

## **State of the City, 2021**

Mayor Robert E. Simison

Thank you Sean. And thank you John and Albertson's for being the title sponsor for this year's event.

Hello Meridian.

I am excited to be standing in front of you today. It has been a long 15 months since March of 2020. But today is the dawn of a new era - a Renaissance of sorts - as we find our way back into our community.

A big step is here, at the Galaxy Event Center for this Meridian Chamber of Commerce event. I am grateful for the opportunity the business community has provided for me to speak about the State of Meridian.

The State of Meridian is strong - some might say a little too strong - as we see new residents and businesses choose to put down roots in our community. This is happening by design.

We have a business environment that promotes opportunity and prosperity. Our public safety is there in times of need and to protect our civil liberties. We have common sense fiscal management of the valuable taxpayer dollars we are entrusted with. We are committed to the infrastructure improvements necessary to provide efficient and effective services. All of which contribute to the premier quality of life we all enjoy.

I am blessed to work with a great team. We have an engaged City Council committed to our city services and working to address the long-term challenges we face.

Our first responders are providing emergency services at the most critical time in a person's life, our engineers and technicians are keeping our utilities flowing, and our clerks and planners are processing the community's needs.

Our Parks Maintenance group has our parks ready for summer and our IT service desk is supporting every department. Our team - your public servants - are making sure things are taken care of. Together we are all moving the community's business forward.

During this last year, your city employees have taken on new challenges that have allowed us to grow individually, as an organization, and as a service provider. I believe in Meridian, this team and where we are headed.

Last summer, we conducted our regular City Survey - during a pandemic and amid nationwide protests - because we shouldn't get to choose when to ask the community how we are doing.

Despite the challenges many people have been facing, residents stepped up and continued their tradition of providing valuable feedback.

What our residents said in 2020 was largely the same as what we heard in 2017. They praised the core services the City provides and rated many areas higher than the 2017 survey. Let me repeat this point, the services we provide today are valued and appreciated by our residents.

Yes, we will always work to improve, but you, the community, love our public safety services and spending time in our parks. And while you may not know about finance, legal, human resources, or our inspectors, planners, engineers, records teams and the rest, trust me, they are awesome!

But don't take just my word. The customer service provided by our City employees is at 86 percent satisfaction. This ranks far above regional and national averages, and I couldn't be prouder of the team.

We have seen some phenomenal work by our employees this last 15 months. They were committed to providing the services during a pandemic that the community expected.

Innovation occurred, whether taking public testimony remotely, using an emergency response vehicle focused on potential COVID-19 cases, using video cameras to do remote inspections, or holding virtual events. Our employees never missed a beat and the work they did is setting the expectations for how we provide services moving forward.

Thank You Team Meridian.

Due to their work, Meridian was recognized by ETC Institute with a "Leading the Way Award". The award recognizes local governments that rank in the top 10 percent of all U.S. communities with regard to resident satisfaction with the overall quality of local government services, customer service, and the value provided for local taxes and fees.

Our employees take pride not just in the work they do, but how they do it. I believe in them. I believe in Meridian.

The City survey also identified areas we need to be focused on. Residents remain concerned about transportation, growth, and education. I was not surprised to see these issues as opportunities for improvement because these are the same issues from previous surveys, and when I was campaigning.

I remain committed to making each of these areas a priority, and bringing solutions - not excuses - as Mayor, because that is what the community is asking for.

Today, a lot of my focus will be on these three issues. Some may question why I am focused on roads and schools when the City does not directly operate the road network or administer school business.

Simply put, both of these issues are a result of growth. In the larger context, we need to care about our roads, schools, and libraries as much as our core services for Meridian to be a premier city.

When residents tell us that core city services like fire, parks, and law enforcement are rated “excellent”, but that growth and development is one of the top three important issues for Meridian along with schools and transportation, we must focus in on these areas. It is our responsibility to work with our partners to determine our ability to affect these community priorities.

We know growth and development brings continued pressure on roads and schools, as the necessary State funding for these issues has not been an ongoing priority at the legislature.

Accordingly, road and school improvements have traditionally come after development, creating an on-going strain on our roads and schools. Our residents are frustrated with this approach and want change.

