



Transcript of Mayor Kahlil Seren's Quarterly Video Update Released April 15, 2022

Welcome to my first quarterly video update. It's been almost one hundred days since I was sworn in as Mayor of Cleveland Heights, and we've just completed the first three months under our new form of government.

One of the commitments I made during last year's campaign was that I'd report to the residents of Cleveland Heights each quarter about the progress we've made instead of making an annual "state of the city" address. So, I'll be posting videos like this one every three months.

For this first video, I wanted to start with where our city is and where we're headed.

I'm honored every day to have been chosen as the first Mayor to lead our new form of government here in Cleveland Heights. It's an exciting time for our city.

At the same time, all you have to do is turn on the TV to realize things are challenging right now. That's particularly true for Cleveland Heights.

Like a lot of Cuyahoga County, the 2008 housing crisis and the recession that followed had profound costs for Cleveland Heights, and the challenges of living under a pandemic for the last two years have only exacerbated these historic problems. When people aren't working, they can't feed their families and pay their mortgages. They also aren't paying taxes. As a result of this ongoing uncertainty, the City of Cleveland Heights was forced to cut its non-personnel budget by 30% across the board last year, and we've downsized our staff significantly. These losses have limited the services the city can provide.

The federal government has stepped in to help, but the funds they've made available can't be used for everything our city needs, and they will run out quickly. And everything now costs more. Inflation, higher demand for employees, and growing energy costs all contribute to this problem.

So, yes, it's a challenging time. But ALL of these problems are solvable. Some will be solved by the passage of time. Some will take hard work. Most are going to take both.

I've focused our efforts during these first few months on areas where hard work and time can have the greatest impact. Our goal for the next four years is to make a real difference for Cleveland Heights. We can—and did—enact change on a single election day, but realizing the benefits of that change will take time. We have to build a foundation for the future if we want to fulfill the promise of changing our government.

One of the first steps we've taken in building a foundation for the future has been to add to the already talented team of professionals working for the City of Cleveland Heights.

This month, we congratulate two of Cleveland Heights' most influential leaders who are retiring—Chief Annette Mecklenburg and City Manager Susanna Niermann-O'Neil.

Chief Mecklenburg has served in the Cleveland Heights Police Division for almost 32 years and is the first woman to serve as Cleveland Heights Chief of Police. She has been instrumental in developing a closer relationship between Heights residents and their police force and has been a leader in diversifying our police force, reforming and modernizing police policy, and establishing ongoing police training.

Susanna Niermann-O'Neil has served the people of Cleveland Heights for nearly half of our city's history—46 of its 101 years. Starting as a champion for fair housing, Susanna has been at the center of progress in Cleveland Heights for decades. From starting the city's community services department to serving as City Manager on two separate occasions, Susanna has left an indelible mark on our city, leaving it better for future generations.

I'm sure the entire City of Cleveland Heights joins me in celebrating the legacy of these two remarkable women and wishes them well as they begin their well-earned retirement.

No one can really replace the wealth of experience Chief Mecklenburg, and Susanna brought to their positions. Still, the people filling their roles going forward bring with them extensive experience of their own.

Cleveland Heights' new Police Chief, Chris Britton, has been a member of the Cleveland Heights Police Department for 26 years, serving as the department's Administrative Captain for the past two years.

And last month, with the approval of Cleveland Heights City Council, we hired the city's first City Administrator. City Administrator is a new position for Cleveland Heights created as part of the Strong Mayor Charter Amendment. If the Mayor is the CEO of the city, the City Administrator is my Chief Operating Officer.

Our new City Administrator is Joe Sinnott, the former three-term Mayor of Erie, Pennsylvania, the fourth largest city in that state. Joe has grappled with many of the challenges facing Cleveland Heights, and we are excited to have him join our team this month.

Building our team, though, extends beyond the walls of City Hall. We are working to strengthen our relationships with Cleveland Heights representatives at other levels of government and building new relationships to gain access to new tools that can help us accomplish the city's goals.

Last month, State Representative Janine Boyd invited me to join her at Governor Dewine's State of the State address, where I had a chance to advocate with members of the General Assembly on behalf of our city.

We are becoming more active in the Ohio Municipal League, the Ohio Mayor's Alliance, and the First Suburbs Consortium to find ways cities with similar challenges can work together to meet our needs. For the first time, the administration has engaged with the National Development Council to provide independent, expert analysis of residential and commercial development projects.

And last week, we resumed the regular joint meetings of Cleveland Heights City Council, the CH-UH school Board, the Heights Library board, and the University Heights City Council.

While we're building our team within city hall and our partnerships outside of city hall, we are also focused on strengthening our connections with residents.

One of the many reasons Cleveland Heights voters approved the 2019 Strong Mayor Charter amendment was to make our local government more accountable and responsive.

