

The City of Eugene held its annual “State of the City” event on January 12th at the Hult Center to selectively and misleadingly promote the work of the city government in 2025, with the mayor emphasizing that “Eugene is an incredibly special place” and proclaiming she was “proud to report that the state of your city is so very strong.” The speech given by Eugene Mayor Kaarin Knudsen showcases perfectly the type of feel-good rhetoric meant to encourage and console those living in relative safety, while neglecting to make any commitment to make material changes to increase the safety of those most marginalized. In her speech, the mayor did not once mention the words: immigrant, ICE, violence, or homelessness—ignoring threats to the safety of the most vulnerable in our community.

Mayor’s Vague Rhetoric and Platitudes vs. Actual City Practice and Policy

Mayor Knudson may have signaled good intentions towards the people of this city throughout her speech, but it’s difficult to see how this speech is anything besides rhetoric. She spoke of connection and collaboration as antidotes to isolation and confusion, and creativity as a means to pave the way to a better, more expansive world.

Near the beginning of the mayor’s speech, she said:

“I thought about the landslide of rhetoric and policy that we have faced this year as a community, and about how many people have been made to feel afraid. I thought about how much energy has been dedicated to confusion and distraction and harm. And I thought about how absolutely critical it is to demand better and how you all in our community deserves so much more.”

The mayor offers no more than these vague references to the fear and harm that a large portion of the city’s population is experiencing. And nowhere in her speech does the mayor propose or make any such demands that she claims to think are “absolutely critical.”

The speech opens with a quote from Einstein—"imagination is more important than knowledge"—saying that Einstein was telling us to "put our attention on the future," and that "the world we can imagine is more powerful than what we have seen." And the mayor closes her speech with:

*"It is incredibly important to me ... that **every Eugenean see themselves as part of the future we're building here.** We are absolutely **all in this together.** We are stronger together. Through every collective effort, we model our values of strategic responsiveness and **belonging.** We are not interested in the patterns of overwhelm and isolation that are modeled by others. If someone hopes to make you feel afraid, they will first try to make you feel alone. And **I promise you that no one in this community is alone.** I do not expect us to be perfect, but **our consistency of care is defining** and **how we care for this community is transformational.**"*

Creating the world we want takes practice. What has the Eugene city government been practicing?

- The City of Eugene has been using its power and resources to systematically remove our unhoused neighbors from downtown and all public parks. The mayor referenced the deaths of people trying to cross HWY 99, deaths that can likely be traced back to the city government's banishment of the unhoused population from downtown. How could these banished people possibly "see themselves as part of the future" the city is "building"?
- The mayor said in her speech that "in the face of dehumanization, we celebrate our diversity with joy." The City's efforts to "celebrate our diversity with joy" amount to nothing more than tokenization and abandonment of migrant and immigrant neighbors. Over the past year, ICE has made participating in the ordinary daily life carry risk. Some of the cultural events hosted and promoted by the City are now only attended by

white people because migrant and immigrant community members are living and hiding in fear of being abducted by federal agents.

- The mayor completely disregards and omits from her speech the rise of fascism that officials in other cities and Oregon's Senator Merkley have recognized. In her speech, the mayor didn't mention that a heavily armed, masked, untrained militia has been operating with impunity and EPD's assistance in our city.
- The mayor made no mention of our neighbors who have been abducted by federal agents over the past year in Eugene and Lane County, nor of their supporters who have been bearing witness to these abductions and have been unlawfully harassed, arrested, and detained. She also ignored the weekly downtown protests against those abductions. EPD's direct assistance to and collaboration with ICE—by responding to calls to help disperse protests and by collecting and sharing data from Flock cameras—violates Oregon and Eugene's sanctuary laws.
- Just four days prior to the mayor's "state of the city" speech, ICE murdered 37-year old Renee Good in Minneapolis, which was responded to in Eugene the same day with a 4-hour protest of hundreds of people. A veteran spoke at the protest referring to ICE as Trump's personal Gestapo. The protesters chanted "No Justice! No Peace! ICE off our streets!" and "I-C-E! E-P-D! K-K-K! They're all the same!" In the mayor's speech, it's as if she's putting her head in the sand and pretending that none of this is happening.
- The mayor talked about the city's work for the "betterment of our community". The improvements listed actually serve the betterment of those who can afford the ever-rising market rates of downtown private and commercial rentals, and the real estate conglomerates who are getting tax breaks to take over more property to lease them. Indeed, it may be easy to say we are "all in this together" if you are an affluent white woman.