This past year we created our next five-year strategic plan. We reaffirmed the vision of Meridian to be the West's premier community in which to live, work and raise a family. We also updated our mission and focus areas, and added a new focus area on Transportation and Infrastructure using feedback from the survey.

As I drafted up this speech and asked my staff to look at it, what I heard is “there seems to be a lot on transportation.” I said great, because that is one of our community's biggest concerns.

So, with that knowledge, sit back, buckle up, and pretend we are all sitting through the light cycles at the Meridian Road Interchange during rush hour and we will do just fine.

Last year, with all of the remote work and learning going on, there really weren't emails complaining about traffic. Weird, I know! But, in April, the first one popped up and I let the office know this would be the first of many to come as the community begins to return to normal.

We have seen some real transportation improvements in our community over this past year. Chinden had several miles improved with more currently under construction. Meridian Road, Linder Road, and Ten Mile all saw improvements with widening projects. South Eagle Road is currently under construction.

These are overdue and welcome improvements. I want to say thank you to our development partners, ACHD and ITD.

This was a good start, however, there is so much more to do. As a City, our number one road priority project remains Linder Road Overpass. The overpass is sorely needed for public safety and to alleviate congestion.

We have the newly opened fire station number six at Linder and Overland which can help serve areas north of the interstate.

FedEx and Amazon are both locating on Franklin Road and we are seeing multi-family residential development in the area.

In addition, as part of West Ada's efforts to balance enrollments, children in south Meridian now need to get to Peregrine Elementary which is off Linder on the north side of the Interstate.

So, what are we doing about it? In April, City Council approved 2.5 million dollars to spur the bridge construction. I want to thank Council for their unanimous support of this project.

Afterwards, we sent a letter to ITD requesting the overpass be added to the state plan for transportation improvements. Later this month, I will be addressing the ITD Board about our commitment to this project.

Additionally, I launched a task force that is committed to this project. I want to thank the business and civic partners who agreed to serve as members. This task force will help carry the message as to why Linder Road overpass is necessary.

Together, we will focus on moving this project forward until the overpass is under construction. This group will help build the needed community support. When the time is right, I will ask for your voice, time and talent to help make this project a reality.

Linder Road is one gap in our road System. Other gaps have been created due to facility location - for example, Discovery Park. This regional park in south Meridian is currently accessed by two lane roads that lack curb, gutter, sidewalks, or pathway connections.

With improvements planned by ACHD along Eagle Road to Lake Hazel in 2023, we were looking for a way to complete the section of Lake Hazel from Eagle down to the park entrance to make it safer for the public to access.

We found a familiar partner - Brighton Corporation - who is working with Meridian and ACHD to expand Lake Hazel Road from Locust Grove to Eagle Road. Once completed, these roads will provide a safe route for the public to access this facility which will draw visitors from throughout the region. Thank you to the teams at Brighton and ACHD for making this connection happen.

We have a similar situation in north Meridian with Owyhee High School. Road improvements are needed to provide safe access for all traveling to the school located at Ustick and McMillan, but we have not found a solution yet.

Last year, I spoke about using our city dollars to help ACHD build needed road improvements in advance and then have them reimburse us. A section of Ustick heading towards Owyhee was a great project to consider this type of partnership.

Unfortunately, there are concerns with what we can legally do under the Idaho State Constitution. Now, I know ACHD is committed to working together to find a way to overcome obstacles and I appreciate their support. However, we need to take advantage of any opportunity to address our resident's top concerns and provide needed transportation improvements.

People want roads to get from point a to point b - today - not just when it is convenient for government or when development solves the problems for us.

Earlier, I touched on a few improvements, but I want to focus on our state highways. Thanks to the development community, Meridian was able to see some real improvements on Chinden between Linder Road and Highway 16 with more currently under way. In addition, we expect to see the much anticipated third lane southbound on Eagle from River Valley to I-84 starting soon. These projects are using a tool called STAR and are paid for by development.

STAR funding is being used because ITD doesn't have the revenue or tools like impact fees - which ACHD can use - to complete needed road projects timely. I applaud the Governor who brought forward a transportation plan to make needed investments on our state highways, like the extension of Highway-16.

