Good evening.

City Council President Elo-Rivera.

Members of the City Council.

City Attorney Elliott.

Chief Operating Officer Dargan.

Distinguished guests from throughout California and the region; local tribal leaders; military leaders; officials from Baja California and around the world.

And our dedicated City of San Diego employees.

Thank you all so much for being here tonight.

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My fellow San Diegans:

When I took the oath to serve as the 37th mayor of my beloved hometown just over three years ago, I did so with an eagerness to get to work delivering on my promise to build a San Diego for all of us.

I understood the gravity of our challenges and how immense an undertaking it would be to overcome them.

And, today one thing I know for sure is that I have never had more faith in the ability of this city to reverse decades of neglect and take its rightful place as not just a “fine” city, but one of our nation’s greatest.

Progress can be a tricky beast.

It doesn’t look the same to everyone -- it’s often non-linear and messy.

In a complex undertaking like overhauling the nation’s eighth-largest city so that it truly works for all of us, the mission not being fully and immediately accomplished can be unnerving.

Frankly, this city has a history of abandoning bold and aggressive efforts as soon as things get difficult, surrendering to doubt and a fear of change.
I’m here to tell you that’s not how we do things.

We have leveled off the downward slide, climbed out of the deep valley our city was in – and our trajectory is now pointed skyward.

My tenth-grade algebra teacher at Madison High School in Clairemont, Mr. Grimes, taught me when solving a problem to show my work.

So tonight, I am going to detail the work we are doing to address our City's biggest challenges: public safety, homelessness, housing, and infrastructure.

Let’s start with the people who are helping me forge this progress – our City workers.

Three years ago, morale among City employees was at an all-time low, with stagnant pay and uncompetitive benefits basically telling them their work wasn’t valued.

The importance of our workforce was evident in the tasks that went unperformed because of hundreds of vacant positions.

When you value the work of your employees, you show it by compensating them with fair wages and benefits.

That’s why I quickly implemented the court-mandated unwinding of Proposition B and restored the retirement security that is critical to attracting good people to careers in public service.

Last year, I signed a measure championed by Councilmember Raul Campillo that dramatically expands parental leave benefits for City employees and launched a pilot program that subsidizes childcare costs for children 12 and under.

Now, I'm pleased to tell you that for the first time since the City began surveying employee satisfaction levels, a majority of employees now say they'd recommend the City of San Diego as an employer to others.

In March, we held a job fair we hoped would attract a couple hundred applicants. Instead, 3,000 San Diegans showed up interested in working at the City.

Because of all the vacant positions that were filled during that job fair, we were able to open 14 libraries across the city that had reduced hours and had been shuttered on Sundays.
The progress we've made in filling positions at the City has resulted in better, faster service delivery for residents.

More potholes filled.

More sidewalks fixed, streetlights repaired, permits approved faster...

... and, of course, faster response times from our first responders.

**Public Safety**

As your Mayor, I'm very proud that San Diego is one of the safest large cities in America.

Every San Diegan deserves to wake up each morning feeling like they will be safe, no matter where their day takes them.

Your safety, and that of your children, is the foundation of a thriving city.

In 2023, we saw the rates for the most serious violent crime decline again.

Murder was down 12%. Rape was down 16%. Robbery, down 7%. Burglary, down 16%.

This a testament to the dedication of our police officers and our City's commitment to support them.

The City has been dogged by police officer recruitment and retention issues for years.

To address them, we have worked to demonstrate that San Diego is a place where first responders can build a career and raise a family.

In 2022, we raised police officer pay by 10% over two years.

This past November, we opened a first-of-its-kind childcare facility for police officers to ease the burden created by the nontraditional hours our officers often must work.

This facility was the brainchild of the San Diego Police Officers Association and made possible thanks in part to a state grant secured by Senate President pro Tem Toni Atkins.

Today, it's a model for police departments across the country.
Now, rather than losing officers to other agencies, we're seeing officers choose to come work for the San Diego Police Department.

