

October 12, 2023  
State of Summit County  
Ilene Shapiro, Executive

Good afternoon and welcome to the 2023 State of the County.  
It is hard to believe that it's been a year since we were last together.

As a reminder, your attendance here today supports the Akron Press Club's scholarship fund. At a time when a constant stream of information is just a click away, supporting a robust, dependable, and free press has never been more important. Thank you to the Press Club for inviting me to present today.

The State of the County is a time to reflect on milestones throughout the year and it is always fitting to deliver the address right here in the John S. Knight Center. This facility is where our community comes together on the largest stage and Gregg Mervis and his team continue to show a dedication to excellence. Can we please show some appreciation for Mr. Mervis, and his staff and especially those who made today possible?

While your hands are warmed up, please join me in thanking our interpreters, Julia Coulman and Kaylee Horn from the Greenleaf Family Center.

For six years, we have partnered with ReWorks to make today a zero-waste event. Through this partnership and with the help of the staff at the Knight Center, we have diverted an estimated 3,000 pounds of waste from entering our landfills.

As you entered here today, you were greeted by a beautiful display of fine art curated by Arts Now. The show highlights artists from eight organizations. These artists are part of the thread that helps to weave together the fabric of our community, and we are lucky to have champions like Nicole Mullet and Heather Meeker leading the way.

It is humbling to look out and see so many of our elected officials. I am grateful for your presence and your partnership. My esteemed colleagues serving Countywide, local mayors and trustees, our Statehouse delegation—thank you. Thank you all for your work on behalf of the fourth largest county in the state, Summit. Together, we have fostered a culture of collaboration and innovation that is positioning Summit County as an adaptive, competitive leader in an increasingly fast-paced, digital world.

Here in Summit County, we work daily to create a forward-thinking, adaptable foundation from which all 31 communities can flourish. We bring this philosophy to everything we do, as together we reimagine a smarter, more equitable, more efficient, and more effective County that better serves our residents and businesses.

Surveys repeatedly tell us that public safety is a top priority. People simply want to live where it is safe. My administration has responded to this concern with steadfast partnerships and investments in cutting-edge technology to lead Summit County into the future.

This past week, we achieved an incredible milestone. We opened the doors to our new, state-of-the-art Summit Emergency Communications Center (the SECC) in Tallmadge. In the coming weeks, our facility will provide high-quality 9-1-1 dispatch to 2 out of every 3 people in the County. This dispatch center can serve all of Summit County. And, all of our communities are welcome in the future.

The current partnership with Cuyahoga Falls, Fairlawn, Stow, Tallmadge, the Sheriff's Office and Akron is an outstanding example of how collaboration with our communities produces tangible and meaningful benefits. In total, we and our partners have invested nearly \$25 million in this high-tech facility, its computer systems and its equipment. The SECC will save valuable time by eliminating the transfer of 9-1-1 calls between jurisdictions and the need to initiate separate mutual aid requests.

Additionally, it also allows the County and participating communities to leverage their purchasing power to provide quality training, assets, and upgrades to our NextGen 9-1-1 system, which will soon enable callers to send video and text messages to dispatchers.

What does this mean for someone in an emergency? It means faster, more connected, and more precise services when they are needed the most. This project would not have been possible without our police and fire chiefs, dispatchers, IT professionals, local contractors, and legal, financial, and HR experts from our communities who came together to make this possible. Mayor Kline, Mayor Pribonic, Mayor Sharnsky, former Mayor Roth, and Sheriff Fatheree, thank you for your commitment to this facility, and working hand-in-hand with us at the County to make it a reality.

A special thanks to Mayor Horrigan and the City of Akron for co-locating their dispatch operations in our facility. While the city's operations remain independent, Akron's dispatchers are now working in the same state-of-the-art building and with the same advanced technology.

By repurposing this building, we were also able to include our 9-1-1 radio administration and the County's Emergency Operations Center. This facility was built for and with our dispatchers. By engaging our dispatchers in the conversation, we were able to add features which prioritize their mental and physical wellbeing. These are tough jobs, and we recognize that. I am proud to say all of the current dispatchers were offered positions at the SECC, and nearly all accepted. That is quite an accomplishment. We brought together the people, the technology, and the facility to achieve the next level of public safety in Summit County.