I hope this approach will give ITD the funds they need to address deficiencies in Meridian and the Treasure Valley. If not, we will continue to work with ITD to find solutions to deliver needed improvements.

We must be innovative, opportunistic, and vocal if we are going to solve transportation challenges. One of the best ways we can help transportation needs as a City is to be responsible in where and how we grow.

I have said it before and I will say it again, responsible growth solves problems; irresponsible growth creates problems. When we grow responsibly we are maximizing taxpayer resources. We are working with our development community to bring projects where services and infrastructure are located or planned.

Meridian is at the center of the Treasure Valley which makes us attractive for development. But we can't grow everywhere in our community at once. Growth needs to be guided so services can be delivered and public expectations can be met.

Last year, we identified southeast and northwest Meridian as priority growth areas. You can see why from this heat map. It is where we are seeing building permits and development applications. It is where we need to invest in our services and where our civic partners need to do the same. The good news is we are doing just that.

In our southeast priority growth area, we are planning to co-locate a fire and police station on property adjacent to Discovery Park.

Additionally, we are talking with Ada County Paramedics about partnering, and working with the Meridian Rural Fire Protection District to help with the first 18 months of staffing costs.

The fire station will help address response times for services throughout our community.

The police substation will allow officers to spend more time in our neighborhoods. Substations provide our officers a more convenient location to write reports, instead of returning to the main station and leaving their patrol areas. By reducing travel time, they can further their efforts in keeping us one of the safest cities in Idaho.

Over time, we also expect substations to become a more convenient place for the community to interact with the Department. This will provide expected services to our residents and allow us to have additional space for officers as we grow.

We are also ready to move forward with phase two of Discovery Park, our regional park in the south. We have a concept plan that we are working through to find the right balance for the needs of the area and the community. I am excited about unique ideas for the park that will appeal to our teens with both a pump track and a skateboard facility.

Our partners will also be busy. The Meridian Library District is going to have two library locations with the Tiny Library at the Hill and a new full-service branch library nearby. There are also plans for a future charter school and land for a future West Ada elementary school in the area of Locust Grove and Lake Hazel.

With all of this activity, the road improvements along Eagle Road, Lake Hazel, as well as improvements to Locust Grove from Overland to Victory are key to the success of this growing priority area.

Similar investment is occurring in northwest Meridian, as well as some planning for the future. Just like in the south, we are looking at co-locating our police and fire stations near the Owyhee High School which will open next fall. West Ada also has a site planned for a future elementary school in the area.

Meridian Library District is also set to break ground on the new North Meridian branch later this year. Located in the Orchard Park development at Linder Road and Chinden Boulevard, this innovative library will bring high-demand resources to the community, including 24-hour hold pickups, a unique active child area to support early learning, and a sensory room for individuals with special abilities. This location is expected to open in 2022.

And roads in the northwest continue to be planned or improved. I already mentioned several examples earlier. However, the biggest proposed investment is the extension of Highway 16 between Chinden and I-84.

Once completed, Highway 16 will provide great access to the area and beyond while reducing traffic on Ten Mile. It will also somewhat isolate a section of our community from the rest of Meridian. That is why Community Development has been developing a detailed area plan for this most northwestern part of town.

Yes, we know where the schools, fire and police stations, and major roads will be, but we need to look deeper and determine what the area feels like; where should the commercial center be

located, the role of our park system, and how the local roads should work to pull it together into its own vibrant community.

As you can see, we need to invest in our community - as do our partners. With our strong financial position, I am confident in our ability to deliver these services to our community - and we can start now.

Last week, I delivered my budget to City Council to meet the needs of our community I have been describing. We can achieve these objectives because we have been collecting impact fees which help cover the cost of growth. We have been saving before we spend. And, we are lean so we can bring on the needed police, fire and other personnel timely to deliver these services.

The funds that have been entrusted to the City by the citizens are for services they expect. Last year, we broke ground on the Scenario Training Center to provide real-life learning for our first responders, and I know everyone is looking forward to its opening here in the coming month. We need to continue our investment in public safety now to provide services as soon as possible.

