

Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you all for joining me today for the 2026 State of Summit County.

Each year, this gathering gives us a chance to take stock of where we are, recognize what we have accomplished together, and look ahead to the work still in front of us. We are grateful to be back at the John S. Knight Center, whose team always takes great care of our County staff, guests, and members of the media. Please join me in thanking Gregg Mervis and his team for their hospitality and service.

I also want to thank the Press Club for sponsoring today's event. Your support for journalism in our community matters. As most of you know, your ticket today helps fund scholarships for journalism students. A free and independent press is critical. We depend on journalists who can ask tough questions, hold institutions accountable, seek the truth, and make sure the public has the information it needs to actively participate in our democracy. Investing in the next generation of journalists is an investment for all of us and our future.

I also want to recognize the interpreters from Greenleaf for helping make today's event accessible and welcoming to everyone in our community. Today is also our 9th zero waste event, thanks to our partners at ReWorks. Nine years is an impressive milestone—and a great example of what happens when we turn our values into action. Thank you for helping us keep this event out of the landfill year after year.

Finally, I want to thank our dedicated County employees, elected officials, nonprofits, community partners, local businesses, and, most importantly, the residents we all serve. Your commitment, resilience, and willingness to work together are what move our County forward. As we look at both the opportunities and challenges ahead, that spirit of collaboration gives us every reason to be confident about Summit County's future.

Change is inevitable, but it also presents us with an opportunity. An opportunity to learn, to adapt, and to grow stronger together. If we embrace change with that same spirit of collaboration and resilience, I am confident we can turn the challenges

ahead into opportunities and continue building a Summit County where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Over the past several years, when I stood before you to deliver the State of the County address, I often spoke about the tail winds pushing Summit County forward. We have benefited from a strong economy, growing opportunities, and a sense that momentum was on our side.

Today, the conversation is a bit different. The winds have shifted. We find ourselves navigating powerful headwinds. Economic uncertainty, rapid technological change, and a political environment that seems to grow more dynamic and unpredictable by the day.

Too often, local communities like ours are left to navigate the consequences of decisions made in Columbus or Washington. Policies change. Priorities change. Funding changes. The only thing in life that is constant is change. And, that change is felt more often right here at home.

But if there is one lesson that Summit County has learned throughout its history, it is this: We must create our own destiny. When I look across this room, I do not see a community waiting for someone else to solve our problems. I see leaders, workers, educators, entrepreneurs, public servants, and neighbors who are always working together to solve problems and create a stronger Summit County.

Today, everywhere you turn, people are talking about artificial intelligence. AI dominates headlines, boardrooms, classrooms, and conversations about the future. It promises to transform how we work, how we learn, and how we live. As remarkable as these technologies may be, they are still just tools.

People wrote the Declaration of Independence. People drafted the Constitution. People created stories and fables that teach our children the principles that guide us. People looked up at the stars, imagined heroes and leaders among the constellations, and told stories that inspired generations to dream bigger than themselves.

It will be people who determine the future of Summit County. Not algorithms. Not machines. Not distant governments. People.

People who choose to invest in their communities. People who build businesses, people who mentor young students, people who serve their neighbors, and people who step forward when challenges arise. People who refuse to believe that our destiny will be decided somewhere else. The future of Summit County will not be written for us. It will be written by us.

Despite the shift in momentum, I believe in us. I have seen what the people of this County can accomplish when we decide to chart our own course. Today, I want to talk about how we do that.

One shining example of how we chart our own course is the Summit Health and Safety Innovation Fund. At a time when so many of the decisions affecting our communities are made far beyond our community's borders, this fund gives us something incredibly important: the ability to invest in solutions we know our residents need.

It is exciting for me to be able to share with you that we are now several steps closer to innovative grantmaking that will help safeguard the health and safety of Summit County in perpetuity. After securing the fund's own 501c3 status in November and tax-exempt status in June, the County officially transferred \$45 million dollars from the opioid settlement to the fund on July 17, 2026.

Additionally, earlier this year, the County and Akron Community Foundation named the 13 appointees to the fund's board of directors. These individuals represent all walks of life and areas of expertise and are truly representative of Summit County. Of course, there is still much policy and administrative work to be done over the next several months, but we anticipate the fund to begin grantmaking in the third quarter of 2027.