As we know all too well, a crisis can happen anywhere, anytime. In Summit County, we felt the effects of the Canadian wildfires and we watched as our neighbors in East Palestine deal with a disastrous train derailment.

Whether it's air quality warnings or just getting information out about a nearby situation, my department of Emergency Management is at the forefront of training professionals, notifying the public, and preparing for disasters and unexpected local events. Most often in Ohio we find ourselves facing weather-related disasters. Last year, Summit County earned the National Weather Service's StormReady designation. Being StormReady means we can help save more lives during severe weather events. Having a 24-hour warning point, multiple ways to alert the public, and a formal hazardous weather plan secured us this distinguished status.

Summit County's Emergency Management team organizes joint training and emergency preparedness for all of our communities--and we take it very seriously.

Communication during an event is key to being able to provide the best possible outcomes. Currently, all our communities utilize our emergency radio system and can communicate with each other during a response. Our central dispatch system will maximize preparedness for these types of events.

When we talk about public safety, we know that 9-1-1 is often the first step in the criminal justice process. Just as we advanced our 9-1-1 technology, we are bringing that forward-thinking vision to our courtrooms, and are pleased to announce that our Virtual Courtroom system is now live. Our Common Pleas judges, Sheriff Fatheree and their respective teams have been thoughtful and patient partners in this work, and I thank them for their help as we made mid-course adjustments through implementation. Today, we are holding remote proceedings, saving time and money, while increasing safety for our deputies, court staff, inmates, and all other parties involved.

These investments connected our courts and jail with high-speed fiber, eliminating the need to transport inmates to the courthouse every day—making the process safer and more cost

effective. Additionally, in the past few years, we've invested nearly \$25 million toward building upgrades and services at the jail including: security cameras, HVAC, plumbing, fencing, services for substance use disorders, and, an updated case management system.

But, it's not just about the courts and the jail. After leaving incarceration, our returning citizens may need employment, housing, mental health services, or peer mentoring resources. Summit County is committed to supporting those who have served their time. My Public Safety department has hired a re-entry specialist who is dedicated to connecting returning citizens to these resources. We know long-term this work will make our community safer and help people return to their families, homes, and jobs.

In addition to improvements to our criminal justice system, my administration strives to provide targeted safety measures for older adults in Summit County. Each year, our Adult Protective Services team receives thousands of referrals related to the neglect, abuse, or exploitation of older adults. Through exceptional collaboration with our partners, every year we successfully resolve most of these referrals and provide the support that vulnerable seniors need to live healthy, safe, and independent lives.

While mandated by the State to administer Adult Protective Services, they only provide minimal funds to do so. But, I know how important senior services are. That is why we have invested significant local dollars to ensure we have the team and resources to respond. Through strong partnerships with Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh and Sheriff Fatheree, my administration supports an assistant prosecutor and two full-time detectives on our Adult Protective Services team. These proactive relationships help to ensure that we are ready to begin an investigation and file charges if appropriate. This also alleviates the trauma of a vulnerable resident having to share their story over and over again.

As County Executive, and as a resident, I too have great concern about gun violence in our community. While I do not oversee law enforcement in our neighborhoods, we provide critical support that impacts public safety. There are a number of initiatives to prevent and respond to gun violence in our community. We are working closely with Akron on their Youth Violence Intervention and Prevention Program. We are recruiting cadets, providing scholarships, and paying a livable wage for those individuals seeking a career in law enforcement in the Sheriff's Office. We are making progress on a public safety network pilot that includes cameras in the neighborhood located just south of the University of Akron for the benefit of students, residents, and businesses. We partnered with the Prosecutor to deliver funding for two additional prosecutors focused solely on gun-related crimes. And at the end of last year, County Council led collaborative efforts to hold a gun-buy back and gun-lock distribution.

On that point, let me take a moment to thank County Council for their steadfast support throughout the year, which enables us to move Summit County forward. President Veronica Sims, Vice-President Rita Darrow, and Councilmembers: John Donofrio, Erin Dickinson, Liz Walters, John Schmidt, Gloria Rodgers, Jeff Wilhite, Christine Wiedie-Higham, Bethany McKenney, and Anthony DeVitis.