The budget I propose asks City Council to move up a fire station that is planned to open in 2025, and build it alongside the one planned to open in 2023. My budget also provides the funding for the two police substations I mentioned. I know this is a big ask for this City Council, but it is the right ask.

We have a contract with the community. A contract that says we will deliver services to you when you call. We have goals, and we aren't currently meeting those goals, and in two more years we could be further behind those goals.

In fact, two weeks ago, our fire chief reported our average response time of 6 minutes and 35 seconds. This is beyond our goal of 5 minutes, and this is after an additional one minute from the time the calls come into the stations. We need to bring down our response times to meet our current goals. And that means doing the right thing to deliver the services our current residents expect and demand.

We cannot ask residents to face diminished services because of growth. There is minimal cost to the City for bringing on a second fire station two years early thanks to the partnership with the Rural Fire District I mentioned earlier.

What all four of these facilities will do is keep our community safer and help response times. With roads that are more congested, having the facilities and officers closer to where people live will help us meet our commitment to the community. It keeps other crews closer to their responding areas and might eliminate travel through road construction for responding vehicles.

Either way, these facilities help keep the community and the firefighters safe which is what really matters. It is why we live here and why others are looking to move here. Having these stations can also improve our community fire rating which has a tangible cost savings to our residents and businesses.

The need is now and it will take two years for all of these to be built. I am asking City Council to approve the necessary funding for these buildings so we can keep our growing community safe.

Speaking of budgets, we need to talk about the action the State Legislature took to limit growth to pay for itself.

What was sold as a property tax relief bill, really is a service cap on local government. Others have acknowledged that the bill signed by the Governor won't really provide meaningful property tax relief. It does however, continue the real issue which is the shifting of property taxes.

Because of limitations this bill puts on new construction revenue, it is likely the City will have to ask for some of the allowable property tax increase, because now, growth is not paying for itself.

The reality is home values are increasing at a faster rate than commercial properties causing a shift. This is shifting the tax burden onto residential property owners, especially homeowners in older sections of Meridian.

Yes, the legislature increased the homeowner's exemption by 25,000 dollars, but in our market this only slightly slows down the shift onto residential homes.

This same bill was to reduce the impact on our seniors by updating the circuit breaker exemption. Well, for many it won't. In fact, the bill sponsor acknowledged that it was unclear how many people currently benefiting from the circuit breaker would lose that benefit this year because of their rising home value.

This bill was a political victory talking point, not a solution. There were several good articles in the Idaho Statesman and Idaho Press, as well a pointed editorial on this topic put out by the Lewiston Tribune Editorial Board on May 20<sup>th</sup>. It is clear they understand the consequences, even if many in the legislature don't.

I am committed to working with Senator Winder, the Governor, and others to create sound public policies that will fix these issues.

You may have heard about the moratorium put in place in Caldwell, and others are looking at how to manage the bill's impact. Each city will have to decide what it means for them, and whether they are willing to give up economic development in their community so they can provide services to the current residents and businesses.

For Meridian, so long as we are willing to focus development in our growth priority areas, we should be able to provide city services as planned under the legislation.

And, while the legislature was doing their best to limit cities financially, they were unable to address a simple clean-up bill regarding City elections.



Last year, the legislature passed a bill requiring city council elections by districts once a city's population is over 100,000 people. For Meridian, this will happen once the 2020 Census information is transmitted later this year.

Last year's bill lacked direction on implementation so we worked with the legislature for guidance. Ultimately, that fix was hijacked and the concerns for implementation still exist.

So, this November we will elect three Council members the way we traditionally have. In 2023, we expect to elect council members by districts.

We will begin the districting process once we receive the necessary data to establish our future districts. It is our intention to complete this process in 2022 so the community is fully aware of the plans and process for the 2023 election.

Our residents also highlighted concerns about education in the survey. We all know this last year was a challenge for our kids, parents and teachers. And, I think we are all excited to look ahead. So, let's take a moment and focus on our future by looking at our 2021 City of Meridian Scholarship winners who are a great representation of the brightness to come.

Congratulations to these deserving students! We are proud to be able to support your education goals.

I truly appreciate the relationship that exists between the City and West Ada School District, and it all starts at the staff level. Last year, I mentioned a new position that would focus on two of our biggest issues, transportation and education. West Ada also has a position focused on development.