As we approach this milestone with the innovation fund, we are even closer with the Summit County Community Empowerment Fund. This new ACF fund, also supported with \$5 million from the opioid settlement, will provide grants to support minority and disadvantaged communities in Summit County that have experienced harm due to the opioid epidemic. The seven-member board was appointed in February. Recently, the board met to define their priorities, and we expect them to begin grantmaking this December.

The County extends sincere thanks to all the board members for their willingness to serve and for answering the call to leadership at such a pivotal moment. Your commitment of time, expertise, and heart reflects a shared belief in the power of community-driven solutions and the responsibility we carry to those we serve. Together, we created the opportunity to transform the lessons of the past into enduring hope, healing, and change for generations to come.

We could not do any of this without the steadfast support of Akron Community Foundation. Thank you John, your team, and your board for your continued support of our collective vision.

This fifty-million-dollar investment is more than a financial commitment. It is a commitment from my office and County Council to the Summit County community. This is a commitment to confronting the lasting impact of the opioid epidemic and investing in the people and families affected by it.

The harm cannot be measured in dollars alone. It is measured in lives lost, families forever changed, children growing up without parents, and the collective grief carried by our community. The epidemic has touched virtually every corner of Summit County, leaving loss and trauma, but also a determination to heal and do better.

I ask you to join me in a brief moment of silence to remember those we have lost, those whose lives have been forever altered, and the families and loved ones who continue to carry that loss. Let us also honor those in recovery and all who work to help our community heal. Building these two funds has been hard work. Thank you to the countless people who helped make this a living legacy.

Hard work is just what we do in the County. Every day, we challenge ourselves to think beyond the traditional. You will find no better example of this nontraditional approach than Summit Connects.

I am excited to share that as of today, the primary construction of our 135-mile Summit Connects Public Safety fiber network is complete, and the very final miles of fiber optic cable are being pulled through ground infrastructure as we speak.

We cannot predict every technological challenge ahead, but we can make sure Summit County is prepared for it. That is what this investment is about. It is about giving our communities the tools and infrastructure they need to respond to challenges rather than wait for someone else to solve them. This initiative was a significant undertaking requiring immense coordination with all 31 local communities. To our mayors, trustees and their excellent teams, thank you for partnering with us.

While the construction phase took a bit longer than we expected, I would like to note our speed was dictated by safety. This project required the use of horizontal drilling. To avoid underground utility strikes, our team opted to utilize ground penetrating radar, the industry gold standard. They also held regular safety meetings with all stakeholders to mitigate any risks to the community.

As we wrap up the physical infrastructure, we can now focus on the use of this high-speed, secure network. All 31 communities will soon be hardwired into the network, providing a safe and secure intranet for their operations, keeping their communities safer from ever-present cybersecurity risks. In collaboration with our community partners, we are assessing the many opportunities Summit Connects can offer, from smart traffic management, data sharing, integrated public safety and much more. These discussions are ongoing.

When you think about how technology supports public safety, hopefully you think about our 9-1-1 dispatch operation serving most of Summit County. Last year, we introduced AI-assisted technology for non-emergency calls at the Summit Emergency Communications Center. Now, our virtual assistant has a name. Meet AVA. In one year, the SECC received more than 70,000 emergency calls and nearly 190,000 non-emergency calls.

AVA answered 83% of those non-emergency calls, handling everything from questions about fireworks and trick-or-treat times to community events and other frequently asked questions. Even more impressive, 65% of the calls AVA answered were completely resolved without the need for a dispatcher.

That matters because it allows our highly trained dispatchers to stay focused on what matters most: answering emergency calls and helping people when they need it

most. We know people want to know that when they call 9-1-1, a skilled professional is there to answer. We want that, too. That is why the SECC continues to educate the community about 9-1-1, AVA and how to prepare for an emergency through presentations, meetings, facility tours and other outreach.

Combined with Text-to-9-1-1 and translation services, these tools make the SECC a state-of-the-art operation, enabling our dispatchers to serve over 350,000 residents as quickly and effectively as possible. I would like to thank all mayors and trustees of our participating communities who work together to keep this operation running at a high-level of service, quality, and innovation. The County continues to be a proud partner in this collaborative endeavor.

