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## State of the City 2020 – Mayor Sandy Stimpson

Good afternoon. In a year marked by a global pandemic and social unrest how do we measure the state of the city? Should we measure it by Covid-19s infection rate or its death rate? The number of businesses shut down or new business start-ups? Or should we measure it by job growth? Or population growth? Or by crime trends? The answer to all these questions is YES.

Thank you for joining the first virtual State of the City meeting hosted by the Mobile Area Chamber of Commerce. I also want to thank the City Council for their collaboration, support and leadership over the past year. They have served you well during these challenging times.

In reflecting back on the first 8 months of 2020, it is with a high degree of certainty that we can predict it will be recorded as one of the most tumultuous years in our city's history. We began the year just like many in recent past – with a successful New Year's celebration. At that time, the state-of-the-city could be best described as being exciting and hopeful in anticipation of the great things to come. We were seeing our lowest unemployment rate in years. Most local businesses were prospering, and many were expanding. Tourism was increasing and downtown was thriving.

Our City was on a sound financial footing with a projected increase in revenue due to our growing local economy. We were investing in our infrastructure like never before. We had laid the keel for the *USS Mobile*, and we were anticipating the first flight of an Airbus A-220. The discovery of the last slave ship, the *Clotilda*, brought global attention to our Port City and everyone was excited about the possibilities surrounding it and Africatown.

Then in late March, COVID-19 entered the scene, changing all of our lives. Schools closed. Day Cares closed. Churches closed. Most small businesses closed. In a matter of a few weeks our lives were turned completely upside down.

Clearly, this was uncharted territory and in short order, we were not only in a health crisis, but an economic crisis as well. Glued to our TVs, we became fearful for our lives and our livelihoods. Almost all decisions coming from City Hall and the Governor's office were controversial and seemingly divisive. There were no easy answers.

Then, at the height of a global pandemic, the world witnessed the death of George Floyd. Cries across America arose for social justice, specifically regarding policing. Hundreds of citizens filled our downtown streets. Mobile police officers marched beside a sea of peaceful demonstrators, diverse in age, race and cultures, ensuring their right to make their voices heard. Their cries did not fall on deaf ears. Immediately, Chief Battiste and I engaged in community conversations seeking ways to improve our policies and tactics.

By the end of June, nerves were on end, and the negative impacts of the pandemic were compounded by the cry for social changes. This brings me back to the original question. In a year marked by a global pandemic and social unrest how do we measure the state of the city? Health statistics would show mixed results, but no statistics would reveal the unparalleled collaboration among government officials, healthcare providers, and private industry. The true state of our city in the year 2020 should be measured by teamwork, ingenuity, commitment, collaboration, perseverance and hope inspired.

First, let's focus on the delivery of health care. Our local hospitals have done a phenomenal job given the ever-evolving protocols coming from the CDC. With personal protective equipment and medications dependent upon broken supply chains from China, what our hospital administrators, doctors, nurses and lab technicians have done is nothing short of miraculous.

Day after day, they were on the front line. **These are the heroes of the pandemic.** Through collaboration, we were able to set up satellite testing facilities, with the city providing equipment and security so the healthcare workers could focus on serving the sick. The City and businesses donated a million dollars of PPE and provided meals for many of the workers at the satellite testing facilities.

Citizens expressed their appreciation through Light It Up Mobile, by gathering in parking lots outside the hospitals, with headlights beaming, horns blaring, lifting up prayers of appreciation for their service and protection against the virus. Today, there is hope for a brighter outcome on the medical front. Therapeutic drugs are evolving to lessen the severity of the virus, and a vaccine will be available sooner rather than later.

Under the category of Pandemic Hero is the Salvation Army. They never closed their doors, despite significant challenges for homeless providers. We may never know everything they had to do to stay open, but for many their commitment to service provided a bed, a hot meal, and medical surveillance. The Salvation Army was an answer to prayers.

Next, there are two business sectors that need to be complimented for their ingenuity and perseverance. They are our restaurant owners and our grocery stores. Adjusting to the COVID-19 rules of operation has not been easy. But they did it. One example is SOCU, owned by Erica Barret. With the fear of losing her newly opened downtown restaurant due to the pandemic, she

took to Facebook. She like many others experienced an outpouring of support from her customers to buy “take out” meals. You, along with area businesses stepped up and placed enough orders to keep her dream alive as well as the dream of other restaurateurs.

When thinking about our small businesses, either single proprietor or mom and pop owned, we cannot help but wonder how they survived. Thanks to the City Council, 142 of our more vulnerable businesses qualified for a City grant to help them keep the doors open. In one case, it was the spark of hope needed to keep Rosshiki Leatherwood’s, Next Level Fitness and Performance open. This grant combined with his customers undying sense of loyalty and support have helped keep his dream alive.