Together, our staff are working collaboratively on growth issues and its impact on education. Their efforts are helping both organizations have a greater understanding of what is occurring in the community and how we can collectively be better.

I want to acknowledge Dr. Mary Ann Rannells for all she has done as the Superintendent of West Ada. She has been a champion of the students, and led the district through a period of significant growth and capital investment from bonds approved by taxpayers.

In fact, we cut the ribbon on Pleasant View Elementary two weeks ago and will see Owyhee High School open next year. With bonds and facility improvements, a supplemental levy, boundary adjustments, and so much more, I wanted to say thank you for your service to West Ada, Dr. Rannells.

In 2021, West Ada welcomed two new Trustees, and the current Centennial High School Principle, Dr. Derek Bub, was recently announced as their next Superintendent. The City Council and I meet them all last month during a joint meeting. It is clear that we are committed to building upon the staff relationships and working together for the students.

One way we can help West Ada is to have impact fees. We need to continue to advocate for growth to help pay for itself from the State Legislature - some of whom expressed an interest in this when they were campaigning last year – in order to build needed schools and facilities.

Ultimately, the legislature needs to take responsibility for their constitutional requirement regarding education. They can do this by providing state funding and tools so that growth can help pay for new facilities instead of just relying on bonds which are part of property tax burden.

Bonds and levies aren't fun, and neither are boundary committees. I applaud West Ada for updating their boundaries and their ongoing commitment to this process. Making sure we are maximizing space in our schools before asking voters for additional facilities is crucial. I know it is not popular, but it is necessary to maintain the fiscal trust of the public.

And while they have maximized space for today, we know there will be other facility needs in the future. I am committed to working with them on long-term options so we can be proactive and provide schools for our kids as the needs arise, not years after it is warranted.

One interesting thing about growth in our community is the changing demographics. It wasn't that long ago that the average age in Meridian was 32. Now it is 36. Additionally, our population that is over 65 - has increased from 8.3 percent to 12.7 percent. Despite the growth and need for schools, we are maturing as a community.

The change we are seeing in demographics, and challenges we have in our community infrastructure is why I am announcing my intention of making Meridian an AARP Livable Community.

Through the age-friendly program, AARP helps participating communities become more livable and age-friendly by creating safer and more walkable streets, needed housing and transportation options, better access to key services, and opportunities for residents to participate in community activities.

The AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities provides a structured process that guides change and serves as a catalyst to educate, encourage, promote and recognize improvements that benefit residents of all ages and life stages.

We will be looking for community members to participate in this multi-year process with the goal of becoming an AARP community by the year 2026.

The opportunities we have with the livable communities program are also tied to economic development. We need to be targeted in our economic development efforts.

As you can see from the numbers for residential and commercial development in the last 12 months, we have a lot of activity in Meridian – even during a pandemic. And, while the nation saw a reduction in jobs of 6.1 percent, according to the Idaho Department of Labor, Meridian saw job growth of 2.4 percent.

The numbers are amazing, but there are also challenges. Residential housing prices are at an all-time high and everyone wants to produce more - it's a supply and demand issue and our development partners are doing their best to help on the supply side of the equation.

With commercial and industrial development, the story is about the same as last year with new space being leased before it is completed, and historic low vacancy rates with industrial properties. I have talked to several businesses this year who are looking to expand, but are having trouble finding property to do so.

A few weeks ago, I met the team from Red Aspen. Red Aspen is the hard work of three amazing women who have created a company focused on beauty products. They have lofty goals for their growing company and have been piecing together space in Meridian as they grow. They have an energy and a commitment to their success and I have no doubt they will reach their goal.

And they want to stay in Meridian, but without balanced land uses for needed commercial and industrial uses it may not happen. Red Aspen is one story. I am aware of others, and I am sure there are many that I don't even know of.

So how do we move forward? Well, it starts with more opportunities. Despite our strong commercial activity from the last year, we need to be preparing for additional needs. One way we can do that is with new urban renewal districts.

I said it during the last State of the City and I will say it again, City Government does not create jobs. We create the environment for others to invest. Establishing new urban renewal areas will bring both investment and family wage jobs to our community. We need to continue that philosophy and utilize the economic development tools at our disposal to help our businesses grow.