It is hard to discuss criminal justice without talking about our community's well-being and mental health. It is impossible to talk about community health without talking about the team at Summit County Public Health. Thank you for your steadfast leadership and always keeping us informed and healthy, day in and day out.

Your ongoing efforts in assisting residents who continue to struggle with substance use disorders and the ripple effects of addiction cannot be understated. While overdose deaths peaked in 2016, we have seen a steady uptick in the last few years. It is clear, opioid use remains a significant issue.

As with public safety, we are planting seeds that—with the help of our community—will grow into a system that puts people at the center of our response to the epidemic. To date, we have invested \$16 million dollars directly into our communities through various programs.

Thanks to these investments, today a resident can walk into an emergency department at Summa or Cleveland Clinic-Akron General and know that their addiction will be treated like the medical emergency it is. Addiction is such an individual disease. It is hard to pinpoint one root cause. But, when I ask in the community for some root causes, the one that word that comes back repeatedly is trauma.

So, to address this issue, we have partnered with ADM and the University of Akron to complete an assessment of our community's ability to deliver trauma informed care. We hope that this will enlighten us and provide a roadmap we can use to guide future investments and treat not just addiction, but trauma itself. It is my fervent hope that the work we do around trauma informed care will be transformative, not only in our delivery of care, but in lifting the stigma that still surrounds addiction. Thank you to the staff and board of ADM.

Let me pause here to reiterate—Addiction is a disease, not a moral failure. And, when citing statistics, it is important to remember that these are not just numbers on a sheet of paper – these

are people, families, children, members of our community—simply anybody. Treatment works, people do get better. If you or someone you know is struggling, please call our helplines.

Lifting the stigma takes the will of the entire community. Our small, grassroots organizations are doing some of this incredible work and are meeting people where they are. I am immensely proud of the financial support we have been able to provide to these groups who are on the front lines of trying to save lives and support recovery. Due to their size and scope, they may not be eligible or equipped for funding from traditional sources, yet they provide critical resources to those in need. In partnership with Akron Community Foundation, we have granted one million 250 thousand dollars to dozens of these organizations.

I want to thank John Petures and his team, as well as the ACF board for their incredible collaboration in this endeavor.

One of the most exciting collaborations begins with funding from the opioid settlement. This one is a real game changer. My office has purchased and launched a brand new technology platform called UniteUs. UniteUs is based on the social determinants of health and uses a closed loop referral system to connect people to the services and care that they need in real time.

Partners using the network provide support services across a spectrum of social needs, including:

- healthcare,
- mental and behavioral health,
- housing,
- education,
- employment, and
- food security.

Think of Unite Us as a one stop hub for a person looking for treatment, for a judge looking for information on the person in front of her, or a physician looking for the best possible place to send her patient.

What this means for our community is the gaps begin to close. Gaps in time, gaps in communication, gaps in service delivery—very gap we close gets residents closer to the services they need.

But before we launch something, we always ask ourselves—are we willing to do it? With that, the UniteUs platform is being piloted by our Community Development Department and Job and Family Services. This enables our teams to receive referrals ranging from minor home repairs to bridging the benefits cliff. And let me be clear, as this platform expands, we are looking at something that will revolutionize service delivery in our community. That is why this service is free to community-based organizations.

Our non-profits are really excited about the potential of this system. There are over two dozen community partner organizations active on the platform, including heavy-hitters like Cleveland Clinic-Akron General and the United Way, with forty more on the way. We know that communities across the state and the State of Ohio itself are watching us, and we are ready to lead the way.

Our JFS team continues to be at the center of serving those residents most in need. They help people and families access critical benefits like food assistance and Medicaid daily. And, just a reminder, most of the people we serve are going to work each day just to make ends meet.

With the ongoing changes at the federal and state level, making ends meet can be challenging. Our team excels at helping these residents understand why changes are happening and responding to their needs. To that end, programs like our new partnership with libraries across Summit County are making a difference. We are providing easy access to our trained staff by meeting people in their neighborhoods. Case managers are now available on select days each month at several library systems and branches. We have seen great participation and plan to continue this program indefinitely!