If we want to build a local government in Cleveland Heights that is more responsive to people's needs, we have to start with ensuring residents know what their government is doing and why. And we have to engage them in an ongoing conversation about what their government can and should do on their behalf.

If you're watching this, there's a good chance you already know about the city's quarterly FOCUS magazine and its weekly City News Update email. As part of our commitment to greater accountability, we will expand our communications and outreach by upgrading the FOCUS and weekly emails. We're planning an overhaul our website to make it more useful and give us more opportunities to talk WITH one another. I've started these quarterly videos, and I plan to start sending out regular email updates to supplement them.

These are just a starting point for how we intend to bring residents closer to their local government.

Building our team, establishing stronger partnerships, and becoming more responsive to residents are three important ways we're building a foundation for how we're governing.

I'd like to talk for a minute about three ways we're building a foundation by what we're accomplishing.

For years, you've been hearing that Cleveland Heights is shifting to automated trash collection. This month, it's finally happening.

Every residence will receive two new carts—one for refuse and one for recycling—and public works employees will drive trucks with robotic arms that will pick up and empty the carts.

Automated collection is faster, more efficient, and more effective than our current program. It's also safer for truck operators, who will now be able to stay in their vehicles while their trucks collect the trash.

The new carts are on wheels, so residents can easily work with them. They are taller and have greater capacity than regular garbage cans, so residents and visitors will see two carts in front of each residence on collection days instead of piles of trash bags. The carts have attached lids that will help prevent animals from tearing into trash bags and creating litter.

And because the two-cart system makes it easier to separate trash and recycling, automated collection will help reduce the impact of Cleveland Heights' waste on the environment.

Trash collection is one of the city's biggest jobs, and we're going to be doing it better and more sustainably.

Also, last year as a member of Cleveland Heights City Council, I introduced legislation to enact a LeadSafe Cleveland Heights program. I've recently asked City Council to take up and pass this legislation so that we can implement it.

Lead paint is a huge threat to children. It impedes their cognitive development, which affects their behavior and employability as adults. But it's wrong to think about lead paint as a housing issue. Preventing children from being poisoned is a health and safety issue. Lead paint abatement is a health and safety issue with a housing-based solution.

The City of Cleveland Heights has a moral obligation to implement a solution that works for all of us, including homeowners and landlords who might need help paying for lead paint removal.

I'm committed to finding this kind of solution and having Cleveland Heights lead the way among suburban communities in Cuyahoga County to make our homes Lead Safe. Making our community healthier and safer for children has to be a foundation for our future.

So does development.

We don't pursue development because we like to build things. We try to bring development to Cleveland Heights because it allows us to attract more people. People who want to visit, people who want to work or do business, and people who are looking for new homes.

We have to have enough people—and the economic activity they generate—to pay to protect, keep up, and build upon all the things that make Cleveland Heights such a great place.

This is why development is so important.

We're laying a foundation to attract the right kind of development to Cleveland Heights—development that fits our city, that respects our history, and that helps make our city more vibrant, sustainable, and resilient.

The most visible example of this is Top of the Hill. Later this year, it will open with 261 apartments.

And after 15 years of trying, we are moving forward on the \$50 million Cedar Lee Meadowbrook development. The Cedar Lee District is already one of the Cleveland area's premier places for people to eat, shop, and enjoy themselves. The Cedar-Lee-Meadowbrook project will replace surface parking lots and vacant land at the southeast intersection of Cedar and Lee Roads with 206 market-rate apartments, retail space, and more than two acres of open or green spaces.

Combined, these two developments will be home to more than 700 residents, nearly 500 of whom will be newcomers to Cleveland Heights. And they will generate 90 permanent jobs.

If you want an example of the impact development projects like these can have, you don't have to look any further than Shaker Heights. The Van Aken District has been wildly successful for Shaker. It is a destination for visitors, a home for new residents, and a gathering place for neighbors. With the Cedar-Lee-Meadowbrook project, Cleveland

Heights will offer something even better—in a location with more restaurants and amenities, attracting tens of thousands of people every year.

Voting has already begun on Issue 9, which concerns a piece of property that the city has designated for the Cedar Lee Meadowbrook project. The city does NOT tell residents how to vote on issues. We have an obligation, though, to inform the public about the city's positions on issues and the implications of policy choice.

When it comes to Issue 9, it's the city's policy that this property should be used for the Cedar Lee Meadowbrook development and not for any other purpose. The city STRONGLY believes it is in the best interest of Cleveland Heights to ensure the Cedar Lee Meadowbrook project DOES move forward. If Issue 9 passes and is implemented, this would NOT happen.

Thank you for your interest in the City of Cleveland Heights. I'll be back in three months with another update to talk about how we are building on the foundation we've been putting in place with our new government. In the meantime, please visit www.clevelandheights.gov and sign up for our City News Updates to stay current on what is happening at Cleveland Heights City Hall.

Thanks for watching!