

State of the City Address
Mayor Susan Candell
February 11, 2021
Lafayette, California

This has been a year unlike any the City of Lafayette has seen before, and I'm hoping that this will be the very first and the very last ever **virtual** State of the City for Lafayette! It has been a year full of challenges that have compelled our city government, community members, business and landowners alike to take actions to promote restoration, recovery, and, most of all, resiliency.

As I look back on all the actions the City of Lafayette has taken this year to address frontline issues, I am so very proud of the strong leadership I've seen displayed by City staff, our Lafayette Police, but especially our community that calls Lafayette home.

Today I would like to reflect on and share the actions the city has taken over this past year to address the COVID-19 global pandemic, Lafayette's dialogue on policing and our efforts towards achieving a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive Lafayette, our current situation involving the on-going protests at El Curtola Bridge, our launch of our General Plan Advisory Committee, and then do some looking forward towards another stimulus package from our government and how this might be best used for Lafayette's recovery.

And please, I will continue to answer questions honestly, straight-forward, and as transparent as I can possibly be. This is the way I conduct myself, and you can always count on that from me.

First I have been so impressed with the by the amount of flexibility, innovation, and thoughtfulness that Lafayette staff has put into their work over the last year to continue to provide safe, high-quality services to our community members and businesses all now remotely. We are happy to hear that new legislation is being introduced in Sacramento which will allow us to continue to conduct our city meetings remotely or possibly even as a hybrid as we start to re-open our city. Most of us are in full agreement that more community members are becoming involved and are participating in our meetings because we allow remote access, which has always been a goal for us!

Immediately after the shelter-in-place was announced last March, our staff came together under the leadership of our City Manager Niroop Srivasta, and all departments contributed to cut our expenses by \$1M and instituted a hiring freeze in anticipation of a revenue shortfall. Because of this quick action, so far our budget has remained solid, and we haven't had to make any more cuts, and we haven't had to tap into our reserves. I'm very proud of these fiscally prudent actions, which has resulted in our ability to now open up our job postings, and I believe we have new hires ready to announce that provide critical support for our city.

As soon as the first stimulus package was announced from the federal government last year, the city set up a 'Business Assistance Program' where we hired Johannus Rinejers, an extremely talented employee from our Townsend lobbying firm. He has personally successfully helped our local businesses and non-profits navigate the complicated federal and state programs through the first two stimulus packages, bringing in over \$1.5M for our local businesses and non-profits.

We recently had the pleasure to rehire him to help with the more recent stimulus package, which has already helped 152 businesses representing 910 employees in the city. And so far this has brought an additional \$232k dollars, for a total now of almost \$1.8M total. And I want a shout-out to our Chamber of Commerce who recently made the effort to go door to door and make sure that all of our local businesses know about this program and encourage them to reach out. We are hearing that a new stimulus package may be announced in March, with one that may also help local cities directly, and we will working out how best to allocate these funds with the vision of re-opening our strong city.

And I want a huge shout-out to Casey Elliot from Townsend Public Affairs. He has been consistently been providing us with up-to-date information from the state and the federal government through the pandemic. This information has been thorough, timely, and hugely instrumental to our city to help us govern during this time. I believe that many of us on Council believe that this has been the best investment we have made these past years. Thank you again Casey!

On another good note, just last week at our Contra Costa Mayors meeting, I heard the presentation by our newly formed 'Community Behavioral Health Crisis Response' team, which is a partnership between cities in Contra Costa County working with our County Health Services to develop a vision and program to help residents in moments of mental health crisis. Why is this so good and important?

During the past year, our nation grieved over the unjust killing of George Floyd and many others, including young Miles Hall in Walnut Creek, who was suffering a mental health crisis. So as we heal, and learn, and try to best evolve away from only sending police to handle mental health crises, we will hopefully soon have a county-wide Response Team trained to best handle de-escalations as well as connect people in need to the services they need. We are very fortunate that our own City Manager Niroop is part of this very important work, and we look forward to hearing more progress in the near future. I'm personally very optimistic that this will result in far better outcomes for so many people in difficult situations in our city and in our county.