The needs of our community are ever-changing. One of the largest growing populations in our community is older adults. By 2030, we expect older adults to make up to 30% of our population. But the narrative around the so-called “graying of America” should not be one of fear and negativity but one of opportunity and creativity. Older adults in our community are active, vibrant citizens. They maintain careers, volunteer at community organizations, and play a vital role in our economy.

Why would we sideline folks just because they are aging? After all, we are ALL getting older. Yes, we know many older adults face unique challenges, and we must face that head on, but we must do that with an Age-Friendly attitude.

That is why Summit County embarked on a 5-year mission to become an AARP Age-Friendly community in 2019 and joined forces with Akron in 2022. Now, our Akron-Summit Age-Friendly initiative has grown to encompass dozens of organizations across the city and county, and we have made some exciting progress.

Among our biggest wins is the brand-new Age-Friendly Accreditation offered through a collaboration between the Better Business Bureau and Vantage Aging. Together with the Akron Zoo and Direction Home, we worked tirelessly to build an application process and criteria for businesses and institutions in Summit County to become Age-Friendly. In May, our Akron Zoo became the FIRST zoo in Ohio to earn an “Age-Friendly Accreditation,” and since then we have seen dozens of businesses and institutions become Age-Friendly.

Whether it’s offering a helping hand to get in the door or large print on a menu, Age-Friendly Accreditation makes it easy for older adults to stay active and engaged. A business only receives an accreditation after a review by an older adult through Vantage Aging’s senior volunteer program, making this a program for older adults by older adults.

The program has been so successful that we need more volunteers to keep up. So please, check out the QR code on the screen to find out more about volunteering to review businesses, and of course, if you are an interested business owner go to [akron.bbb.org](http://akron.bbb.org).

We also know that housing and digital access are indispensable to our older residents. People want to stay in their homes as long as they can. Our community surveys tell us 96% of older folks want to age in place. That’s why today, I am announcing that I will introduce legislation to provide \$8 million dollars toward a host of programs and services in partnership with Direction Home. This investment will support home repairs, food deliveries, and digital services. Because sometimes, it’s the little things that can become serious barriers to our older residents and their families: a missing step, a broken light, an outlet that doesn’t work. These smaller fixes are often ineligible for our home repair programs but can make a world of a difference.

Together, Direction Home and my Community Development team will sort through incoming requests from residents to connect them to the right program.

Need a furnace?—we’ve got you.

A cracked window?—we have it covered.

Need help setting up an email?—no problem.

Through collaboration, we can better leverage funds and better serve our residents.



At the same time, we are preparing for the changing needs of our environment and are thrilled to be on the leading edge of some exciting projects. Our Department of Sanitary Sewer Services is making critical investments to ensure our residents receive quality services, and that our rivers, lakes, and streams are clean. In Peninsula, and in Boston Township, we are delivering important sewer infrastructure to residents and businesses with a combined \$17 million dollar investment. In conjunction with Hudson, we plan to bring water services to Peninsula, so they no longer must truck in water to their businesses every day.

In New Franklin, we continue to work to secure funding for a sanitary collection system that will protect people and wildlife across the Portage Lakes and offer new opportunities for economic development. We are also partnering with Copley Township to bring sewer lines to the commercial and industrial corridor along Copley Road.

In Stow, we have committed over \$25 million dollars to design and plan improvements to our Water Reclamation Facility to provide higher quality treatment and maintain clean waterways. It may not be glamorous, but sewer and water access are critical for growth. These once-in-a-lifetime investments are only possible with landmark federal funding and a County with the resources and relationships to get the job done. And, as a preview of what these investments can do, just look to our Springfield Treatment Plant, where the water that flows through, goes back into the Tuscarawas cleaner than the river itself.

But what about the water that comes from rain and run-off? Well, we have got that covered too. Runoff can send chemicals, fertilizers, and litter into our streams and creeks, and inundate roads with water, cutting off neighborhoods. In 2022, Engineer Brubaker, County Council and I expanded the Surface Water Management District, which now serves all nine townships, plus Lakemore, and Reminderville.