We are looking at a new district on the south side of the Interstate with the focus to help make the Linder Road overpass happen and spur commercial development in this area.

Also, being considered is the Northern Gateway District. This district will continue our work in downtown and be focused on the area between Meridian Road and 4<sup>th</sup> Street along Fairview and would help with the development of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Street extension.

The final district is an expansion of the newly created Union District in downtown to include property that is likely to see investment through redevelopment in the near future.

These districts matter because urban renewal works. Look at what is occurring at 10 Mile and in downtown. The jobs which are now located at 10 Mile are a direct result of the district.

In downtown, much of what we are seeing is thanks to the urban renewal districts. We have the Keller building on the south side of the tracks almost complete; the Old Town lofts, north of City Hall in the midst of construction; and Union 93 has cleared the site and is ready to move forward.

Since last year, the plans for the area known as the Civic Block in downtown has changed. We are once again seeking proposals to find the right “next” project for this property. This project will continue the existing energy and reshaping of our downtown.

One element that may or may not be included in the Civic Block is a community center. I believe a downtown, central location for an enhanced community center is essential for our residents. If it is not included as part of a proposal, we will be focusing on developing our own plans for a much needed new facility in the upcoming budget. This is an important part of our downtown's future.

Our Parks and Recreation Department has been, and will be, busy for years to come. Besides planning for the next phase of Discovery Park, improvements at Homecourt, and several pathways completed, this year they also took on the task of overseeing Lakeview Golf Club.

This facility is owned by the City, but has been managed by third party operators for decades. Technically that is still the case. However, we are moving forward and planning for the future of this important community asset.

We took over operations in 2020, and worked with the National Golf Foundation to assess the immediate needs, as well as the future “wouldn't it be nice” and everything in between.

We purchased new lawn mowers and golf carts with more to do. There are some heftier issues to address including upgrading the irrigation system, course improvements and long-term management.

We have a premier system of parks and amenities. We also know that the golf course has not seen its fair share of upkeep under prior management. Now that the City is helping to manage the course, Lakeview Golf Club should meet the premier standards we have for our facilities, and I look forward to meeting that goal over time.

Working with the Western Ada Recreation District to take over the management of Lakeview has also allowed WARD and the City to begin discussions about the Meridian Pool in Story Park. The pool is owned and operated by WARD, and we look forward to future conversations with them regarding the transition of the pool ownership to the City.

This follows previous collaboration with WARD when we took over operations of Fuller Park. Bringing these amenities under City operation provides clarity to the community, and an opportunity to remove WARD as a property taxing district which is a win for everyone.

Parks are great community infrastructure, just like water, sewer, streetlights and broadband. Last year, I spoke about the plans to commission our Waste Water Resource Recovery Facility after a multi-year expansion.

The new plant has been successfully operating for 11 months now and we continue to evaluate next steps - from the odors, to the access, to the opportunities with changing technology – in order to make sure we are planning for future needs.

On the water side, we are making investments in water quality with our 5<sup>th</sup> well treatment facility completed in 2020. I was able to spend time in one of these facilities earlier this year. It is state of the industry technology operated by technicians who are dedicated to delivering quality water to our residents. We have seven more of these facilities slated to come online over the next five years.

I want to touch on broadband as well. We have been fortunate to have private investment of this important and needed infrastructure. During this last year, you have likely seen lots of contractor activity connecting households in our community with fiber.

What we learned over the last year is the importance of connectivity and the freedom it affords businesses and their employees. We need to get every home, business and public space connected.

By now, you may have heard about the American Rescue Plan Act, or ARPA. Under ARPA, the City of Meridian can access 12.2 million dollars that has been identified for water, sewer, broadband, and other uses.

By leveraging ARPA funds and working with our business community, we have an opportunity to ensure we are all connected with broadband. We need to look at how we can utilize these dollars to help our private sector bring broadband to underserved areas that are more costly and complex.

Quality broadband infrastructure can be the difference when people and businesses are looking to grow and thrive.