Our city this year also launched our Equity and Inclusion Task Force. We have had many meetings and a Town Hall in order to better understand the nature and the extent of systemic racism that exists in our community. I know that this is a difficult subject for us to face, and many don't think that it even exists, but if each of us takes a moment to walk in another's shoes, and to experience what some of our residents experience as

they tell us their real stories, it's very clear that we can and should do much better here in Lafayette. So our city has a three-pronged approach: the first is through the Schools, which reaches out to parents and students. The next has been through the Public Safety Task Force, which addressed policing and will expand to include the Behavior Health Crisis Response team mentioned before as that program develops. And third is our Equity and Inclusion Task Force which aims to address broader issues in our community.

So far, our City Staff has completed Implicit Bias training, and I look forward to extending this to City Council and Commissioners. We are also working with the Chamber of Commerce to develop a system that encourages all of our businesses to foster a stronger message of inclusion throughout our city. It is my hope that anyone who lives or even just visits Lafayette has the same experience that most of us have here – that we are a strong and caring community who accepts and appreciates all of the different people we encounter, and we treat everyone with the same dignity and respect that we all deserve. Are we there yet? I don't think so. Can we get there? Absolutely.

On a more troubling note, I want to take a minute to talk about the ongoing protests on El Curtola Bridge over Highway 24. As I said at our Council meeting on Monday, this is the issue that keeps me up at night. We all know that peaceful protests are protected by our First Amendment Rights. What is different about this situation is that the protests have now lasted for 6 months and we have been told that there is no end in sight, **and** that the neighbors are not happy that they continue to be impacted by the presence of protesters. I consider this issue regardless of WHAT the protestors are protesting for – this would be an issue no matter WHAT they are protesting.

We have now engaged Senator Steve Glazer and Assemblymember Rebecca Bauer-Kahan since the bridge is owned by Cal Trans and is protected by the CHP, both state agencies. What is so frustrating to me is that we have had two assaults on the bridge that have led to charges filed with the District Attorney, a flag was recently thrown onto the freeway from the bridge which is frighteningly dangerous, and a reported sideswipe accident by a resident on the freeway due to a driver distracted by the protest on the bridge. We learned on Monday that it is Cal Trans Policy to not allow this type of activity on the bridge, and that affixing any item including an American Flag is not allowed due to the real public safety concern that this is distracting to the drivers on the freeway. We also learned that the CHP does not think that we have reached a 'threshold' of unsafe behavior in order to stop the protests and activity on the bridge.

So, the City has very few choices before us, which are pursuing. These include the possibility of moving the parking for the protestors away from the most impacted neighbors, encouraging and helping the CHP to keep track the incidences on the bridge and on the freeway, including incidences over the past 6 months since they have been there. Assemblymember Bauer-Kahan mentioned that the legislature could pass a law to make protests and other activities on Cal Trans bridges illegal, but this would take a

lot of time to create, get support, and pass through the state legislature. Another idea that Cal Trans is looking into is to put some sort of visual barrier like slats through the chain link fence in order to reduce the possible distractions due to activities on the bridge.

Like I said, this is a very complicated issue, and we are trying to find solutions that would be acceptable for everyone, and it is encouraging that we have the support of our Senator and Assemblymember. Please, if you witness any incidences on the bridge or on the freeway, reach out to the CHP dispatch center, and please feel free to reach to me as well. And if you witness any incidences off of the bridge, please report them to the Lafayette Police Department. Our City Manager, City Attorney, Police Chief and I have been working very hard on this issue and we need all the information we can get to better understand and resolve the issues. I thank you for your support and your help.

On a brighter note, we successfully launched the General Plan Advisory Committee last year! Our last General Plan update was 20 years ago, and we are starting to update this very important document now with our new collective consciousness in 2021. The first very difficult task this group will undertake is to update our Housing Element. As many of you may have heard, the State Department of Housing and Community Development, or HCD, has determined that the Bay Area needs to add 441,000 new housing units, with the majority of these being affordable units. This is a **huge** increase over the prior cycle.

This total number gets handed to ABAG, the Association of Bay Area Governments, and then distributed to all Bay Area counties and cities. In the most recent draft, the City of Lafayette has been allocated 2100 housing units to build between 2023 and 2031, an 8 year cycle. And of these units, almost 1300 units need to be moderate and affordable. To give some reference, Lafayette currently has a total of 10,000 housing units, so they are expecting us to grow by 20% in 8 years, with 60% of these affordable. To be honest, we have never in our history had this amount of growth, especially in the affordable category. Also, the only toolset we have today to build affordable housing is to build far more market rate units, and expect that the developers will build a small fraction of affordable units as an incentive. I have, as a councilmember, been challenging these huge new quotas along with other local electeds across the state of California.