We are committing \$19 million dollars to the district to prevent damage from erosion and flooding, address water quality issues, and preserve our land and water. We have projects lined up across the County, from Bath to Copley, Sagamore Hills to Twinsburg Township, from Springfield to Lakemore.

Now, I don't get up every day thinking about stormwater runoff, but your Engineer does! And our environment and wildlife feel the difference! So, thank you, Al.

These investments are part of a bigger picture. Partners across Northeast Ohio have literally invested billions of dollars toward clean waterways, quality sewer and water lines, and restoring our environment. A collective effort has transformed our Cuyahoga River into a shining gem, and

we are especially blessed to have the National Park and Summit Metro Parks that expertly maintain our rivers and land for all to enjoy.

Now, this locally led coalition is finally removing the Gorge Dam, which has not been operational in decades. Over the next few years, toxic sediment behind the dam will be remediated, and the structure will come down soon after. Summit County is proud to have announced a \$250,000 investment toward this project. To Akron, Cuyahoga Falls, the Metro Parks, Ohio EPA, our grassroot activists, and all those involved with “Freeing the Falls,” thank you.

Northeast Ohio is fortunate to have access to plentiful, fresh water, and we need to be good stewards of our natural resources. Our efforts, with our partners, will help to ensure a high quality of life in our communities amid a changing climate. My administration joined Power a Clean Future (PCFO), making a public commitment to reducing our carbon emissions and implementing sustainable, cost-saving practices.

We are now the sixth PCFO county in Ohio, and join our friends in Cuyahoga Falls, Munroe Falls and Green as Summit County members. Our PCFO membership builds on previous efforts to reduce the County’s carbon footprint. From lighting upgrades to electronic signature software, we have already begun the process.

The federal government’s investment in climate action offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity for local governments to reduce their emissions. PCFO’s technical assistance, including grant application support, will be a valuable tool to leverage these funds in Summit County. As our nation and our world moves toward sustainable practices and a greener economy, Summit County intends to position itself as a local leader in the transition.

If our future is to be greener, then our County must work “smarter.” You may have heard of “smart cities”. They are communities where increasing connectedness brings improved services and quality of life. I want Summit County to be a “Smart County.”

Last year, I announced our intent to build Summit Connects, an innovative, high-speed broadband network connecting all 31 communities. You know, not every County can boast that when they come up with a transformational idea and put out a clarion call, that their communities respond with a single sound: the sound of yes.

This year, we completed the first leg of the network from Akron to Tallmadge connecting our new, SECC dispatch center, giving this critical public safety operation access to our fast and secure

network. It will also ensure that our local police, fire, and EMS teams will have access to reliable, high-speed connection.

And when a new technology emerges, we will have the infrastructure to implement it in the field.

Meetings with the communities are underway and I anticipate we will be under contract for construction in 2024. Additionally, we are committed to bringing opportunities to our businesses and residents through Summit Connects.

One month ago, we announced a \$1.7 million dollar investment to bring affordable internet access to Copley. FairlawnGig will now serve two areas of the community where there was both an opportunity and obligation to invest.

However, access to the internet is only a part of the puzzle. Digital equity encompasses the devices and skills needed to fully participate in digital work, education, and more. As we continue building out Summit Connects, we are working to ensure that all of our residents can reap the benefits. Summit Connects positions us for a future with innovations like smart traffic lights and solar microgrids and who knows what else.

It's not just infrastructure that creates the future and brings new jobs and investment—it's the people. Smart counties require the workforce to attract and retain industry in our communities. This involves both tapping into the talents and skills of our current workers, as well as new members of our community.

The International Institute has recently welcomed 300 refugees, helping to prepare them to participate in our local economy. Our local partners like the University of Akron, Stark State, SEI, our school systems, and our trade unions, and many more, are educating and training our future workforce. They are connecting our residents with the jobs of today and tomorrow.

And, in an ongoing opioid epidemic, we know that folks in recovery need resources to return to work. The County is partnering with Public Health to promote the benefits of becoming a Recovery Friendly workplace, which cultivates environments where peoples' mental and physical well-being are supported. It is a win-win for employees, who deserve the opportunity to flourish and overcome challenges, and businesses, who want hard-working, talented employees.