And of course, I want to thank the staff and dispatchers for their unmatched level of expertise and dedication. Notice I said unmatched? I know they are unmatched because right now our team is in Columbus accepting the Dispatch Center of the Year Award! Dispatch is just one piece of our robust public safety ecosystem.

Another is the county jail. Improvements at the Summit County Jail continue to be a key focus for Sheriff Fatheree's and my administration. Last year, we shared news of our state grant award to support a new sallyport and intake area which are currently under construction.

We recently added two Mental Health Coordinators at the jail to assess incoming inmates, connect them with appropriate treatment and behavioral health services, and work with mental health and corrections staff to address concerning behaviors and ensure a timely response. Thank you, Sheriff Fatheree, for your continued commitment to improving inmate mental health and substance use needs.

Summit County's ecosystem is always looking for creative new ways to collaborate, especially when it comes to the criminal justice system. In May, the Summit County Pro Bono Collaborative was born. Modeled after a similar initiative in our neighboring county to the north, it pairs volunteer attorneys with community members in need of assistance.

Spearheaded by our Summit County Common Pleas Court judges and made possible with volunteer attorneys from the Prosecutor's office, Summit Legal

Defenders, Community Legal Aid, the University of Akron School of Law School, and private practice. This initiative builds upon the impressive work Prosecutor Kolkovich and Clerk of Courts Tavia Galonski have done through their One Stop Expungement Clinics. Held the first Friday of every month, residents can ask their legal questions with a trusted legal professional, for free. Everything from child support, to housing, to driver's license suspension, you name it, they will assist you.

Our Courthouse sits just down the street, as does the Ohio Building, the county's main office for decades. As a major property owner in Downtown Akron, it is important that we help provide the backbone for businesses, nonprofits, and our residents to live in and enjoy while staying safe.

Over the past several years, Summit County has invested \$20 million dollars into improvements at the Ohio Building and our attached parking garage, the first upgrades to these structures in decades. On most days, this area is full of County staff, residents attending court, obtaining a wide variety of documents to handle their business, as well as eating and stopping in at some of our favorite restaurants and coffee shops.

Now hear me, every weekend, we lift our parking deck gates for anyone to park for free and enjoy what downtown has to offer. There is much to do! Did you know there are hundreds of exhibiting artists, 30 artists in residence, and monthly Art Walks at Summit Artspace just down the street? Summit County has owned and leased this building to various organizations for the last 50 years. This year, we invested \$1 million into updating the electrical, HVAC, lighting, and finishes. These improvements ensure that Summit Artspace's artists and visitors alike can fully utilize this historic space for many years to come.

We are making a similar investment in the Knight Creative Project, a collaborative partnership turning the historic Polsky Building into a vibrant arts, academic, and community space. The County is increasing our ongoing annual financial support of the Downtown Akron Development Corporation to support this compelling project. I want to thank the Knight Foundation and Kyle Kutuchief, President Nemer, Mayor Malik, Chris Hardesty, and the other partners who are making this transformation possible.

We believe this project is another piece of the economic development puzzle we are crafting with our community partners. When the economic landscape changes, we cannot simply wait for opportunity to come to us. We must create it. Which leads us to the Polymer Industry Cluster.

The Polymer Industry Cluster, consisting of 53 investing partners and 7 cornerstone partners, previously received \$100 million from federal, state, local, and private partners since its launch in 2021. They did not stop there. These researchers, scientists, and entrepreneurs continue to collaborate, innovate, and forge their path in such a remarkable way that investors cannot help but pay attention.

NEO-SMART is a coalition of over 70 partners across industry segments, higher education, technology, economic development, government, philanthropy, and nonprofit sectors, all working together to strengthen America's production and manufacturing backbone. The industry defines what needs to be researched. The universities and labs deliver it. Workforce and civic partners bring people together to share the work and the results. Together, they push science forward from the lab to the factory floor across three industry clusters: Polymers, Chemicals & Coatings, and Metals.

One of just 15 finalists nationwide, NEO-SMART received a transformational National Science Foundation (NSF) Engine Award in July. Now designated an NSF Regional Innovation Engine, this grant will bring in \$160 million over the next ten years. These are massive wins for Summit County, Northeast Ohio, and our future.

