

State of the City Address – 08/30/2021

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>> Mayor Adler: Good evening, thank you for joining me for the 2021 state of the city address in a covid friendly environment. Thank you city manager cronk and to my colleagues, I am going to list my name because I don't think that there has ever been a council drawn to such a level of work as we have faced these past several years. Mayor pro tem. >> Harper-madison:. >> Renteria, Fuentes, Casar, kitchen, Kelly, the pool, tovo and alter. Thank you for your leadership and I am, unparalleled commission to Austin, thank you to our city executives, department heads, the entire city staff, including my own staff and the fair's office and the others on the second floor of city hall for never wavering in your service to this community, you have all kept this city moving forward.

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A special thanks to the city's first responders, the police, the firefighters, the emergency paramedics who put themselves at risk to protect us all. Let's remember four of our finest that have passed away in the line of duty just this past month. Senior Sargent -- officer Boyd, officer trailer who, firefighter Rodney Callie. And to our health authority, Dr. Walk and her predecessor Dr. Escott, Austin public health formerly led by assistant city manager Stephanie Hayden Howard, and now director Adrian. Dredge stirrup, their staff at public health have helped keep Austin covid death rate at less than half of the rate as the state of Texas. Work that was only possible together with county judge Andy brown and a, again county judge, now senator Sarah Eckhardt before him, and the county

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commissioner, constables, especially constable more, morales and fire chiefs, especially chief Bailey, the hardworking and wonderful staff of Travis county and our critical partnerships with the black, Latino and aapi community organizations, as well as the close collaboration with our major hospital networks, ascension, barrel, Scott & white and St. David's, Dell medical school, and our modeler, Dr. Lauren Myers. You know, if the state had the same covid rate as Austin, Travis county, more than 25,000 Texans would not have died of this virus, that's more than 25,000 lives that would not have been lost. Thank you to our teachers and school administrators who have taught us all by finding ways to teach and care for our children against all odds, education first responders who even today are battling at the front lines

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that are confusing and contradictory rules of community sentiments, all with the singular focus of helping our kids. Thank you to our medical first responders, the nurses, doctors, respiratory therapists, technicians and other healthcare workers, I simply don't have the words. You look death in the face, you stand up to our worst nightmares, you are exhausted and emotionally spent. You assume the brave responsibility of saying good-bye for us all and the most amazing thing to me is that tomorrow you will come back and you will be there again. Uh recently had the privilege of making the rounds in an icu, we were with a pregnant woman whose blood was being pumped outside of her body so that a machine could reoxygenate it. A resolute technician nearby, nurses coming and going focused

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on the hope of her and her baby's recovery. I don't know that I could do this. Thank you too to those who have had to go to work when many of us were staying home to keep the power on and the the water running and the phones working and the news coming. Thank you to our musicians, artists and those in the hospitality industry who are not only the lifeblood of our culture and economy but have been among those that have been hit the hardest and there are so many more. Thank you to the grocery store clerks, the restaurant workers, and the cooks in the kitchens across the city that have made sure we have all had food to eat. To the transit workers that kept metro, at cap metro that continuously this whole time have operated to ensure that everyone could get around, and I know here that cap metro, like other frontline public agencies and private employers have had

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workers fall victim to this virus while serving in our community and we thank them, although it doesn't seem to be enough. Thank you to those that in this covid world have reached out to neighbors and friends to make sure they are okay, volunteers who brought food to those who might be hungry, water when the faucets were running and warmth when the power wasn't on. Thank you to those who figured

out how to do their jobs in such taxing and stressful times, often at home, many times nearly alone, keeping our economy working at the highest possible levels, levels that will help us speed and gain the reach of our recovery at the end of this nightmare. Thank you to our parents who have been stretched to their limits managing multiple roles and modeling resilience for their children. And to our kids, some of whom can barely remember a time when

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we weren't wearing masks, and didn't fear being around too many other people, yet have still found a way to embody joy and hope. Thank you to all those that have not given up, that have not lay down, that despite all that has been thrown our way have demonstrated the will and the spirit to overcome, and who have by their example given strength to others to do the same. And for those struggling with their mental health during this time, I want you to know you are not alone, and it is absolutely okay to get the help you need and deserve and thank you for recognizing that self care is an act of courage. Thank you to all those that have gotten vaccinated and those that struggle with the decision and are still willing to listen and learn with an open mind. Thank you for saving our economy, but more importantly many lives, perhaps even including your own.