I'm pleased to report that we have improved recruitment and retention in our Fire-Rescue Department as well.

The Department's efforts to recruit more women into the ranks have been so successful that San Diego was selected as the location for the Women in Fire International Conference this year.

We're also doing more to ensure our first responders have the equipment they need to do their jobs.

Last year, we secured City Council approval for the use of Smart Streetlights and Automated License Plate Recognition technology to help investigate and solve serious crimes.

And we did so while outlining clear rules of the road to protect San Diegans' privacy rights.

Our Fire-Rescue Department has been building our reserve fleet for large-scale emergencies and added a fireboat to respond to calls for service on our beaches and bays.

And, we have cleared the way to design a new, state-of-the-art Fire Training Facility in Kearny Mesa.

Two leaders have overseen these improvements to our Police and Fire-Rescue departments for the past five years – Police Chief David Nisleit and Fire Chief Colin Stowell.

I am incredibly proud of what they have accomplished.

Both Chiefs began their careers with the City 36 years ago, dedicating over half their lives to keeping San Diegans safe, and both have announced they will retire later this year.

Chief Stowell and Chief Nisleit are here with us tonight, and I'd like to ask you to join me in thanking them for their steadfast service to our city.

We've begun a national search for our next police chief with a series of community forums in each Council district to learn from you, the people of this city, what you want to see in the next leader of the department.
We'll launch a national search for our next fire chief very soon.

Although San Diego is a safe city, we are not immune to crime, nor to the impacts of crimes committed across the state and nation.

Cities throughout California are struggling with new trends like open air drug markets and organized retail theft.

As mayor, I will do everything I can to protect the people and property of our city.

We must ensure that our laws are responding appropriately to the realities of today.

Let's be clear: When crimes are committed, there must be consequences.

In 2014, California voters approved Proposition 47, reclassifying certain drug and theft crimes as misdemeanors. The idea was to reduce the state's costly prison population by diverting low-level offenders into treatment programs and reducing recidivism.

That law may have made sense at the time.

However, since it was implemented, we've seen criminals exploit these reforms, leading to organized networks of career thieves ransacking stores with little to no consequence.

These are not crimes of poverty. These are criminal enterprises gaming the limits set under Prop. 47 and making a cottage industry out of retail theft.

While San Diego hasn't been hit as hard by these theft rings as other California cities, we're still paying the price.

Both at the cash register and in time and convenience.

You shouldn't have to flag down a Target employee to unlock a plexiglass cabinet just so you can get toothpaste.

We should be locking up criminals, not laundry detergent!

We should be punishing thieves, not customers!

We will not accept this as our new normal.
Reducing this type of criminal behavior starts and ends with making sure people know they will face consequences, including jail time.

We must respond to the reality that Prop. 47 has created and improve the law so it achieves its intended purpose.

So, tonight, I am announcing I will be supporting statewide action this year to amend Proposition 47.

I am not suggesting we return to the days of the War on Drugs.

But the fact is: Our laws, like society itself, must evolve to meet the challenges we face today.

It’s why I have focused so much attention on the proliferation of illicit fentanyl.

Fentanyl has pushed accidental overdose to the very top of the list of killers of Americans between the ages of 18 and 45.

Here in San Diego County, illicit fentanyl killed 92 people in 2018.

In 2022, it killed 815 people.

That’s why I signed an executive order to strengthen and prioritize enforcement around illicit fentanyl.

Before it, we averaged 34 fentanyl-related arrests per month.

Since my order, that number has risen to 53 arrests per month – a 54% increase -- and cooperation among regional, state and federal law enforcement has never been greater.

Last year, I announced that I would be a leading voice in California for legislation to come down hard on dealers who peddle illicit fentanyl.

True to my word, I sponsored multiple bills in the state Legislature to strengthen penalties for dealing a lethal dose of the drug.