This brings high-paying jobs, innovative research, and real growth opportunities for our residents, businesses, and communities for years to come. While I might not be a polymer scientist, I do know when you get the right people with the same vision together, you can really create something transformational.

Please join me in thanking the people in those rooms: President Nemer and his entire staff at the University of Akron, Steve Millard and his team at the Greater Akron Chamber, Hans Dorfi, head of the Polymer Industry Cluster and all the partners who contribute to this work. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to sustaining our region's role in America's manufacturing history, keeping it alive and ever evolving.

For initiatives like the Polymer Cluster to be successful, we must be ready when opportunities arise. When businesses are facing uncertainty from changing markets, regulations and costs, local government should not add unnecessary barriers. We should be making it easier to invest, build and create jobs.

One way we stay ready to support this project and other economic development activities is with our Division of Building Standards. Through the first half of 2026, our team has provided permits and inspections for hundreds of residential and commercial projects throughout the county. Through just the first of this year, these projects represent over a half billion dollars in renovations and new builds. Clearly, there are game-changing projects underway throughout the county.

Last year, I talked about how we eliminated contractor registration fees and shifted nearly the entire permitting process online, all to be more business-friendly. This year, we saw new demand for these efficient, high-quality services from our communities.

In May, the City of Norton requested we provide building code enforcement in their city. In August, the City of Barberton followed suit. With these partnerships, we are lowering city government's costs and eliminating the expenses of operating and staffing the building department. All while streamlining services for their over 35,000 residents and countless businesses. To ensure prompt service, we will be opening a satellite office in Norton to serve the southern portion of the County even more conveniently.

Today, Summit County Building Standards provides commercial plan review and inspection services for 24 communities, and residential plan review and inspection services for 23 communities. My sincere thanks to the Building Standards staff for embracing change, expanding your impact, and setting a standard of professionalism and service that our entire community can be proud of.

Each year, I like to highlight the many infrastructure projects the County undertakes to support growth and development in our 31 communities. These projects never seem to grab the headlines, but rest assured they are making a real difference. In Peninsula, we have completed the design for a new sewer system. In addition to the County's \$7.5 million dollar investment, with the help of Congresswoman Emilia

Sykes, we have secured state and federal funding to push this important project forward. Thank you, Congresswoman Sykes.

In Boston Township, an extension of sewer service to Akron Cleveland Rd. is under construction. Once complete, vacant tracts of land with significant traffic flow will be prime for development, opening up important new opportunities for one of our smallest communities.

In Copley Township, the Summit County Transportation Improvement District received \$150,000 from ODOT to begin redesigning Copley Circle at Cleveland-Massillon Road and Copley Road. The project funds traffic analysis, field surveys and conceptual design for a roundabout to improve safety and modernization.

Federal and state changes are presenting challenges for maintaining County infrastructure. Despite declining revenues and major concerns about the future of federal grants, County Engineer Brubaker and his team continue to leverage their budget to help as many communities as possible with critical improvements. By pooling resources for things like paving, we can help our local communities improve and maintain roads at a lower cost.

In 2025, the Engineer managed 34 different projects throughout the County, from bridges and culverts to roads and ditches. Thank you, Al, for your leadership and partnership.

The Engineer and his team have also led the important work to better manage stormwater throughout the County. As we continue to see more severe weather, management of stormwater is essential to avoiding costly damage to property and infrastructure. The fees paid into the County's stormwater district are funding projects in Copley, Springfield, Bath and elsewhere that will reduce flooding and improve area water quality.

Like I said, these projects are not flashy, but they are making a real difference for property and business owners alike. We cannot control every factor that affects whether a business chooses to invest or if a community can grow. But we can control whether the infrastructure is ready when that investment comes.

Rehabbing brownfields is another critical component of successful development work in order to support our 31 communities. These are properties that require environmental cleanup due to former use.

Our community has been very successful in repurposing these sites in the last several years and have received new tools in the last year to tackle even more sites. In 2025, the County and our partners received a \$1.2 million federal EPA grant to conduct environmental site assessments and plans in Akron and Cuyahoga Falls, which are crucial first steps in the remediation process.

Another essential component is a workforce capable of conducting the remediation work. So, we were especially pleased when, earlier this year, our workforce board received another federal EPA grant to train local workers for in-demand jobs in this field.

