properly house his staff and he worried about finding space for his light manufacturing plant.

He’s not alone.

Job growth in Ashland is at negative 2.6%. We’ve lost more jobs than we’ve gained. Our population has not grown, but our aging population has--we’re at more than 26% of people older than 65.

This is not a trend with the future in mind.

We need to diversify our sources of income. We need to manage our own budget as well. A thriving economy is good for everyone. So is facing where we are and doing what needs to be done.

And we need to be smart about it. We need to be transparent and clear. We need to make sure everyone who lives here can understand our budget process and can participate. That's a priority this coming year.

I applaud local employer Blue Marble for its expansion which will offer more living wage jobs. This company forged ahead despite early obstacles. Next time, let's make it easier.

A company which specializes in creating small, sustainable home building wants to locate here too. Pacific Wall Systems estimates they will bring 300 market rate jobs to Ashland. Let's consider them respectfully.

We as a city must work with living wage employers on behalf of young families and our overall economy. It's the right thing to do now and for the future.

Let's bring our kids home. Let's be a community where you can grow up strolling through Ashland, going to it's excellent schools, getting a job which pays enough to buy a home and raise a second and third generation of Ashlanders.

We shall do it.

Yet we must be here to manage it. And wildfire is an existential threat. The Alameda Fire taught us--we must prepare for mega fires.

Our Public Works Department and administration worked with Oregon Department of Transportation and is happy to report the additional emergency exit off of I-5 in case of fire is now underway after some delay. This might not have happened without our staff's actions.

Our city staff also created a mapping system for evacuation and our Wildfire Safety Division continues to help homeowners make their homes safer and fire adapted. The work in the woods which surround us continues with careful thinning and burning. In December, Ashland Fire & Rescue's Wildfire Division received final signatures on a \$3 million FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation grant. The grant will fund reduction of flammable vegetation around 1,100 homes and replacement of wood shake roofing with fire resistant material.

The Forest Service in cooperation with non governmental organizations and Tribal stewards is in process on creating safer, healthier and climate adapted forests in the areas which surround our communities. The City of Ashland maintains our support for these initiatives.

And our electrical department stands at the ready.

In March of 2021 the City of Ashland Electric utility was recognized for excellence in reliability by the American Public Power Association. To receive this recognition the utility has to be in the top 25% of utilities nationwide for System Average Interruption Duration Index. Earning this recognition is a high priority for the utility in their efforts to provide safe and reliable service. This years recognition represents the 5th in the past 6 years.

Our busy fire and police department continue their work of keeping residents safe in an incredibly fearful time. Our police department in 2021 handled 29,512 calls for service and 2,713 cases. Ashland police officers saved at least 6 lives in 2021 through CPR or Narcan

deployment. APD partnered with Rogue Retreat to successfully launch the urban campground, facilitating placement of previously unhoused people in their shelter. Ashland police detectives investigated approximately 100 cases in 2021.

Ashland Fire and Rescue responded to 4,785 calls for service and transported 2,554 patients. All the while dealing with the continual changing model of the COVID Pandemic, staff vacancies and a severe injury.

And the City of Ashland continues to prioritize climate crisis. There is no way forward without this in mind and we honor the need to create authentic solutions with equity at the forefront.

Solar is among our portfolio of solutions as is drinkable water storage and the use of grey water for farms and lawns. We live beside wild spaces and recognize the need to do so peacefully while protecting our pollinating species. Without them there is no food and no life.

We know that soil regeneration is vital in this mix as is limiting fossil fuel consumption and buying habits. I encourage continuing to source what we buy in terms of distance in shipment and sustainability. I look forward to an electric vehicle fleet when the time is right and working with Parks toward urban food gardens as have been created in cities across our country.

Saving our world is a job for all of us. The City of Ashland will continue in this work toward climate and social justice. Climate crisis is said to be the future cause of mass migration--we must do all we can to prepare our community. We need all hands on deck with affordable ways to limit natural gas and fossil fuel use, so no one gets left behind.

There is an increasingly large chasm between rich and poor and the stain we've yet to wash away--the ugliness of racial violence and exclusion still exists.

Yes, here in Ashland.

We cannot begin to heal wounds we deny. The death of former Ashland High student Aidan Ellison is remembered on a mural at his former school, put there by current students and helped by the City of Ashland Arts Commission. His face along with those of agents of change in our community remind us of the work yet to be done.

I had a conversation recently with a Black bodied community leader--he whispered to me--"I experience more racism in Ashland than I do anywhere else in the valley." The pain on his face was apparent.

Let's be honest. This is not the work of Black, Indigenous People of Color, this is the work of White Ashland. If it was up to our Black and Brown neighbors, racism would have been solved.

But there remains hope. In this past year the City of Ashland established the Social Equity and Racial Justice Commission and it adopted a working resolution. These are not performative measures, but true evidence of a city which intends to live up to the aspiration of total equity and anti racism.

We can be a welcoming place for all. We can have a thriving community for young families and an oasis for those of us choosing to age in Ashland. We can stand together like we did

yesterday on the Ashland Plaza to hear, once again, the words of Dr. Martin Luther King who dared to dream.

It's time to make his vision an absolute reality in our town. We cannot rest until we do.

President Biden has said we are fighting for the soul of our nation. We, you and I, are fighting for the soul of Ashland.

What's it going to be? Ask yourself, what does Your Ashland look like?

In my vision, I hear a place full of music. I see the bandshell busy every weekend as people enjoy their locally sourced food and wine on picnic blankets. Musicians are everywhere and artists too. There is room for everyone, university students of all colors, creeds and genders play on the front lawn of Lithia Park. The plaza is once again our heart as artists share their performances and craft and we watch the newcomers try our Lithia water and laugh.

Restaurants are packed with smiling visitors and locals alike, employers are proud of the wages they pay and the products they produce and young families are buying houses and settling in by their neighbors of all ages and backgrounds.

Our children and grandchildren are marching in the Halloween Parade and they feel as if they are growing up in a wonderful town that almost forgot them--but turned around instead and made it great for them and for their children and their children too.

I want Ashland to say of itself--it was touch and go for a minute--but we figured it out.