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Thank you for those willing to put back on their masks, often among a group of folks who are unmasked because doing what is right isn't always a easy and the rewards are often those you realize in your heart. If there was nothing else accomplished in my words this evening, let bit that we recognize that we should look at everyone around us and say thank you. We have shared and survived incredible odds, all of us together. We have each of us earned the appreciation of the entire community and we have each of us incurred a debt and an obligation to appreciate what those around us have weathered and done for us together, because this is what community is all about. Let us remember to say thank you to everyone we encounter. You know, almost 50 years ago I was passing through Austin and I

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stayed, I often joke that it was the breakfast tacos. Sometimes I have joked and I say it was the live music and Barton springs. In truth, it has always been about the people that I have chosen to live here. We are a city where. We are a people, it is a city where people genuinely care N Austin people walk down the street and actually make eye contact and they smile. People open and hold doors for one another. Tech entrepreneurs in Austin are suspicious when austinites open up and share their contact lists and a year later they found themselves doing the same thing. Remember how it felt when we pulled

together in response to a bomber, delivering explosives to random porches. While we were a community gripped with fear we all did our part to be more

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vigilant about watching for anyone or anything out of place. We increased our efforts to get to know our neighbors and offered support to anyone who might feel alone and isolated. We acted quickly to raise funds to support grieving survivors. And in recent weeks in the midst of reacting to the delta virus and our overwhelmed city, Austinites got word that Afghans might be seeking refuge at our city and Austin did not blink. Our city council issued a resolution to welcome Afghans in need of safety and service organizations have been flooded with offers of groceries and gift cards and even furniture. It reminds me of one of my favorite memories as mayor a few years ago Diane and I made a public call for a central supplies for hurricane Harvey I have evacuees who were coming into Austin.

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Thousands stopped what they were doing and literally emptied the shelves at Wal-Mart and targets in town to make welcoming baskets, because that is who we are at our core. Keeping Austin weird means welcoming, caring for and respecting one another for who they are. Even when they are different, even when that means that some come downtown wearing only a thong. Everything that goes well in this city begins with our people, and today we can say the state of our city is the strongest in the country. You know, I -- just about every traditional and frequently used measure, Austin is the envy of cities across the country. Austin just added jobs in 14 of the last 15 months, in fact, Austin has regained most of the pandemic related jobs that were

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lost during the spring of last year. Austin's unemployment rate of 4.2 percent anticipated to be a seasonally adjusted rate of 4.0 percent is the very lowest among the 25 largest cities in the country. Austin ranks as the second best performing major job markets since the beginning of the pandemic. Austin is the safest of the four biggest cities in Texas and is among the five safest big cities in the entire country. As of July more than 16,500 jobs have been announced from roughly 60 companies moving to the region and nearly 70 ex-packs, expansions companies already in the area. This is yet another reflection of how much is going well here and how desirable a city we are. .. We have attracted new, clean manufacturing that will bring much needed middle skill jobs,

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jobs that don't require a degree, to a city where that is our most significant employment need. And the water in Barton springs remains cold and clear. Completion of the city wide all ages and abilities bicycle get work is well ahead of schedule, substantial first steps are being taken to address long-term safety and security needs associated with wild fires and technology tax. I am particularly proud of our accomplishments in transportation, which has been a key priority for me, for my colleagues and the entire city council. We are well on our way to a new mass public transit system and a subway rail underground downtown, a ton of under lake Austin and crossing it soon to be a new pedestrian transit only bridge. Our complete seasonal design is now being brought to the community for comment and input,

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even while designs are being debated moneys have been designated for a multibillion-dollar ih-35 project that should lower the freeway and stitch back together the east and west while providing transit lanes to encourage people to get out of their daily auto commutes. Our city and our utilities enjoy high bond ratings and a confidence of the financial markets. Because we have such a strong economy the Austin city council was able to lower the city portion of the typical homeowners property tax bill for only the second time in recent memory. By doubling the homestead exemption and dramatically increasing exemptions for seniors and for those with disabilities Austin maintains our position as one of the international leaders of climate change litigation with electrification of energy and battery technology. The state of our city is not

