City of Aurora Year in Review: 2024



December 20, 2024, was a big day in Aurora history! This is the day when the City of Aurora became the proud owner of Geauga Lake and 47 adjacent acres after many years of blood, sweat, and tears.

One of the first things I did as Mayor in 2014 was work with Council to place the rezoning of the Geauga Lake and Sea World park land on the ballot, from industrial to mixed-use, which passed overwhelmingly.

We negotiated for years with Bainbridge for a JEDD agreement, and that finally came to fruition in 2020, with favorable terms for Aurora. Then we worked with the owner on various options to ensure lake access for our residents, and ultimately decided, with Council's support, that we needed to purchase some of the land along the lake and even the lake itself to protect it for the future. It will be redeveloped into a beautiful park facility – **Aurora Park at Geauga Lake** – for all to enjoy, featuring water amenities including a pool, recreational options, trails, meeting spaces and beautiful scenery.

Our focus right now is designing Phase 1 and determining what kinds of features should be included in it. You may not know that we have retained the two gatehouses from both Sea World and Wildwater Kingdom, which we expect to refurbish and use for the entrance to the new park. Engineers have evaluated the aquarium building and while we might not be able to reuse it, we hope to recreate it into an open-air pavilion with restrooms, concessions and attractive community space overlooking the water. We also expect to restore the dock that juts into the water for boating and envision a parks-themed play space for kids to enjoy. These are the decisions, and long pursuits, we are involved in as a city, all for the benefit of our residents.

Similarly, without the long planning and vigilance for opportunities, something like the **Aurora Trail** would never have happened. Now, thanks to years of laying the groundwork, the Aurora Trail will break ground this spring and should be opened some time this summer. The city had sought to engage Norfolk Southern Railroad for years to discuss the possible purchase of the right-of-way, and I continued those attempts to no avail. We had an opportunity to try again when FirstEnergy was seeking to buy the ROW for a transmission line. We did not like that idea and, not to be daunted, used the leverage of litigation to wrangle some concessions from the utility including a recreational easement along that ROW. This year we are building Phase 1 of the trail, a 2.8 mile, paved, 10-foot wide multiuse path from 82 in the Station District in Aurora to Chamberlain Road in Mantua. The vistas along the ROW are just beautiful, promising a scenic and popular trail for enthusiasts.

And we still tackle important projects across the city every year. In 2024 alone we implemented the **$2.6M FEMA stormwater project** in the Geauga Lake neighborhood to help mitigate stormwater impacts there. We replaced the city's **last century-old waterline** on Maple Lane, having replaced four others in the last 11 years, all without borrowing for these expensive projects. We installed a **new sidewalk** on New Hudson which will enhance access to the Aurora Trail once completed, and which marks more than three miles of new sidewalks installed during my tenure. We also spent $1.6M on our annual road **paving program** and paved East Pioneer with the help of a state grant.

None of this could happen without our staff of talented, committed public servants who work hard for us every single day. Thank you, team!

Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin

Aurora Finances Remain Healthy

Aurora is exceedingly fortunate to have a strong financial base which enables us to provide great services and amenities to our residents. Just as an example, our revenue has been rising in the last 11 years, and receipts in 2024 came in at almost 129% of expected amounts, with expenditures less than expected at 92.5% of what was budgeted. We were able to transfer $6.85M at year-end from the General Fund to a variety of capital funds which will be used to help cover the $17.8M in anticipated capital projects budgeted in 2025. The General Fund still had an ending balance of $13.3M after the transfers, leaving a comfortable cushion. Total city assets have grown 52.1% since 2013, including investments to benefit the city for generations to come.



Jennifer Drlik from Ohio State Auditor Keith Faber's office presents the Ohio Auditor of State Award with Distinction to Finance Director Tim Clymer and Mayor Womer Benjamin.

Aurora Police Department Commits to Safety, Innovation and Community



Mayor Ann Womer Benjamin officiated at the swearing-in ceremony for police officer Alexandria Libertucci ("Alex") at City Hall in September. Officer Libertucci is pictured with the Mayor and Lieutenants Hagquist and Lumpkins. Congratulations Officer Libertucci!

The City of Aurora benefits from low crime rates, thanks in part to the leadership of Chief Brian Byard. Under his direction, the Police Department has embraced advanced technology to both prevent and solve crimes. Additionally, Chief Byard has implemented a directive ensuring that officers patrol every street in the city at least four days a week, providing residents with a reassuring presence. The department also introduced a lateral transfer process in 2019, which helps attract highly qualified candidates that fit the department's culture. The Aurora Police Department maintains compliance with the Statewide Law Enforcement Accreditation Program and with ongoing professional training, including interactive scenarios, officers are always prepared.



Mayor Womer Benjamin delivers a heartfelt address to the crowd during the Memorial Day ceremony at Veterans Memorial Park, honoring the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom.



Mayor Womer Benjamin marching in the annual 4th of July parade.