This is a perfect example of how we work across community borders and disciplines to deliver good outcomes. Just like stormwater and sewer, this is not the flashiest work, but it makes a difference in individual lives and businesses and is one piece of a that puzzle that makes Summit County a great place to live and work.

Our economic development team is always looking for new and creative ways to support local businesses, especially our small business owners. As a former small business owner myself, I know firsthand the challenges these folks face daily.

Since the beginning of this year, our team has traversed all corners of the County to visit over 50 new businesses and officially welcome them to Summit County. As part of this outreach, our team introduces themselves, so business owners have a contact if they want to connect more formally in the future. We also present them with a Welcome Certificate. This is a simple gesture, but we're opening the door for future dialogue about the resources the County and our partners can offer.

We also use our social media platforms to help residents learn about new businesses. In the last few months, our posts featuring those businesses have received tens of thousands of views, helping to spread the word near and far. Since every business counts, we enjoy celebrating anniversaries with our existing businesses.

Our economic development team has also focused on highlighting our GIS, or Geographic Information System, over the past year. After launching a new parcel viewer earlier this year, we held events to teach developers, realtors and other stakeholders how to maximize use of this important tool.

Tools like the parcel viewer allow anyone to easily access property and community data in one place. At the end of the day, our GIS services help businesses and communities identify opportunities, evaluate sites and make data-driven development decisions.

On your table you'll find another exciting GIS opportunity to take advantage of. Our team is hosting three events in the next couple months to show residents how GIS tools work in your daily life, help us understand the past, and propel us into the future.

Housing continues to be an evergreen topic in Summit County, the state and the nation. We do not yet have a silver bullet to address this multi-faceted challenge. Congress passed the bipartisan 21st Century ROAD to Housing Act earlier this year. It is recognition from our federal partners that local governments need more tools to better address their unique housing needs. This bill made important policy changes, but we also need more funding. We ask our federal lawmakers to prioritize investing federal dollars in affordable housing.

Locally, we are doing what we can with the funding we do have. Our Community Development team continues to help keep vulnerable Summit County residents in their homes. Since this speech last year, we have invested nearly \$5 million in federal funding to improve 350 different homes throughout the County.

Summit County's Development Finance Authority has prioritized housing and seen great success in the past year. Utilizing various financing tools, the DFA supported the creation of 629 housing units in Akron, Barberton, Sagamore Hills and Stow. I'd like to thank President and CEO, Rachel Bridenstine, her team and the DFA Board for supporting our community with these investments.

Hear me when I say housing is an economic and workforce issue. We must ensure that residents, our workers, can afford to live in our community.

If we broaden that lens, we see that the same is true of our social services system. Programs like SNAP help families remain stable, maintain employment, and navigate the challenges that can otherwise push someone out of the workforce. Supporting people today can help strengthen the workforce of tomorrow. Yet new barriers keep popping up, blocking and weakening access to programs like SNAP. As the federal and state governments reduce their financial responsibility, while increasing the workload for essential government programs, we at the local level are struggling to meet the needs of our residents.

I want to be very clear, these changes have created significant barriers for veterans, seniors, individuals with disabilities, and others in need. We saw the largest single month decrease this July, with recipients dropping nearly 19% when compared to July 2025. I am fearful this means that more families and more vulnerable individuals will not have enough food on their table. This is serious. To be frank, the changing funding and policies are difficult to explain.

What I really want you to understand today is that the federal government is asking our staff to do significantly more, and even higher quality work, but providing us with 25% less funding to do so. Think about your own organizations? What would a 25% cut in funding do to your ability to staff your operations and your ability to operate at a high level of quality. I am sure we can agree the impact to your bottom line would be extremely challenging.

New eligibility policies are asking those served by the program to jump through more hoops, making it more difficult to maintain that stability I mentioned earlier. Despite these evolving challenges, our Job and Family Services staff continue to perform admirably. In fact, our staff continue to set the standard of quality for all JFS agencies throughout the state. New challenges arise almost daily in the form of new rules, increased documentation and more frequent verification. That doesn't even account for the new Medicaid work requirements that will be in effect in the new year. These all present new challenges for our residents and the County. We continue to engage with local, state and federal partners to mitigate and navigate these challenges.