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only strong but the strongest in the country and we should pause and celebrate this achievement. [Applause] >> And I love the covid applause. And at the same time we are here today with our eyes wide open to the racial and ethnic disparities that exist for our black and brown communities. Our work is not done until all austinites share access and opportunity equally. And while we have so much work ahead, we are taking greater action to effect justice and equity than ever before in the history of this city. Austin's equity office is leading the review, measurement and implementation of new equity initiatives in city departments and in our bucket budget. Thousands of private sector community leaders and connectors

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have given their time to go through focused multiday training to understand the shortcomings and opportunities that exist with racial equity and then turn that learning into practice. Tens of millions of dollars have been devoted to creating thousands of units of deeply affordable and permanent supportive housing units, many already on the ground and 15,667 others planned and under development will soon appear on properties, such as at the St. John's and Ryan drive tracts. In fact, over just the last few years, our city has produced and set into motion significantly more deeply affordable and supportive housing than ever before. Austin has one of the lowest pandemic eviction rates among U.S. Cities in part because of orders from me and the county judge, as well as the actions of the city council and the

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commissioners court and over \$50 million in federal rental assistance that has gone to tenants and landlords, efforts that have kept people in their homes at this dangerous time. First ever region that workforce development plans including training, childcare, apprenticeship, job fairs are operating to continue to move thousands out of poverty and into living wage jobs. We are making transformational investments and providing quality childcare, investing over \$6 million in cares funding and over \$11 million in American rescue plan funding. And we have brought childcare services to over 500 Austin children, about to serve hundreds more. Austin leads nationally for reimagining how to do public safety in a way that will make our already safe city even safer and for all.

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We are disparities in arrests and process accuses for low level offenses, increasing community oversight of policing, restructuring the academy, training new police officers and increasing investments in mental health first response and ems coverage and response and increasing sheltering capacity for victims seeking protection from domestic violence. We initiated new programs to fight increased violence, including the illegal gun initiative of interim police chief -- participation is one of a 15 city white house convened cohort to drive community violence intervention and new investments in gun safety and other violence interventions. We should be proud to be part of a community that when voters approved as we did last November project connect we approved a \$300 million anti-displacement and affordability component, the

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largest such equity component of any transit program in the country. And led by black and brown community activists and organizers our city has taken meaningful first steps toward addressing race related generational wealth disparities through restitution and atone., preserving black culture, history

and economic opportunity and planning for a black embassy just east of IH-35. Austin is among the first cities in the country to make a substantial investment in developing a guaranteed income tool as a more efficient and effective way to deal with poverty. Despite the significant disparities we face across race and ethnicity in Austin, our COVID death rate for Hispanics and for African-Americans is also lower than the state's and lower than the urban counties like Houston's and San Antonio.

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Whether you are white, black, Asian, Hispanic, this has been a tragic and difficult year, but know that your life was safer here in Austin than in other cities, thanks to our community's effort. There is still much work to be done for Austin to be truly a fair and just city for everyone, nonetheless, we should stop and take measure of all that is being done to achieve greater equity and on an accelerated schedule. And we need to recognize that it is the strength and opportunity and resources that come with having such a successful economy that provide the promise and the tools and the ability to realize our ideals and I wish that was all that we needed to talk about this evening. As I said before the state of our city is so strong.

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At the same time, however, our sense of community is at risk. Despite all that is good around us there are some who would want to polarize and divide our community with this information. While we should be celebrating our shared successes there are those who seem to seek out ways to foster fear and engender hate, it is almost as creating a client and a movement that seek to separate and divide us from one another has become a pastime or sport. The proliferation of bad information, some unknowing and some intended to misinform results in the successes of our city often being lost or twisted or turned or hidden and drown out for calls for divisiveness and self-doubt. Often, our days seem harder and opinionated and far too many of us feel overcome with wariness and emotional fatigue. We are tired.