Many of these bills were sidelined before they could get to the Governor’s desk, and that’s infuriating.

Because I see what it’s doing to our homeless population when I walk through Downtown.
I see how it's destroying families. I've met the parents who had to bury their children.

This cannot continue. Our legislators in Sacramento must act – and tonight, I am calling on them -- yet again -- to do so.

And mark my words: I will keep coming back again and again for as long as it takes until the legislature passes laws that will hold the callous dealers of this deadly poison accountable. Enough is enough!

**Homelessness**

Without a doubt, this exceptionally addictive drug is undermining our efforts to address homelessness, adding another layer of complexity to this nationwide challenge.

While it's true that the solution to homelessness is a home, it's not always that simple.

The puzzle that is homelessness is an extraordinarily complicated one.

That's why, over the past three years, my administration has pursued a comprehensive strategy that tackles the homelessness crisis on all fronts.

And while the mission is far from accomplished, we have made significant progress.

We have opened a series of new programs tailored to seniors, women, families, LGBTQ youth and people with substance-use issues.

Since April 2021, we have more than doubled the options for people experiencing homelessness to come off the street.

We've also maximized the space in our existing shelters and expanded our successful Safe Parking Program.

Last year, we launched our newest effort to get more people off the street – our Safe Sleeping Program, championed by Councilmember Stephen Whitburn.

The program includes two sites with space for more than 1,000 people to get off the streets and connected to services that will help them end their homelessness.

In just a few months, our Safe Sleeping Program has already moved more than 600 people off the streets.
Over the past three years, our City-funded outreach, shelter and family reunification programs, have successfully placed more than 3,600 people into permanent housing.

This year, consistent with our comprehensive shelter strategy, we will build on this progress and bring forward the largest homeless services proposals this City has ever pursued.

The first is a plan to add another 1,000 beds to our homeless shelter system by this time next year at new sites, like H Barracks, near the San Diego International Airport.

The second is a redevelopment of the site of our Old Downtown Central Library.

We plan to create additional shelter space along with hundreds of new affordable, permanent homes for low-income and formerly homeless San Diegans.

In the meantime, it will continue to serve as a temporary shelter for women.

I'm proud of all that the City of San Diego has done to address homelessness in our communities.

I've also been clear that our city cannot bear the burden of this crisis alone. Homelessness is not exclusive to the City of San Diego.

That's why I've repeatedly called on the leaders the 17 other cities in this region to step up and be part of the solution.

Tonight, I can tell you that that is starting to happen.

Chula Vista, National City, Oceanside, and Vista have taken steps to open new shelters in their cities – and I applaud them for doing so. Thank you.

All cities must do more to solve this regionwide problem.

It's when we recognize that we all have a role to play in solving this crisis that we can make more progress to get people off the streets and into care.

Recently, we lost a great San Diegan who took that sense of responsibility personally.

Peter Seidler, the late Chairman of the San Diego Padres, lived his values and acted on his compassion for people experiencing homelessness every single day.
He didn’t watch from the sidelines. He dove into action, encouraging others to do the same.

Peter represented the very best of San Diego, so tonight I’m announcing that we’ve initiated the process to rename one of the streets leading to Petco Park as “Peter Seidler Way” to honor his legacy and how much he gave to our community.

Peter believed in his fellow San Diegans’ better angels.

Like Peter, I know that the people of this city have a deep well of compassion toward our homeless neighbors.

Every day, I’m asked how people can channel their concern into meaningful assistance.

And so tonight, I’m announcing a philanthropic campaign to help the City carry out our ambitious plans to end our homelessness crisis.

Called “San Diegans Together Tackling Homelessness,” this campaign already has commitments for $250,000.

Now is the time to build on our progress, and I hope San Diegans who have the means to step up and help will provide some of the fuel for our efforts.

With all of the opportunities we’re creating for people to end their homelessness comes the obligation for them to use them.