Perhaps what she meant to say was she is together with her yuppie friends who have found a new home in downtown Eugene, who she references in her speech: *"On the day the Portal building opened, a group of six friends waited for me because they wanted to make sure I knew how lucky they felt to have found this chapter of their life in downtown Eugene. And after we said goodbye, a young professional . . . wanted to share how wonderful it felt to live in a home that reflect their values through a low-carbon, car-free lifestyle. All in the same building."* **A publicly subsidized building with expensive, market rate housing in a city that needs housing built for its poor and working class residents,** not wealthy, Bay-area transplants that the mayor wants to attract to the "Silicone Shire."

Downtown "Safety" and "Quality of Life" and The Death of CAHOOTS

The mayor talked about an improvement of "safety" and "quality of life" in the downtown area, ignoring the real violence being perpetrated in our city by ICE and Eugene Police. She touts "double digit" decreases in police calls "related to quality of life" and "in every area of violent crime," while saying that at the same time, the Rapid Response Clean Team massively expanded its services. The "Rapid Response Clean Team" are agents of EPD pretending to be CAHOOTS.

The mayor talked about the importance of "match[ing] the right resources with needs," saying that "many of the challenges we see in our community have to do with vulnerability, not criminality." But these words ring hollow. 'Quality of life' is a coded phrase to describe the city's ordinances and administrative rules that criminalize being poor and/or resting in public, and make it illegal to do any number of things, including sit on the sidewalk or park an older vehicle on the street, especially in areas being taken over by real estate opportunists and high-income people. These 'quality of

life' laws and regulations represent a modern take on old fashioned segregation and serve as judgments about who can and who cannot occupy public spaces, and about who is free to go where and do what. These measures are taken for the purpose of improving the 'quality of life' for wealthy, predominantly white people who are uncomfortable with the unsightliness of poverty and unsupervised youth. The city government has refused to calculate how many millions of public tax dollars it spends every year on criminalizing poverty, ticketing and seizing older vehicles, installing 'hostile architecture,' and dumping large-diameter quarry rock everywhere—money that should have instead been spent on housing for poor and working class residents.

The mayor then referenced the massive loss of CAHOOTS in our community as a “major shift in our safety net system last April with White Bird’s closure of mobile crisis services in Eugene,” and that “Lane County Mobile Crisis stepped in to meet high acuity needs—with a model of service that is only possible because CAHOOTS paved the way.” The mayor was bold enough to brag about New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani referencing our alternative to policing—CAHOOTS, saying “our community creativity is known nationwide.” But her overall message was: CAHOOTS is gone and has been replaced by programs that are under the direct control of the state and EPD.

In sum, the entire 'State of the City' event was an elaborate 'dog and pony show'—with a land acknowledgment, the “Mayor’s Art Show,” paid musicians, and community service awards—that concealed the failures of the city government and the actual 'state of the city.'

Mayor Knudson has charged the people of this city to demand better – here are some demands: Acknowledge and confront the profound and historic challenges we face. Stand strong in support of our many poor and working class neighbors, as they struggle to live their lives and provide for their families.

Limit real estate corporations, out of state landlords, and Airbnb from making it nearly impossible for working class people to own a home or property. Denounce ICE and the federal government's attacks on immigrants, migrants, and all people of color. Drop the platitudes that minimize the fear and trauma many people in the city are facing, and move your rhetoric to a reality of real solidarity.