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**State of the City Address
Tuesday, January 26, 2021
Mayor Scott Conger**

Good morning everyone.

I want to start by thanking JEA and EPlus-TV for allowing me to use their studio. I also want to thank the members of our City Council. The council and I are partners in all of this and I'm proud to serve beside them.

This is a very different way of giving the State of the City, and giving the State of the City is one of my favorite parts of the year and I want to share with you all our successes. See, I love Jackson. I love bragging about Jackson. We began this year with optimism and excitement for the future. Then a pandemic hit. I want to share with you all how you inspired me from the very beginning. See I grew up working in the service industry: waiting tables and cooking. I know the impact it has when a server misses a few days of work, but all across our city, we stepped up to make sure we were more generous in our to-go orders and when they were back, you made sure it was made up from your generosity. Service employees are very important so keep it up. People talk of the time and the difficult year we've had, but I don't want to do that this morning. I want everyone in Jackson to know that there's a lot to celebrate.

I ended last year's State of the City with sharing some goals that we have for 2020. Some of our goals were: we would demolish twenty more dilapidated residential properties through blight elimination project. Done. We promised better asset accountability. We kept our promise and implemented a tracking program as well as new preventative maintenance schedules. We said we would update technology and software everywhere. We've made huge strides and are going even further so stay tuned. We promised we would sell lots that are maintained by the city to reduce property maintenance costs. In 2020, we sold sixteen of those lots. We pledge we will publish a citizen's legible budget. You can now go right to the city of Jackson webpage under government and select budget simulator for your property tax receipt. But that's not all.

See the deck was stacked against us, but we beat all the odds. We ended fiscal year 2020 under budget by \$4.6 million and we added \$2.75 million to our general fund. That's more than five times what was added to the in fiscal year 2019. We also reduced our long-term debt by over \$11 million. During the pandemic we had to make some tough decisions on finance. At the beginning, we didn't know what to expect in a lot of areas, especially our budget. We had to look at some efficiencies and make some cuts. So all of our department heads took a 5% salary reduction and I took a 15% salary reduction during the time when we had employees on furlough.

One of the largest questions we faced at the beginning of the pandemic was, "what about our city venues?" See we're the owners of several large venues that would sit empty for an undetermined amount of time, but that never deterred our staff. When the city buildings weren't in use, our staff

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made use of them: from standing up drive-thru testing sites now vaccine sites to temporarily housing our homeless, our staff showed dedication to everyone in our city. So I want to publicly recognize Diane Robinson at the Ned, Tosh Newman at the Civic Center and the Oman Arena and John Robert Mehr at the fairgrounds for being those outside the box thinkers and coming together to rapidly serve our citizens.

Our animal care center is exactly where they need to be. See how a city treats its animals is a reflection of the city itself, and so I'm proud of the accomplishments of our Animal Care Center and I'm looking forward to the future. In 2020 we brought in 892 animals. That's a 51% increase from 2019 and the team at the Animal Care Center also increased adoption numbers by 43%.

Our street department has kept busy as well. They closed out 5,652 pothole tickets this year. We purchased a new infrared patch machine that makes permanent fixes and utilizes some of the existing asphalt to cut down the cost of supplies. This has been a game changer for our city and I promise I'll continue to look for efficient ways to keep our streets in good repair. Our building and codes department wrapped up a successful year. They were able to secure a new permitting software that will allow citizens to obtain permits or submit plans completely online. Contractors builders and developers will also be able to request and check on inspections online. Internally, we've updated technology systems citywide. Through our 3-1-1 app, we can track request from residents and the progress for items such as pothole repairs or bulky waste pickup. Other benefits from this system include being able to identify locations and assets that require frequent attention and maintenance.

It's been a big year in law enforcement and public safety. Our fire department is fortunate enough to have an excellent leader in Chief Darryl Samuels and frankly we started off behind the eight ball on our equipment. We are faced with many challenges with our agent equipment. Many of our pumpers and aerial trucks were past time for them to be out of service and I don't need to tell you the importance of having up-to-date equipment working when it comes to a vital service such as our fire protection. Our chief, along with Deputy Chief Friddle, worked tirelessly evaluating and securing a lease purchase agreement and purchased five pumpers and two aerial trucks. Our firefighters put their safety on the line every day and I'm proud to work alongside these brave men and women, and they deserve our support.

