

2021 State of the City Address by Mayor Julie Akins

Good evening.

The state of the city of Ashland--how does one fully speak to it? Ashland is a place unified by its love. Our mountains and streams, our architecture and engagement, our parks, and people.

But, we are also divided by our separate and real experiences of life--here in Ashland, the Rogue Valley, Oregon, and the nation.

We have been through a period of great stress, some might say trauma. We've lost people we've loved to a pandemic which we've been largely left on our own to figure out, this has created a rip in our fabric. People have lost jobs, businesses have died while others barely hang on. Homeowners and renters have worried if they can keep the basic need for a door that locks and roof to keep the rain away. We have not been able to gather, to hug, to enjoy the sunshine of each other's smiles. Live music, a play, a glass of our outstanding wine--none of this have we had to comfort ourselves.

It's been so hard.

Now add to it a fire which ripped through our valley and decimated our neighbors to the north. I cannot drive down highway 99 past the homes lost without a tear pooling in my eyes. I think of the book store in Talent and the times I took my granddaughter there, how its gentle owner handed her a book, "Keep it. Enjoy" he said, never knowing he would months later lose everything. I, too, have friends who barely escaped with their lives and who still try to understand the depth of their grief--our shared grief--at such loss.

And then January 6th. An attempted violent overthrow of our nation. Our elected leaders on the floor desperately fearing they might die as an angry mob broke through the doors of the People's House, disrespectfully battering our democracy--the same democracy for which many of our friends and families sacrificed. I think of my own father and uncles, cousins, and brothers and now my daughter who proudly wear the uniform. I am reminded of going to the city council with that same dad who told me that it doesn't matter how much money you have or status in this country--you have the right to redress and to speak truth to your elected representatives. He was so proud of this fact he would every now and then practice his testimony with me. I am sorry he is not here to see this tonight but also relieved he did not have to see what happened on January 6th. His heart would have broken beyond repair. Sometimes I think my heart will never heal too.

But that's what I'm here, really to say as we ponder the State of our City. We are in need of healing, of the comfort of each other, of knowing that despite our differences we are not defined by that. We are instead defined by something else---a one word mantra:

Hope.

We will address our economy, our housing, our need for living wage jobs, our businesses who need our help and climate change.

Hope as steady as the need we share to deliberate together about how to best combat the steady march of climate change. Many who are here, joining me on this council and in this

community have devoted their work and their knowledge to this cause and we will not fail to listen. We are lucky to be so graced. Let us not forget. Climate change and yes, the risk of fire weigh heavy upon us and we are engaged in the serious work of preparation. We will be hearing your voices in February about this. We will be seeking best practices and employing them. We will support our firefighters and police in this effort of keeping our town and its residents informed and safe.

We share hope too in supporting our businesses who have gone all in to stick it out through this hard time so that when one great day when we are able to be together again they can do what they do best. These businesses are also what make Ashland what it is and we will stand by them, assist them, listen to them.

We hope, too, to be the kind of town where our university students graduate and stay. We will work for living wage jobs and the kind of housing where a family starting out can afford to be here. Taking care of the planet and taking care of each other are intertwined. We want our walkable streets to be used for working people on their way to their jobs rather than commuting from towns which require a car.

To do this we must build affordable housing.

We will support our builders and collaborators in creating housing that is dignified and affordable for everyone.

And, we will bring in those people who are Ashlanders through and through who need to come in from the cold. There is no reason why we cannot house the unhoused. No one benefits from the continued trauma of homelessness. We will bring hope where there was once fear.

In this hope we will reach out to living wage employers and support those who are already here. I think of Organic Alcohol who switched production to care for people in the pandemic shipping hundreds of gallons of hand sanitizer around the nation--with special care toward those with fewer resources. That's but one of many Ashland employers hiring people at living wages while giving back. There are more and they need us to stand behind them as they've stood behind us.

Next year when I speak to you about the State of the City, I will report back on how we're doing. It will move from hope to reality with your help. Yes, I am setting an aspiration based on the many hours over the years you and I have spoken together, but it is more than a dream or a vision--it is about achievable goals.

And remember this is not me. And it never will be, it is US together effecting the change we want to see in our town.

Bring your engagement, your skills, your voice. Hold us accountable to uphold this hope. This is your city and tonight we gladly serve at your will and upon your wishes.

Thank you for bestowing upon us your trust. Hold fast to your faith. We've made it through some dark days but soon we will be standing together smiling on a sunny day in our Ashland watching our children and grandchildren playing in the creek and being glad we kept our love alive even when we weren't sure how.