When safe and legal options are available, pitching a tent on a sidewalk, in a park or in a canyon is simply not acceptable.

It isn’t safe or sanitary -- nor is it compassionate for us, as a city, to simply let these conditions persist.

Last year I signed into law the Unsafe Camping Ordinance, prohibiting people from camping in public spaces when shelter is available. I can report that the new law is working as intended.

We are clearing encampments without widespread arrests.

Since the ordinance passed in June, only one person has been arrested, but hundreds have accepted shelter.
And, as has been reported, there has been a significant reduction in tents and people experiencing homelessness – a 60% decrease in street homelessness Downtown since it peaked in May.

We are making progress, clearing our sidewalks and getting folks on a better path.

We know for some, mental illness is a key factor in this challenge, so we’re pushing to ensure better access to treatment.

More than 50 years ago, state leaders shuttered psychiatric institutions, then failed to follow through on the community-based treatment facilities that were supposed to take their place.

This broken system has left the sickest among us suffering without care on the streets.

In my State of the City address two years ago, I vowed to work with the State Legislature and the Governor to fix California's badly broken behavioral health system.

That year, I stood with Governor Newsom as he signed CARE Court into law.

We also pushed hard to modernize the state's conservatorship laws. When our efforts fell short the first year, we refused to give up. Last year, working with State Senator Susan Eggman and the bipartisan California Big City Mayors coalition, we passed major conservatorship reform legislation and got it signed into law.

By next year, when the County fully implements this reform, desperate families of people who are so severely mentally ill that they're unable to tend to their basic personal needs will finally have a path to getting their loved ones into care.

Of course, these new programs underscore the need for facilities to provide this treatment. Fortunately, this year, we have the opportunity to address that need as well.

Proposition 1, which will be on the March ballot, will generate the funding necessary to add more than 11,000 new behavioral health treatment beds and nearly 27,000 new outpatient opportunities for Californians.

I am a strong supporter of this measure, and I thank the City Council for joining me in support of it yesterday.
We all recognize that our homelessness crisis has many causes, and solving it will mean tackling it from every angle. But there's clearly no more important step we can take than creating more homes.

**Housing**

Rapidly rising rents amid our severe housing shortage have caused the number of people who are becoming newly homeless to outpace the number of people we are getting off the streets into housing.

That's why last year, I worked with City Council President Elo-Rivera to pass a Tenant Protection Ordinance and increase funding for rental assistance to help keep people who are at risk of eviction housed.

But the only true solution to both addressing homelessness and housing affordability is to BUILD...MORE...HOUSING.

I'm especially proud of San Diego's leadership to do just that.

Our Affordable Housing Density program is building more homes that are rent-restricted for low-income San Diegans while also creating market-rate apartments.

Our adopted policies on granny flats are successfully creating middle-class housing where it's sorely lacking.

My two Housing Action Packages are making it easier to build more affordable and middle-income homes – including homes for people experiencing homelessness, students, people with disabilities, and families.

Under our Bridge to Home initiative, we've invested over $63 million in 16 projects, totaling 1,337 affordable new apartments, including 368 reserved for people experiencing homelessness.

Further, last year, just before this very address, I signed an executive order requiring city departments to review all 100% affordable housing projects within 30 days.

And, our Development Services team stepped up, enacting a new program known as “Affordable Housing Permit Now” that’s permitting these projects within 9 days on average.
As of today, this program has permitted 16 projects, totaling more than 2,000 new affordable homes.

All in all, based on preliminary calculations, the City of San Diego last year issued roughly 8,000 new housing permits – an impressive increase of more than 50 percent over the 5,300 homes permitted in 2022.

And, we are not done yet.

I intend to build on that progress!

Today, I have signed a new executive order requiring permit applications that fall under our Complete Communities program to be reviewed and permitted within 30 days.

What has typically taken up to 12 months to review, I am now ordering be done in just one.