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We have had enough. And most regrettably for a city that takes its strength from the community too frequently we have had enough of each other. No longer do we find ourselves just disagreeing with others. There is a corresponding and almost inherent need to dislike, distrust and even demonize those with whom we disagree and just because we disagree. No longer can we civilly dispute what might be the best policy to deal with the real challenges we face, civil discourse is becoming increasingly rare and second, too many feel they are entitled to not only their own opinions but also to their own alternative facts. How do we make sound policy decisions as a community without a shared sense of reality? The rise of hyper-partisan media

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outlets and right wing alternative news sites disinformation campaigns on social media platforms and contempt for experts opinion pose a danger for Austin and for our country, this phenomenon is not unique to Austin. It is happening nationally, but it feels more strange and foreign to an austinite because of our strong local history and what has been the powerful interconnectivity of those that choose to call Austin home. I want to touch on three issues as examples of this challenge how we respond to the delta virus surge, public safety, and policing and homelessness. The test of how we move forward as a community will be found in how we respond to these three challenges. Our city's most immediate challenge is to stop the delta

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covid-19 variant, it is killing too many of our neighbors and putting at risk an even larger number. It is filling our hospitals and icus and not only crowding out only covid patients but also endangering any of us who might be in an accident or have a heart attack. The strain of our emergency response now requires the closing down of events and gatherings not just because of the risk of viral red is but because gatherings in the best of times results in a small number of ems calls and hospital visits and the delta variant is robbing us of the capacity to even handle this. In 2020 the virus and the lack of tools to fight off its spread was our common enemy get challenges associated with the pandemic Austin's economy grew while maintaining some of the lowest infection rates and unemployment numbers in the nation, because of our ability

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to remain safe as a community through masking and social distance practices. The current surge is similarly preventable and so it is our clearest illustration of the harm caused by disinformation and polarization that it helps create. What makes our current situation so frustrating is that we are our own worst enemy. There are certain and undeniable truths. The only way to stop this virus is with vaccines and in the interim with masking. Our cities successfully lowered every prior surge every time we have implemented a masking mandate. The vaccines are safe and effective. Far safer than experimental treatments, far safer than getting the delta variant, but you don't have to take my word for it, just look at our icus. 90 percent of the people in our

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icus are unvaccinated and you know what these icus are filled with? People who are not filled with? People experiencing vaccine side effects. Our hospitals are now using the word dangerous to describe the overcrowding situation they are now experiencing on account of unvaccinated individuals, and surely the reason that we require a vaccination for measles as we do for our school children is no more important than the need for the protections against covid. It is so hard for me to understand how we can be pacing such risks, know exactly what we need to do and have our governor affirmatively trying stop our school boards from doing all that the experts say is best to keep our children safe. Parents across the state should

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be outraged and they should make their anger known. It is shameful that a private business gets threatened with a loss of a state operating license because it chose to try to protect its employees and customers by setting rules for their own private property. It is not enough to merely recommend vaccines and masking. People who choose not to take these time proven public health mitigation measures are not just putting themselves at risk. That's why as mayor, I will do everything I can do twoght the county judge and my colleagues on the council and the city manager to use every power we have for however long we can to fight to keep our children safe, our workplaces safe for our employees and our businesses and events open. I will continue to work toward a vaccine mandate for city

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employees or alternatively a testing mandate that allows for waivers for those that voluntarily choose to get vaccinated. I believe the city should lead by example. I don't know the answer to the great harm caused by the misinformation casting its shadow over Austin, but I know in the end that it is up to you. We should each seek out and be guided by the truth. In the end, regardless of what the courts say can and cannot be ordered or mandated by law each of us in this solitude of our own conscience will have the absolute power to make decisions for our families those choices that best protect our neighbors and their families too. It is what it means to be part of a strong community. You know, as interim police chief Chacon recently shared in

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a public meeting Austin is one of the five safest big cities in the country. Again, our community should pause for a moment and celebrate this achievement, yet there are some in the city working really hard to convince you otherwise, and their efforts following the national political debate and the use of yet another law and order frame for organized politically have left our community polarized and divided. There is a political advantage being sought by those creating a false impression that Austin is unsafe,

even one life lost is too many, and Austin has seen a significant increase in the number of murders this year versus last year. We should and we are working to take a legal guns, illegal guns off the streets with anybody identifies fight gun and other types of violence in our city,

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but the same data that shows that number of homicides in Austin is rising also shows that the rate of homicides in Austin is among the lowest among the four big cities in Texas and among the lowest in such big cities around the country. We are not dealing with a city that is unsafe, but with those working hard to create the perception that we are unsafe. Those who wish to divide our community use information as a tool for their work, a piece of information that I believe is particularly harmful and personally offensive is the suggestion that the Austin city council does not respect nor support our police force. Associated with this disinformation is the claim that the council defunded and took \$150 million or a third of the police budget away from police