There is already a lawsuit against HCD and SANDAG in Southern California, and multiple city appeals against the high allocations in Los Angeles. Southern California is about a year in front of us in this process. What is now interesting is that the YIMBY association, which is 'Yes In My Backyard', the same group who has also spoken at some of our Lafayette City Council and Planning Commission meetings, has recently filed their own lawsuit against HCD complaining that the housing allocations are too small in the Bay Area! So no matter what, the topic is hot, and challenges now in all directions. My personal belief is that Lafayette deserves the 'Correct' allocations from our state – we should pursue finding the truth, as we must hold our state officials

accountable for producing accurate results based on reality. These allocations were done Pre-Covid, so it seems very reasonable to include the effects of the pandemic and our new reality of remote work and education, plus the results of our recent census where it is known that California is actually losing population, in their projections. Our City Council, by every measure, is dedicated to doing our fair share to provide affordable housing.

I truly wish we had more tools and more support to actually build this housing, instead of the only method available right now which is to overbuild market rate housing to get a few affordable units. And I wish we had more local control to build the right kind of affordable housing that we really need, one that is more equitable and inclusive than is required by state law.

On a local level, there are going to be upcoming neighborhood outreach meetings about the General Plan and Housing Element – please look out for notifications and I encourage all of you to get involved and be informed! To be candidly honest like I always strive to be, the City Council and Planning Commission last fall had a meeting where we chose to “study” the upzoning of our BART parking lots to build 825 or more units without replacing any BART rider parking because the state law for the BART parking lots doesn’t require it.

In addition, we are studying changing almost all of Deer Hill Road from single family housing to 3 to 4 story multi-housing units, extending into the neighborhoods north of Deer Hill Road. We also are studying allowing 5-7 story or higher buildings in our Downtown, as well as possibly removing some of the protections for our retail districts in our Downtown Core. We are studying these areas in order to allow building the 2100 housing units required by our new RHNA allocations. To be clear, we are not required to build them, we just need to make these areas available to be built by passing higher density zoning to allow more units to be built in these areas.

We also must think of all of this growth along with some possible new State Laws trying to be passed which are aimed at eliminating single-family zoning in the entire State of California. In particular there are two new laws: First is SB9 which would allow splitting of any single family lot and allow building of 6 units, so 1 house into 6 units. Next is SB10 which allows 10 unit buildings by right in our single family neighborhoods near BART.

If any of these topics interest you, and you want to get involved, I would encourage you to sign up for the notifications for our General Plan Advisory Committee, and you can do this by going to our City of Lafayette Website, and go to Quick Link called ‘General Plan Info’. This will have all of the information you need, plus you can sign up for notifications. And if you can’t do this, please reach out to me at scandell@lovelafayette.org and I can help you get the notifications and get you information on how to best get involved.

In terms of looking forward to re-opening our city, I met just today with the Mayors of Orinda and Moraga, and we are hoping to add to the agenda of our March Tri-Cities meeting a discussion of how we have been helping our cities survive during the pandemic and shutdowns, as well as discuss good ideas and best practices for re-opening. We are looking for community feedback, so please reach out to us with all of your good ideas on how to better reopen our city, and bring these ideas to the Tri-Cities meeting.

Lastly, I encourage all of you to continue to shop at our local Lafayette businesses, and make a goal like we did in our family to eat out or get take out at least once a week from one of our fabulous restaurants! If we make this effort, we really will help everyone survive this crazy time.

And while you are doing this, definitely don't forget to love a little more, and try to be a little more patient and forgiving when dealing with each other. We have made it this far, and I'm hoping very much that we can all get vaccinated sooner rather than later if our nation can ramp up the supply as they are trying so hard to do.

Since this annual State of the City Address is usually done at a lovely dinner and party along with the Chamber of Commerce, I want to make this one last shout out for Teresa Geringer, our current Vice Mayor. Teresa, I have this lovely bottle of champagne for you and me next year at Your State of the City. And I'm hoping very much that we and the rest of our great new City Council including Cam Burks, Carl Anduri, and Gina Dawson, will be toasting in person next year and celebrating this wonderful community that calls Lafayette home!

Thank you everyone, and I look forward now to hearing from our Department Heads and their reports to you on the state of our City.