Complete Communities incentivizes housing near transit, and last year it accounted for 1,000 of the new homes permitted, with 15% of those set aside for low- and moderate-income San Diegans.

This new, faster timeline will likely increase those numbers, creating even more homes San Diegans can afford.

These are all necessary policy changes as San Diegans continue to bear the brunt of decades of underbuilding.

From decades of housing production not keeping pace with population growth.

From decades of politicians surrendering to the mistaken notion that new housing destroys communities.

Even those fortunate enough to have bought homes decades ago feel these impacts with adult children either still living at home, being rent burdened, or considering moving to other cities.

As a renter myself, I understand the housing reality of today.

Not only is typical rent on a one-bedroom apartment around $2,600 a month, but it comes with the anxiety and hassle of racing against dozens of others just to apply for that hard-to-find vacant unit.
It's causing people to put off big life events like getting married or starting a family.

My housing policies are designed to send a clear message:

To every hardworking San Diegan, this Mayor wants there to be a place for you in this city.

To every young person, that I want you to stay in this city that helped raise and educate you.

To every senior on a fixed income, that you shouldn't have to spend your golden years worried that you'll lose your home.

That's the progress we're working toward – and we're not done yet.

Relentless effort and action is the only way to catch up when you've fallen far behind.

The same is true when it comes to resolving our massive infrastructure deficit.

**Infrastructure**


For the past three years, we have been addressing these needs through record infrastructure investments, solid data to guide decisions, and policy reforms that ensure we're prioritizing the projects that are most needed. And, we're delivering them equitably and in keeping with our ambitious climate action goals.

Build Better SD overhauled how the City collects and distributes the fees developers pay to improve infrastructure, so we're no longer sequestering small amounts of revenue in 43 separate community lockboxes across the city.

By consolidating these funds, we will get neighborhood projects done faster.

We've streamlined contracting to reduce delays and deliver improvements more efficiently.

We've strengthened outreach and engagement with communities to make sure we know which projects you want us to prioritize.
San Diegans demand and deserve a City that works. That's why a little more than a year ago, I hired Eric Dargan to be our city's Chief Operating Officer.

Eric shares my passion for effective, efficient city governance, and we're reaping the benefits of his decades of experience unraveling operational knots to get things done.

In 2023, our crews filled 61,305 potholes, a 94% increase over the prior year and an astonishing 122% increase over 2021.

Through our Sexy Streets program, we added $40 million to our standard street-improvement budget to fix San Diego's most heavily used thoroughfares in every City Council district.

Convoy Street, Park Boulevard, La Jolla Parkway, Nimitz Boulevard, Division Street, Ruffin Road, Reo Drive, Genesee Avenue and Otay Center Drive – and many more – have all been recently repaired.

Soon, we'll add to this list University Avenue, Navajo Road, La Media Road, Carmel Mountain Road, Chollas Parkway, Balboa Avenue and Clairemont Mesa Boulevard, Main Street, College Avenue and Linda Vista Road.

Overall, in 2023, we repaired or resurfaced 252 miles of roadway -- a 20% increase over 2022 and a 57% increase over 2021.

All told, over my three years as your mayor, we've repaired or resurfaced 627 miles of city streets.

And as I promised last year, we updated our Street Preservation Ordinance to ensure that public and private utilities that tear up our roads restore them to as-good or better condition than they found them.

We recently completed the most exhaustive pavement-condition study our city has ever undertaken to give us comprehensive data that will guide our decisions on which streets to repair and in what order.

That data will inform a new Pavement Management Strategy to guide our street repair and maintenance efforts well into the future.

As we dive into the next budget cycle, all indications are that we're headed into leaner times.
However constrained the budget may be, we'll continue to prioritize our limited resources to clear this backlog of deferred maintenance.

We will chip away at our lengthy backlog of broken streetlights. Last year we hired additional electricians to help us repair circuits and lamps to get those lights turned on, and they're in the field now. We expect to substantially cut the repair backlog using these supplemental crews.