Helping to bridge the gap between workers and businesses is one of the things the County does every day. For example, when Yellow declared bankruptcy, we knew some of our residents were going to feel the impact. So, our Response Team went to work. OhioMeansJobs Summit County hosted job fairs that connected 75 former employees with 17 different employers.

For us, it is not just about connecting workers to businesses, but about connecting businesses to the resources we have to offer. Last year our Elevate Greater Akron business retention team met with over 300 businesses, including 150 that are considered disadvantaged to see how we can

better meet their needs. They have also conducted over 100 site searches and have identified 6 large sites ripe for development. If an opportunity comes along of size and scale, we want to be prepared.

In Northeast Ohio, we have many incredible assets, but we are challenged by the lack of open space. So, we must think more broadly as we work to attract and expand our businesses. In addition to looking for open space, we also identify existing sites that need a bit of work. For example, in Barberton, we secured \$350,000 toward redeveloping an industrial park on Newell Street.

We are also part of the SiteOhio program which enables us to put our sites on the forefront for companies looking for space. However, supporting existing companies with relocations and workforce development is an ongoing priority.

We helped launch the Greater Akron Business Navigator, a website that offers a range of resources to support any business, from entrepreneurs just starting out to companies looking to scale-up. This website connects businesses with the resources available to them in our economic development ecosystem.

We are thankful for our partners like the Greater Akron Chamber, TeamNEO, Conexus, ODJFS, OhioMeansJobs, the Workforce Development Board, and so many more who support our efforts to grow our economy.

Summit County has taken considerable steps to ensure our residents have access to housing that is livable and affordable. Through our different Community Development programs, we have invested a total of \$3.25 million dollars directly into local housing in the past year. These funds were used to weatherize homes, purchase new furnaces, remove lead, and replace septic systems. These funds were also used to support LeBron James's Family Foundation's I Promise apartments. These affordable housing units are filling a critical need for families and their children.

We also provided \$50,000 for improvements to Family Promise's new, single-family home. Alongside a host of partners, we recently celebrated the home's completion and another step toward homeownership for a local family.

A special thank you to our Land Bank for its work in support of this program and others that repurpose abandoned, blighted, or delinquent houses. Thank you to our Fiscal Officer Kristen Scalise for all of your efforts with the Land Bank.

Homeownership is at the heart of the American Dream and a key driver of generational wealth. It provides lasting benefits to our entire community. So, here is more exciting news: Beginning

November 1, we will launch our First-Home First-Loan program, where the County will provide a 3 to 1 match for qualifying, first-time homebuyers.

In a housing market that is increasingly competitive, we know how a little help can go a long way. If a family puts down \$4,000, the County will match with \$12,000 dollars in a deferred, no-interest loan. This program is targeted to our neighborhoods that are most in need. Check out our website for more information.

As we are working to keep Summit County livable and affordable for our residents, we are also keeping our County livable for our four-legged friends. People do love their pets. Almost one year ago, Summit County Animal Control launched our Community Pet Food Pantry in partnership with Greater Goods Charities. It has flourished ever since. We have delivered 250 thousand pounds of FREE pet food and supplies to local families.

We know we need to be proactive about preventing pets from ever reaching our facility. This highly popular program serves an average of 212 households each drive-thru event. And, that doesn't cover those served by our deliveries to local pet charities and our Meals-on-Wheels program. Additionally, through October 31<sup>st</sup>, we are offering reduced adoption costs for dogs and cats, so come "fall" in love with your pet and take advantage of our new, free microchipping for every animal adopted out.

This program is one more example of how the County leverages our financial resources to meet the needs of our community. Spending our money wisely and being financially solvent remains a cornerstone of our philosophy of governance. Our finances remain as strong as ever. We continue to maintain strong bond ratings from Moody's and S & P. We will continue to advance our community and provide high-quality services for our residents while exercising sound financial principles. And, we do all this with the lowest county sales tax in the state.

Summit County operates with the lowest general fund revenue per capita, of the largest counties in the state. We are also committed to accountability and transparency. We recently launched Open Finance, a digital tool that provides free and easy access to the County's financial data.