This isn't the first set of dollars our community has had access to during this last year. Through the CARES Act, Meridian was able to get needed personal protective equipment for first responders and enable a more remote workforce. Where these dollars really made a difference was for our small businesses.

As a City, we were able to provide 1 million dollars to over 60 companies to help them during the pandemic. I recently had the chance to visit with one of these companies, Hammer and Stain.

Here, I heard the story of a business that opened just before the pandemic and the struggles they faced, the change in their business model, and the value of the funds received from the City through our Business Grant Program. It helped them keep their doors open.

While theirs was a success story, there were also other businesses who choose different routes - some by choice and others by necessity. When the pandemic was first hitting Idaho, I talked with several businesses as they were making hard decisions about the future of their business and their employees.

Some decisions were ending their dreams of business ownership after years of hard work. It was through these conversations that I saw the love for humanity.

Unfortunately, we also saw too much of a divided humanity during the last year. We saw people divided about masks, elections, and injustices across the nation. It pitted neighbor against neighbor, as people were asked to choose a side, as if there was only one right answer to every issue. When we were no longer gathering together as a society and engaging in conversations, I believe everything became further polarized.

We lost sight of a core belief of mine, the need to actively listen, respectfully discuss, and perhaps find a way that unites us rather than divides us. I still believe that a better way exists in our community. That is why I believe in Meridian.

Believing in Meridian is to support the movement to bring civility back into our communities.

We are a community with diverse perspectives. A community who encourages one another to engage in thought-provoking conversations. A community where it is okay to disagree, while still supporting curiosity and challenging one another for solutions.

We are a community that embraces cultural diversity. We accept people for who they are and where they came from, and welcome them once here.

We are a community that stands up for one another and speaks up when we see wrong doing, so people understand our shared values.

Believing in Meridian starts with me, our City Council, and other leadership in the City - but the responsibility lies with all of us if we are to be the community we say we are and desire to be - the premier place to live, work and raise a family.

We need to listen to the conversations that are occurring across the nation - and have our own conversations in Meridian - so we can learn from those who have different experiences than our own. It's important to engage in open and respectful dialogue as we work together as a community.

We started those efforts this last year under the leadership of Council President Bernt. He and I were joined by our police department and had conversations with members of our community to understand the challenges they face.

I believe we need to continue the conversations we started and expand to include our faith community, business leaders, and educational providers.

We all need to be engaged if we are going to evolve towards a more just society building stronger ties in our community and as neighbors. I believe in Meridian and ask that you do the same.

We have great leaders in this community, and while I can't mention everyone today - at least not if you want to go home soon - I do want to take a moment and recognize someone who has been a consistent leader from our business community, especially for our youth.

This year's Legacy Award winner isn't a stranger to the Meridian Chamber or the community. She has been an active volunteer for decades with the Special Olympics of Idaho, the American Heart Association, Boys & Girls Clubs of Ada County, Ronald McDonald House, St. Luke's Regional Medical Centers in Meridian and Eagle, and the Meridian Kiwanis Club.

Most recently this year's winner played a role in the Chamber's first Job Shadowing Day in Meridian, and coordinated a school backpack program. What really caught my eye was how instrumental she was in starting the Meridian Chamber Scholarship Program, which awards seven students in the Treasure Valley with a 1,000 dollar scholarship - a true Legacy project.

I am honored to present Toni Smith as this year's Mayor's Legacy Award winner for a lifetime of involvement in Meridian and dedication to the youth in our community.

Toni, please come on up to the stage!

Toni, you are leaving a lasting legacy in Meridian.

In closing - we have had quite a year, and I am excited when I look at what is on the horizon. The State of Meridian is strong. We have an environment that promotes business opportunity and prosperity as we step out of the shadow of a global pandemic.

Our public safety is there in times of need and to protect our civil liberties, and we need to make significant investments to continue to meet our service expectations. We have common sense fiscal management of the valuable taxpayer dollars we are entrusted with, and need to utilize tools to ensure growth pays for itself.

We are committed to eliminate barriers that make sense in the challenges we face, and invest in facilities and infrastructure necessary to provide effective and efficient services to continue the premier quality of life we all enjoy.

Let's get back to talking, finding solutions and supporting one another and together we can all believe in Meridian. Thank you.