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functions to which it was being put and none of this is true. Let me clearly speak for myself and I believe for everyone on the council. I respect and support the officers of the Austin police department. I believe they are among the best officers in the country, which is why I have always supported paying them at the very top of the comparable salary schedule. Every individual officer I have come to know personally is a credit to their profession, someone I trust and believe has the ability to help keep our community safe and in a just and fairway, each is someone I respect. I believe that in today's world there is a need for cities like Austin to have strong professional and well supported police forces. I do not believe that all of our officers are out to do harm.

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Nothing about what I believe is inconsistent with also believing that we expect too much of Orr officers and that this can cause harm to officers and community members alike. Cities should not rely on their officers for how they intersect with ports advertise and the officers should not be responsible for how we intervene with and support those with mental health challenges. Of. I can support and honor our police and still confront institutional racism and support changing a warrior culture to one that leads with a guardian mindset. Doing this requires us in part to change how we teach new cadets and ultimately meant pausing three cadet classes while the changes, over 20 of them recommended by the Austin police department itself could be put into place. Now, I deservedly get criticism when I make mistakes and I have

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made them. This is also true of our institutions and our officers. We can support our police officers while also being critical of the harm done to peaceful demonstrators at the George Floyd and Mike Ramos protests. We can admire the heroism of police officers while also disapproving of inappropriate police interactions on video. >> It is not right and so many of us in our community, especially many of those of color do not feel as safe with our police as do other parts of the community. The hard fact is, me being stopped by the police when I am driving does not invoke the same anxiety felt by many in the black community. And I never got a lecture from my mother about what I needed to do to stay alive in such an encounter. This is neither right nor just and it must be corrected. George Floyd, Sandra Bland and

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countless others cannot have died in vain. We don't get to say never again .. And then forget their names and do nothing because it is uncomfortable or disruptive. I believe we need more police officers and that's why I supported starting the cadet classes earlier this year and supported with my colleagues at least two additional classes next year as approved in the recent budget. I believe we will make a safe city even safer with a comprehensive approach to public safety staffing that is data driven, is able to adapt to changing needs and considers the collective public safety efforts of our police, our firefighters, EMS responders, mental health support professionals and violence prevention personnel. It is true that we are experiencing police staffing shortages, a significant amount of this is not the direct result

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of Austin city council action but rather is consistent with national trends, being experienced by cities across the country that have increased police retirements and resignations over the last several years, especially most recently, and I do recognize that for some officers their duties have changed. Some of this attrition has been exacerbated by the perception that our police force, that they are neither respected, valued nor supported in this community. My experience tells me that such a perception is not true. I spent a lot of time in the community and my personal belief is that, as I outlined a moment ago are shared by most of the people in this city. Regardless of what you see on social media. An APD officer recently reached out to me a few weeks ago because they believed I had not spoken out to recognize and thank the officers for their heroic actions in saving lives

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at the mass shootings on sixth street. I was so grateful for the opportunity to share with them the ways that I had actually done this, both with local and national media, beginning within hours of the event just as I have done in the past. He gave me a chance to hear their concerns. Being able to communicate directly with this officer was a privilege and an opportunity I valued. Maybe there is a path forward in this experience where we find ways to personally connect, correct misinformation and meaningfully communicate again. We will all be safer by appropriately staffing and by reforming policing to 21st century standards. But we are more unsafe if we are divided by misinformation. And no discussion about the visions in our community would

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be complete without a discussion about homelessness. Except again the lack of accurate information results in increased divisions in our community. Our community is united in wanting to help people experiencing homelessness get off the streets, out of tents and back into general -- society or safely situated in stable homes. We don't want to see tents and -- under highways or our roads. We want those with mental health challenges to receive the care and support they need. The truth is that we know how to get these things done. We reach people with veterans providing homelessness where we can get them housed and services at the same rate we find them on our streets. We are getting close to getting most of the children experiencing homelessness off