Kudos to our talented team of professionals for getting things done right, and on a tight budget. To Fiscal Officer Scalise and her team, thank you, especially as we have shifted to a 21<sup>st</sup> century financial management system. Migrating to a system like this is no easy feat.

Folks, all these projects and initiatives I have just told you about continue to put Summit County on the MAP. Now, in April of 2024, we will actually be on an incredible map. If you have not heard, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, our County and a vast swath of Ohio will be one of the BEST places ON EARTH to view a total solar eclipse.

Those of us living in Ohio will not be able to see another one locally until 2099. Let's make it count. The countdown begins, with just 179 days left. We expect the County and our State to experience a massive influx of visitors. During past eclipses in the US, communities have seen their populations double and even triple.

We are excited to welcome our guests and showcase our community. The flip side of that is that we must be prepared. We have already seen high demand for hotels, campsites, restaurants, parks, and our infrastructure and roads are likely to feel the pinch. Earlier, I mentioned the excellent work of our Emergency Management Team and their diligence in preparing for events. Now, our EMA team needs your help.

We need local governments, businesses, schools, parks—all of you to step up and prepare for this incredible event. To give you an example - some of our school districts have already made plans to cancel classes or release early. Remember, we have less than 6 months to prepare. To help our community get ready for this event, we have created a solar eclipse website that contains important information. You can use the QR code on the screen or on your table. We plan to hold information sessions in the future. The success of this event depends on you.

Now, the eclipse is not here yet, but we do have an election just around the corner. Early voting has started for the November 7<sup>th</sup> Election and we encourage everyone to get out and vote. You can request a mail-in ballot, you can early vote, or you can vote on Election Day. There are lots of ways you can cast your vote. So, as the saying goes, just do it.

Let me remind you why your vote is so important. This past August, our county saw voter turnout reach 41% percent. That's 41% compared to 7% in August of 2022. And you all made that happen.

Your vote does make a difference.

Now, Summit County has always celebrated difference makers. Let's take a moment to look back at one of the greatest – Sojourner Truth. In 1851, she stood just steps away, at what is now the United Way Building, where she delivered a timeless speech. She fought tirelessly for the rights of Black people and all women, and never wavered from her resolve.

From a kernel of an idea that was brought to me, our community, once again came together, and re-ignited past efforts to honor Sojourner Truth. I am proud to have been a part of this from day one, and to have contributed resources and funds towards our Sojourner Truth Plaza and Statue.

It has taken many people, many donors—too many to mention here—and many days to make this happen. Thank you to the Committee and United Way who have worked tirelessly to make this a real tribute to her legacy. And if this project inspires you as it did me, please consider donating.

One of the challenges in making a speech like this is that you can never really cover every project or thank every partner. However, I would be remiss if I did not recognize our outgoing mayors who have worked with us over many years. To Mayor Horrigan, Mayor Kline, and Mayor Neugebauer: thank you. As these three mayors finish their terms, I want to publicly acknowledge the strong partnerships that have benefitted not only those cities but the entire County. Gentlemen, it has been my honor.

And, thank you again to all of the public officials in attendance today. Many thanks to our community, business, and nonprofit leaders. You all bring your expertise and heart into what you do and I am gratified to live in and serve Summit County.

Today, we have endeavored to give you the big picture (a bird's eye view, so to speak) of some of the things that we are spearheading in our community. You know, when I talk to my friends and family, they sometimes ask, "Do you ever get tired?" And the answer is no. This work energizes me.

The answer is No because I have the most incredible team, made up of individuals who work day in and day out, in countless different ways, to serve our communities.

When we go to a national conference and we hear from across the country what's going on, we understand that we are not alone in facing some of these issues.

So you ask, what makes the difference? What gives me the energy? It's the people. Every day I get up, I am grateful for the people who make this County work. You may not see these people, you may not know who they are, but I get stopped—even in the grocery store—where people tell me stories of how they have been touched.

So, if you are an employee of Summit County—any employee—please stand and let me thank you for your unwavering dedication to our residents. Your work is valued, important, and meaningful. I am humbled.

As I close this address, I want to remind you that the State of Summit County is strong because our people are strong. And, I thank each and every one of you for your help in strengthening our community each and every day.