Though we face significant challenges with SNAP and Medicaid, which are our largest programs at JFS, we are seeing excellent results in our other programming.

One of the common barriers working families face is the “benefits cliff,” an issue I have highlighted in past speeches. A raise or promotion should be something to celebrate, not something that puts a family at risk of losing critical support before they are financially ready. That is why the JFS Benefit Bridge program, known as NEXT, is so important. Through personalized coaching, financial incentives and supportive services, we help residents move toward employment and financial independence with confidence.

The results speak for themselves. Between November 2022 and September 2025, Summit County generated more than \$1.1 million in SNAP savings through Benefit Bridge—nearly 25% of the savings achieved by all 15 participating Ohio counties. That success led the State of Ohio to select Summit County to help develop a new Ohio Works First pilot that takes a more individualized approach, connecting residents with the employment, education and other supports that best meet their needs.

The goal is simple: help more people find lasting employment, help families move forward, and give residents the opportunity to create their own future. That same commitment extends to our young residents. Through our year-round BOSS workforce development program, young adults gain valuable work experience while preparing for careers. Last year, participants collectively earned \$1.4 million. Our Summer Youth Employment Program provided another 225 young people with meaningful work experience and an estimated \$600,000 in earnings.

These programs are about more than a paycheck. They connect young people to mentors, expose them to career opportunities and help them build the skills and confidence they need for the future.

Our commitment also extends to some of our most vulnerable residents. Each year, Adult Protective Services responds to reports of abuse, neglect and exploitation involving older adults. This year, Summit County was one of only six Ohio counties

selected for an APS Innovation Grant, supporting a new Differential Response model designed to help older adults safely remain in their homes whenever possible.

We were also one of only five APS programs nationwide selected for an opioid response pilot, supported by a \$200,000 federal grant to connect vulnerable adults, caregivers and families affected by substance use with treatment and recovery resources. Together, these investments reflect our approach: intervene early, build strong partnerships and provide people with the support they need to remain safe, stable and independent.

Behind all of this is an exceptional team of public servants. Their commitment to accountability, compassionate service, and strong community partnerships continue to set Summit County apart. That commitment is also reflected in how we do our work. This year, JFS once again received a clean audit from the state. That demonstrates our commitment to responsible stewardship while delivering high-quality services to the residents who count on us every day.

JFS is one of our most public-facing agencies. Another is Animal Control.

Late last year, we moved Summit County Animal Control under the umbrella of the Department of Public Safety to better reflect its services in our community. The Humane Society, a separate, non-profit organization, protects dogs from people. Animal Control protects people from dogs. It serves a true public safety function for Summit County's townships, as well as the 10 cities and all 8 villages contracting with us. In the past year, we have helped 204 dogs find new fur-ever homes and reunited 72 dogs with their owners!

Every dog leaving our facility receives a full veterinarian work-up, including vaccinations, spay or neuter, and microchipping. Lost and stray dogs are a serious concern, evident by the fact that our facility has been consistently full since 2022.

Despite this challenge, we have some of the best, most dedicated staff you could ever imagine working at Summit County Animal Control. They host fun themed celebratory adoption promotions every month, lowering the adoption cost to just \$28. In addition to our amazing staff, we have exceptional volunteers lending a

helping hand to our resident dogs. Volunteers take our dogs on walks, play with them, bathe them, and give them lots of love while in our care. Volunteers and staff assist with our monthly Pet Food Pantry, which has distributed hundreds of thousands of pounds in FREE pet food and supplies since 2022. In the past year, we have served an average of 200 households each month. I want to thank all the individuals who take time out of their day to give back to these pups in need. Your kindness and hard work are so appreciated.

I know I have thrown a lot at you so far. So, I am going to shift the vibe and take a minute to brag about my team. If you have been around since I took office, you know I have had an amazing team since day one. My folks continue to raise the bar for themselves and leap over it year after year. You know what is especially cool about our team? It is intergenerational. I have 20-year-olds contributing to our success as much as those who have been with the County for a couple of decades. I am constantly in awe of their creativity, passion and teamwork.

I am not the only one recognizing our stellar staff. Over the past year, members of our team have been recognized for excellence in leadership, victim services, communications, community development and public service. From statewide honors and professional awards to recognition from community organizations, these awards reflect the expertise, dedication and commitment our employees bring to their work every day.