You know I say this everywhere I go, which hasn't been a lot of places lately, but our law enforcement is second to none. Under the leadership of Chief Weiser, our officers are involved in community. They have a community minded policing philosophy. Their active community partnerships and their engagement with their fellow community members are an asset not only to our community, but to law enforcement in general and they need our help. They have 31 cars that need to be replaced and we're suggesting this to be done through a lease purchase program similar to what got us our new fire equipment last year. So as soon as the paperwork is put together, we'll take it to city council for their approval. The people of Jackson did not feel the impact of Covid as it relates to law enforcement and public safety, and that's due to the work of our officers, our firefighters and our dispatchers.

Our recovery court had ten participants graduate from the program this year. They have worked tirelessly through this pandemic to implement virtual treatment services, virtual group meetings, remote monitoring and electronic communication.

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Parks and Rec completed some big task. They completed the Vicki Schneider Lake Dog Park, as well as the seven pillars African-American Memorial at Shirlene Mercer Park. And they also worked to acquire \$151,000 donation from AmeriGroup to replace playgrounds at Conger Park, Muse Park and Stella Duncan Park in Bemis. Our Sportsplex hosted 764 teams and it hosted the single largest tournament in history in October with 116 teams.

One major change from last year to this year is the efficiency of our leaf pickup. This year, the leadership of the groundskeeping maintained a process that improves significantly and we've been able to serve homes faster. Our Planning Department implemented a digital review and approval process for permits business license subdivision plats and site plans to move the department and the city to a paperless environment, as well as allow for staff to work remotely if needed.

We administered an online interest exam for eleven police applicants. We conducted orientation for thirty-nine new full-time employees, and we processed out 61 full time employees. The cost of on-the-job injury claims were down 42% from last year. Risk Management work with city departments to create safety policies and procedures specific to each department. A new benefit was added to the health plan that allows video or telehealth visits. Our employees are our biggest investment and our biggest asset.

Then there's everyone's favorite department to have to call, Health and Sanitation. You know they've had a very active year as they always do. You all remember at the beginning of the pandemic sitting at home, you decided to clean up your spare bedroom, your garage. You hauled that old chair that old mattress to the curb. You remember those "covid couches?" Yeah. That's the department that cleaned those up. They picked up over 55,000 bulky waste piles in 2020. That equates to more than two piles per household in the city. They're also now billing and receiving all commercial accounts in their office, making it a hub for commercial accounts. By doing this, customers no longer have to call one place to get a service and another place to get their billing.

The pandemic this last year was devastating. It shook us, but it didn't break us. On top of all of that, we're able to find success with launching a new comprehensive website that implemented the Ready 3-1-1 app for residents to report issues, track progress, and receive faster solutions; launching the data hub on our website for residents to track department cornerstones; hiring an internal auditor to ensure fiscal compliance; securing an AARP grant to develop an app to improve access to public transportation; creating two new art murals Downtown; recruiting forty-six new board appointments to bring more people to the table; breaking ground on a new Madison Academic; receiving a city start grant to kick start local municipal financial empowerment efforts; launching Hub City Hero to recognize our local public servants.

Just as we did last year, I want to share with you all some goals for 2021: demolish twenty more dilapidated residential properties; enter into a clear and concise solid waste contract; implement a local municipal financial empowerment plan; acquire thirty-one new patrol cars for the Police department; begin a comprehensive stormwater infrastructure evaluation and make a plan on how to make the repairs; research and implement more feasible recycling efforts; and the final goal I want to announce that will hopefully remedy you know a lot of the tragedies that hit our city this year. I want you all to

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know that I'm committed, and we're going to make it happen: bringing a Snoop Dogg to Jackson this year.

See I stand here today with optimism, not the same optimism I had last year but more. It's the optimism that again tells us our cause is just and our path is true. I know we can do this together because I've watched us. When we saw a need for the homeless, our city stepped up to meet that need. When we saw hunger in our neighbors, we make sure they had something to eat. When ordered to stay at home, our city stepped up and checked on their neighbors to make sure they had what they needed. When the virus put our parents, grandparents, and senior citizens at risk, our city stepped up to make sure they have what they needed.

Even when things seem darkest, our city always shines. Together, we can ensure that Jackson's best days are ahead of us. God bless you and God bless our city.