A Look Back at 2024

- December 20, 2024, Aurora became owner of **Geauga Lake and 47 adjacent acres**.
- **Aurora Trail**, phase 1 designed and approved.
- The Mayor's husband, **David M. Benjamin**, passed away July 8.
- **Bill Fellenstein** was promoted to Assistant Director and **Nick Miller** was promoted to Supervisor in the Parks and Recreation Department.
- The city assumed management of the city-owned **Aurora Memorial Library building** following the dissolution of the Aurora Library Trust.
- **New Hudson sidewalk** completed, making more than 3 miles of new sidewalks in Aurora in 11 years.
- **Park Ranger Sam Colmery** retired after 19 years of service.
- **385 trees** planted across the city.
- Established a **membership program for Aurora Seniors**.
- Hosted a **surprise fireworks show** at the Holiday Tree Lighting Festival in celebration of Aurora's 225th birthday.
- First **Citizens Police Academy** was held.
- The Fire Department's l**ock box program** installed fifteen new boxes.
- The **2024 paving program** included Francis D. Kenneth Drive, Bryce Avenue, Colony Drive, Briarcliff Drive, Heritage Drive, East Homestead Drive, Lookout Point, Duneden Drive, Greentree Lane, Oak Hollow Drive and city owned properties Central WWTP Access Drive, Service Center parking lot and the ballfields parking lot at Sunny Lake.

Looking Ahead: Key Developments and Plans for 2025

- **Aurora Trail** to open this summer.
- Construction of **Aurora Park at Geauga Lake** to begin.
- New Section J at **Aurora Cemetery** will be available later this year.
- Expanding the Parks and Rec **pickleball** programming.
- Rebranding and launch of the **DARE Program** with Aurora City Schools.
- Formalizing a **juvenile diversion program** aimed at refocusing low level juvenile offenders toward community service.
- The second 8-week **Citizens Police Academy** will be held this fall.
- Two full-time **firefighter/paramedics** are in the budget to be hired this year.
- **Decorative street lamp**s will be installed on S. Chillicothe.

Public Services and Infrastructure Updates

- The city signed a contract with **MKSK** to develop the conceptual design for **Aurora Park at Geauga Lake**.
- Utilizing **FEMA funding**, the city purchased and demolished **7 structures** in the Geauga Lake neighborhood, with plans for the vacant lots to mitigate flooding during heavy rain.
- **4,438.50 tons** of organic materials, including brush and leaves, were collected through the residential curbside service.
- **1,028.61 tons** of organic materials, such as mulch and humus, were distributed to residents.
- **484,972,128 gallons** of drinking water were delivered to the community.
- **Sidewalk projects** on Aurora Hudson and Aurora Road/Bissell Road are currently in the design phase.
- **Lighting upgrades** at the Aurora Cemetery were completed, made possible through **donations from the VFW**.

Keep in Touch

Police/Fire Emergency - 911 • **City Hall** - 330.562.6131
City Council - 330.995.9125 • **Mayor's Office** - 330.995.9126
Parks & Recreation - 330.562.4333
Planning, Zoning & Building - 330.562.9564
Service - 330.995.9116
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Law 330.995.9160 • **Personnel** 330.562.6390

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City Finances: General Fund Review

	Expenses	Revenue
2023 Actual	$20,427,719	$27,033,319
2024 Actual	$21,468,095	$27,963,209

City Finances: Total Fund Review

	Expenses	Revenue
2023 Actual	$38,406,520	$42,245,883
2024 Actual	$46,043,051*	$47,139,838

***2024 figure contains several one-time big items, including $5.26M Geauga Lake purchase and $2.03M FEMA project.**

A Year of Service: Aurora Fire Department 2024 Summary

The Aurora Fire & EMS Department responded to 2,886 calls in 2024, with a 2.48% increase in total calls from the previous year. EMS response times averaged 4 minutes and 32 seconds, while fire/other emergencies averaged 4 minutes and 50 seconds. The estimated fire loss in 2024 totaled $1,245,352, with an additional $55,000 loss from a non-fire incident. Significant incidents included residential fires on Scarlett Lane, North Aurora Road, and Reid's Way, as well as a fatal motorcycle accident on East Garfield Road. The department continued its collaboration with local senior living and care facilities to address rising EMS demand, promoting alternatives to 9-1-1 for non-emergency transports to ease hospital and EMS strain.

Aurora's Growing Business Landscape

Retail: Aurora has welcomed a variety of new businesses, including Atlas Theater, Aurora Foot Spa, Lucha Bubble Tea, Wrap City, Senior Helpers, Good Nature Therapy, El Granero, and The Goddard School.

Industrial Park: Phoenix Corporation, located at 325 Harris Drive, has opened its doors in Aurora's Industrial Park, specializing in designing, customizing, and repairing freezers for the hospitality industry. After relocating to 255 Campus Drive, **Reality Recess** purchased the former **AIM** building and is currently marketing the property to find a new tenant. **MJ Property Group** acquired the former Premalux building with plans to offer warehousing space for businesses in need of additional storage. Expansions have occurred at **AIM**, **Layer Zero**, and **Pyrotek**.



The Mayor, Council President George Horvat and Council Representative John Kudley helped Aurora Inn partners Franz Bauer, Jay Leitson and Izzy Schachner celebrate the grand opening of 56 Tavern.