When thinking about our medium size, service businesses, such as law firms, insurance agencies, accounting firms, and banks, you too had to rely on ingenuity, collaboration and perseverance. You learned a new trick, and we call it remote working. We all realized many of our employees could work from home and be just as productive. This has helped keep our employees healthy and our businesses and government operating.

At City Hall, we transferred 280 employees to remote working. The entire permitting and business licensing department went fully remote within a matter of two weeks. Those trying to build a home and do business in the city were not delayed. In our case, the pandemic forced the City to become more business friendly by providing on-line services. It has definitely been a silver lining during the pandemic. Our contractors and businesses will reap the benefit of this for years to come.

Also, at City Hall we are continuing to engage the community regarding social justice by working with citizens. The recently formed equity task force is evaluating policies in five City departments and will make recommendations for improvements. We are adopting new policies that will ensure our police both respect and protect life. These policies are an important measure in continuing to build better relationships between the community and law enforcement.

During the pandemic, our Community and Neighborhood Development department never slowed down. It has continued to revolutionize how we address blight, DBE contracting, supplier diversity, and affordable housing opportunities.

Additionally, the state of the city for Mobile in 2020 should be measured by the long-term impacts of the critical decisions we are making today.

While other cities around the state and the country are cutting operational budgets due to declining revenues, Mobile has set itself apart and will not be cutting its budget nor any essential services. This is the result of working for seven years with department heads to be better stewards of your tax dollars.

In addition, in 2020, thanks to several years of hard work, there will be an unprecedented convergence of local, state, and Federal dollars into the City for capital projects and infrastructure improvements. By year’s end, the total will approach more than \$100-million-

dollars, which is double the amount invested within any other year. All of this will occur while reducing our debt and maintaining our rainy-day reserves.

Perhaps the most transformative change to Mobile's economic future comes as the result of the recently announced plan to move all commercial air service to the Mobile Downtown Airport at Brookley Field. For the first time in our city's history, Mobilians will soon enjoy the benefits of having an international airport in our city, yielding lower ticket fares, more low cost carrier options, and additional direct flights to new cities.

The federal government will cover the lion's share of the cost of a new state of the art terminal and contribute to additional investments at the Downtown Airport. This will further advance our future economic development opportunities at the Brookley Aeroplex.

The Alabama State Port Authority and Mobile Airport Authority have initiated a new strategic partnership to quickly leverage the economic possibilities created from the widening and deepening of our ship channel and the migration of commercial air service to the downtown airport. Nowhere else in the country does an international passenger and cargo airport sit immediately next to a top 10 seaport and directly connect to five Class I railroads, two interstates, and 15,000 miles of inland waterways. Tom Enders, the former chairman of Airbus once told me, "In Mobile, the sky is not the limit."

We cannot talk about long term impacts without talking about the growth of Mobile. One of our challenges is the age of our housing stock – some is old and not as appealing when compared to other areas around Mobile. To solve this challenge, we need a two-pronged approach.

One prong is to facilitate the growth of affordable and workforce housing. Our plan is to build or renovate 1,000 homes by 2026. Most of these homes will be located in the oldest part of our city, which is east of I-65. This plan will be complemented by new projects and exciting announcements coming in the next few months.

The second prong is to grow the city through annexation. It has been done on multiple occasions before. A few months ago, we were just one vote shy of it passing the city council. With a 5<sup>th</sup> vote, Mobile would have regained the title of Alabama's second largest city and would have become eligible for more resources and federal grants. Annexation combined with workforce housing is the way to grow our city. Now is the time.

In assessing 2020, we must acknowledge there have been a lot of heart aches – jobs lost, loved ones who have died, and dreams shattered as businesses had to close – all due to COVID-19. However, there are some who have thrived over the last several months. There are individuals and businesses who have relocated to Mobile during the crisis simply because they have determined that it is a great place to live and work.

There has never been a better time to promote moving to Mobile than right now. **By all measures, the state of the city is very strong.** We should all be optimistic about the future. We have shown that we are doing what it takes to overcome the pandemic, just like we have proven we know how to overcome the destruction caused by hurricanes. Through teamwork, ingenuity,

commitment, collaboration, perseverance and hope inspired, we will become One Mobile, a safer, more business and family friendly city.

Thank you for joining us today, and a special thanks to everyone who has been praying for the wellbeing of the citizens and the City of Mobile. But most importantly, thank you God for the countless prayers you have answered on behalf of our citizens and City.