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out of streets. And recently we closed encampments at the library on Cesar Chavez just east of I-35 at the Menchaca intersection with Ben White and from around city hall and Cesar Chavez near Congress Avenue. We have been able to buy and put hotels under contract for conversion into permanently supportive apartments or other types of housing that have, at a significantly lower cost and at greater speed than past alternatives. Many in the community, including the city council have adopted the goal of housing 3,000 people chronically experiencing homelessness in the next three years and are doing the work to get this done. Those advocating for the building and sustaining of a permanent integrated system are speaking additional partners. Such a system will have all stakeholders pulling in the same direction in a coordinated fashion rather than merely seeking to fund and execute

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needed projects one at a time as one off efforts. This will take investment and it will take time but it will deliver our city the chance to meet the challenge of homelessness indefinitely by creating the infrastructure to make homelessness brief, rare and nonrecurring. Now, voters in May passed proposition B that returned our city to the camping ordinances in effect two summers ago and I expect

the city manager to enforce it. This means that many people currently in tents will be returning to places where they are not seen and where they are moved around with nowhere really to go. We cannot be satisfied leaving these people in this situation, so the efforts that I mentioned a moment ago become even more important and more important to be done quickly.

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There is so much to be done as we still have about 1,500 people sleeping unsheltered on our streets on any given evening. I am calling for everyone currently in a tent to be immediately housed. Unfortunately these proponents do not come with the resources to accomplish this, and they are not able to propose any specific location that would be supported and accepted. Even if we could find an acceptable location for sanctioned campers for over 1,000 people we have learned the hard lessons from other cities, cities that have tried to deal with the challenge of homelessness with such camp areas and this strategy alone does not work. Many people will only go to encampments if they believe they will ultimately be moved into something more permanent and private, and the wraparound services so integral to recovery are many times more successful for people living in homes than

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in encampments. Now we need to learn from the cities that have tried this approach, spent too much of their dollars on immediate and temporary answers only to find that there are insufficient resources left over to build a permanent system and its physical and service capacity necessary/mess to meet the challenge long-term. We see success by getting hundreds out of tents and into homes with services rather than moving people from one camp area in one neighborhood to another camp area in another neighborhood. And I believe most people in this city agree that we need to meet this challenge, remove the tents a house and support the people and accomplish this in a way that invests our dollars in long-term solutions, and while this takes time, we are already seeing successes, already lowering the polarization and in this action and resolve we are finding another path toward

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community cohesion. Since the beginning of this pandemic, the city council has purchased hotels in districts 3, 4, 6 and 7, along with new partnerships with caritas and others communities to create over 600 homes for those coming out of homelessness. By comparison, in our first two years on the dais, colleagues, that number was 46 homes in total for those experiencing homelessness. Our community is making unprecedented and truly promising efforts to meet the challenge of homelessness. So by post all traditional measurements of success, Austin is the strongest major city in the country and this is no

small feat and that means for the most there is great opportunity and an exceptional quality of life. This positions our city to do more than any other city to focus on and improve the

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disparities that we and every other major city face. In fact our success makes that our duty and responsibility, and we are a city that is stepping up to that challenge. I share with most everyone in Austin immense thankfulness and appreciation for the privilege and opportunity to live in this city. Austin is a magical place. This requires us to do better to mitigate the impact that our affordability is having on our ability to help people continue to live here and preserve the diversity that is the fabric of our city and these issues are our next biggest challenge, but the immediate challenges we face we need overcome together, the delta variant, policing and homelessness, these are the ones that have been identified and we are pursuing the path forward to success. We cannot let ourselves be distracted or consumed by misinformation or the desire by

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some to divide us to gain a political or rhetorical advantage. We need to reach deep into the reservoir that is our community, our common culture, our core values, all the elements that make Austin special and fight for our community, fight fear with facts and misinformation with listening and truths, if we do, we will find the strength and the power to realize the promise and potential of Austin. Austin is an exceptional city with very real challenges. The state of our city is strong, our future is boundless. I know through my work and interactions with mayors nationally and even globally I can attest every major wants to serve a city like Austin. We also recognize and clearly see the most significant chance confronting us. We must stay true to who we are. We must fight against the forces

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that would divide us, discredit objective data and make us scared of and demonize one another. We must commit to seek out and share only real and truthful information and we must listen, we must talk to and try to understand one another. Now is the moment for us to show the world and ourselves that we are still Austin, Texas. Stay safe. And let's keep taking care of one another. Thank you. [Applause]