These honors represent just a small sample of the incredible public servants who show up every day to serve Summit County and make our community a better place to live. I am incredibly proud of our team. Thank you all for everything that you do.

Now, before I began, you may have noticed our slideshow on these big screens behind me highlighting projects, services, and programming funded in your local communities with your property tax dollars. From police and fire to public parks, road and bridge maintenance, and much, much more, property taxes are vital to so much of what we consider normal life.

However, we know that homeowners are feeling that burden. My staff and our state association have been advocating for responsible fiscal solutions that can help

reduce that burden while maintaining public services. We have the lowest sales tax in the state, and we are always striving to find the most cost-effective solutions possible at every decision point.

When revenue is uncertain and costs continue to rise, responsible local government means planning for what we know and preparing for what we do not. We presented a balanced General Fund Budget amidst uncertain revenue sources. Because we strongly believe in the importance of transparency and good financial stewardship, especially when it comes to your tax dollars.

Our Finance and Budget department continues to expand these efforts. Last year, our team prepared the first Popular Annual Financial Report, a 20-page booklet that distills hundreds of pages of financial reporting into an easy read for the average resident. This booklet, along with our Operating Budget and Fiscal Officer Kristen Scalise's Annual Comprehensive Financial Report earned Summit County its first Triple Crown Award from the Government Finance Officers Association!

This year has truly flown by. It is hard to believe fall officially begins next week. And you know what that means? Another sad Browns season. Just kidding!

It means we are barreling towards the November election. We held our first General Election last November at the new, state-of-the-art Summit County Board of Elections at 1050 East Tallmadge Ave. This \$15 million investment will continue to pay off through increased savings from in-house ballot printing, increase safety from security improvements and secure infrastructure, and help keep our staff, our residents, and our elections safe and secure. By expanding the facility and parking, we can accommodate far more individuals who choose to vote early or drop off their absentee ballots at the Dropbox.

I hope we see record voter turnout this fall. Like I always say, I do not care who you vote for. I mean, I really do. But, just vote.

Remember, you cannot vote if you are not registered. Luckily, you still have time to double-check your registration, and make sure your name and address are up to date. If not, you can register online in less than 2 minutes. It is as simple as that.

The last day to register to vote is October 5th. Early voting at the new Board of Elections starts the very next day, October 6th. We made it even easier to check your registration and make a plan to vote by providing cards on your table that contain all the info I just mentioned. Even when things feel exhausting and burdensome, I want you to know that your voice matters, your vote matters. And, it is personal.

Our democracy is held up by local county staff members, working together across the aisle to ensure safe and secure elections. Our democracy is made possible by men and women in our communities who choose to work a 13-hour day in the middle of the work week. Our democracy needs us to continue voting, to continue showing up, and to continue speaking out. No matter what.

As we look ahead, I know the challenges facing us have not disappeared. The winds remain uncertain. The economy will continue to evolve. Technology will continue to reshape our world. And decisions made far beyond our borders will continue to affect life here at home.

But after everything we have discussed today, I hope one thing is clear. Our future does not depend on the direction of the wind. It depends on the strength of the people holding the wheel.

The story of Summit County has never been a story of waiting for permission, waiting for rescue, or waiting for someone else to determine our fate. It has always been a story of people stepping forward. People solving problems. And people building opportunities where others saw obstacles.

Generation after generation, the people of this County have faced change, uncertainty, and disruption. Each and every time, we have adapted. We have innovated. We have persevered. Not because it was easy, but because we understand that the future belongs to those willing to create it.

That spirit is alive today. It lives in our entrepreneurs and business owners. In our teachers and first responders. In our nonprofit leaders and public servants. In the young people preparing to shape the next chapter of our community. And, in the generations who built the foundation on which we all stand.

New technology may change how we live. But, it will never replace the values that have always defined us: hard work, resilience, creativity, compassion, and a commitment to one another. Those are human qualities. Those are Summit County qualities. And that is why, despite every challenge before us, I remain optimistic.

Because the State of the County is not measured solely by budgets, projects, or economic indicators. The State of the County is measured by its people. The State of the County is strong because the people of Summit County are strong.

As we continue writing our future together, I thank you.