Late last year, we presented a new Safe Sidewalks program to the City Council that will help property owners repair the sidewalks in front of their homes and businesses at a reduced cost.

We have updated our Parks Master Plan for the first time in 65 years, which has helped us plan and prioritize park improvements.

We've created 19 new parks and upgraded 31 existing ones over the past three years, and we anticipate creating 16 new parks and upgrading 34 more in the next two.

No infrastructure project in recent history is larger or more ambitious than Pure Water San Diego.

By 2035, this groundbreaking project is expected to provide our city with roughly 50% of the water we need.

As of now, we’re close to halfway through Phase 1 of Pure Water that consists of nine large construction projects like new treatment facilities, pump stations and miles of pipeline throughout San Diego.

Pure Water projects have so far have created more than 3,000 good-paying local jobs through the City’s first Project Labor Agreement. We intend to build on that successful model.

Because San Diego voters had the wisdom to authorize our City to negotiate Project Labor Agreements, I'm proud to announce an agreement with the San Diego County Building and Construction Trades Council on a Citywide Project Labor Agreement that will apply to all major City construction projects.

The agreement, which the City Council will consider next month, will ensure City projects get done on time and on budget. It will provide the City with a reliable source of highly skilled workers for all City construction projects; encourage the employment of local
residents for these good-paying jobs; and meet high standards for worker health and safety.

Close

My fellow San Diegans,

Tonight, I have detailed the work we've done and the progress we've made to solve the great challenges facing our city.

In doing so, I'm reminded of a San Diegan I recently met while serving meals at a community event in Hillcrest on Thanksgiving Day – Robert Stevens.

Robert has been homeless and living unsheltered on the streets of San Diego for 19 years. When I met him, I asked him why, in all those years, he hasn't accepted a bed in one of our shelters.

Robert said his past experiences made the idea uncomfortable, and he just wanted housing.

I pulled out my phone and showed him photos and told him the stories of some of the people who had stayed in our shelters and whose caseworkers had helped them get into a permanent home.

And I said, “Where you start is not where you end.”

What I meant was that going into a shelter is just a step along a journey.

Tonight, I share that same message with you that I shared with Robert -- “Where you start is not where you end” -- because it's the essence of progress.

The fundamental belief that our beginnings do not define us, but rather serve as the launchpad to reach our full potential.

Progress is about pushing past the circumstances we inherit.

It's about the choices we make, the resilience we exhibit, and the determination to chart a course toward a better tomorrow and, above all, to keep moving forward.

I'm pleased to tell you that, about a week after he and I spoke, Robert contacted my office to tell me that he would like to give one of our shelters a try.
Today, he’s off the street and in a shelter with a case manager who will help connect him with permanent housing.

Over these last three years, that’s what we have done together – made strides that once seemed impossible.

Found the courage to embrace the unknown and break free of the shackles of the familiar to do what we know needs to be done for all of us.

And we’re not done yet.

All of us can visualize the kind of San Diego we want to live in, the kind of city we want today and the kind of city we want to leave to our grandchildren tomorrow.

It’s safe and secure.

Its streets are smooth, and its parks are clean.

Families can afford to make ends meet.

Housing is attainable.

Its businesses are booming, and opportunity is there for anyone ready to seize it.

We, as a city, have put in the hard work to climb out of the deep valley we were once in and rise to the challenge of scaling the mountain before us to achieve this vision.

And, San Diego, we’re making progress toward it every single day.

With every homeless person we house...

With every street we pave...

With every home we permit...

With every officer we recruit...

With every streetlight we repair...

With every pothole we fill...
We are getting things done, and as a result, the State of our City is getting stronger every day.

We are stronger than yesterday, and we'll be even stronger tomorrow!

We have more work to do, but we have proven that, together, we are up to the task.

We will keep making progress, we will keep getting things done, until the JOB is done!

Thank you, San Diego! May God bless you and may God bless our great city.

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