

State of the City 2026 Address

Mayor Bill Wells

Tuesday, February 3, 2026

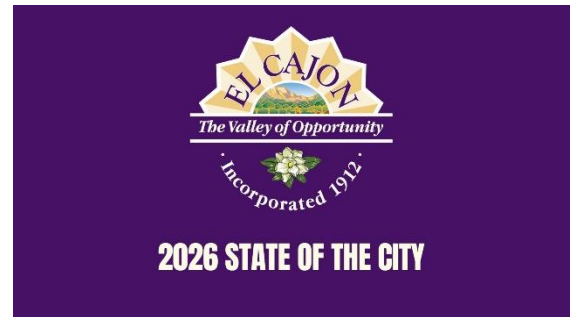
Introduction

Good evening everyone, and thank you for being here.

I'm Bill Wells, Mayor of the City of El Cajon, and I'm honored to welcome you to our 2026 State of the City.

Tonight is about reflecting upon where we've been, recognizing the people who make this City work, and—most importantly—sharing where we're going.

I want to begin by thanking all those who have contributed to this evening's event and those we will be recognizing. This evening, we will be celebrating the achievements of a wide-variety of individuals and corporations—from two outstanding local youths, to a global corporation. It takes this diverse range of citizens to make a community amazing.



2026 State of the City

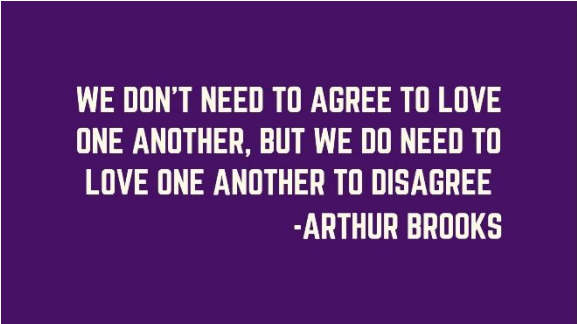


El Cajon City Councilmembers: Deputy Mayor Michelle Metschel; Councilmembers Phil Ortiz, Steve Goble, and Gary Kendrick; and Mayor Bill Wells

Also, I want to begin by thanking my colleagues on the City Council who represent each of the four districts in the City—Deputy Mayor Michelle Metschel, Councilmember Steve Goble, Councilmember Gary Kendrick, and Councilmember Phil Ortiz. I’m grateful for their leadership and partnership over the past year.

The work we do together is strengthened by open, respectful dialogue. Our discussions on the dais—while sometimes spirited—are always professional, thoughtful, and focused on serving the best interests of our community. That collaborative approach is essential to good governance. I truly hope we can continue this culture of harmony into the future.

As Arthur Brooks reminds us, *“We don’t need to agree to love one another, but we do need to love one another to disagree.”*



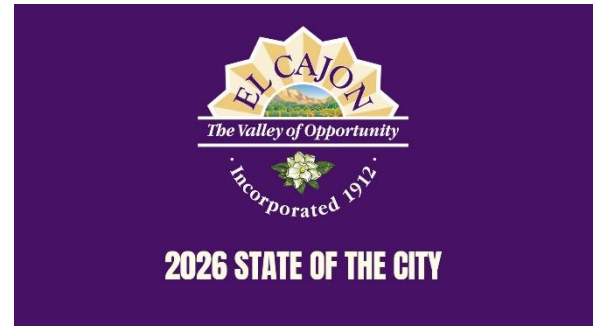
**WE DON'T NEED TO AGREE TO LOVE
ONE ANOTHER, BUT WE DO NEED TO
LOVE ONE ANOTHER TO DISAGREE
-ARTHUR BROOKS**

Arthur Brooks Quote

I also want to thank our City staff—across every department—for their professionalism, their dedication, and the pride they bring to their work every single day. This City does not function without them.

Looking Back

El Cajon faces challenges that affect all cities in California—rising costs, infrastructure needs, public safety demands, and issues that require regional solutions. These challenges are well beyond the capacity of any single city, but even in the face of those challenges, we made meaningful progress.



2026 State of the City

In 2025, we focused on being deliberate, disciplined, and responsible—making decisions that protect our residents, strengthen our neighborhoods, and position our City for long-term success.

The video we just watched highlighted just some of those big moves made by the City. Thank *you* to my colleagues for highlighting these successes.

Tonight, I want to walk through the City Council priorities, share some of our successes from 2025, and discuss our work in 2026 and beyond. I think it's also fair to address some of the challenges and controversies we currently face.

Goal 1: City Beautification

A clean, well-maintained city reflects pride, safety, and care for the community.

In 2025, the City worked closely with our long-standing partner, EDCO, on a targeted outreach effort to reduce illegal dumping.



Intersection of Oakdale Avenue and N. Second Street

I want to thank EDCO for their collaboration and responsiveness. Through our partnership, we reduced illegal dumping by at least 50 percent.



EDCO & City crews removing illegal dumping.

Public Works also strengthened oversight of third-party contractors responsible for services like bus stop maintenance, median landscaping, and street sweeping. That increased accountability has led to higher service standards and visible improvements in the cleanliness and appearance of our City.

In 2026, the City is moving forward with two targeted initiatives that will have a visible, long-term impact.

First, the City secured a USDA grant to plant 750 new trees throughout El Cajon. For the past 27 years, the City has been a Tree City USA awardee. This will help maintain that title. After extensive planning and outreach, we began planting earlier this month. This investment will enhance our neighborhoods, improve air quality, and provide lasting environmental benefits for the community.



City Crews planting trees.

We have also launched a “no parking during street sweeping” pilot program in four



Street sweeping notices

areas around the City. I regularly hear from residents that they want our streets to look cleaner. If successful, this pilot program will be expanded and will make a visible difference in our neighborhoods.

Beautification isn’t just about aesthetics—ultimately it’s about quality of life, economic confidence, and ensuring our City is a place where people are proud to call home.

Goal 2: City Infrastructure

Infrastructure is one of the most important—and often least visible—investments a city makes.

In 2025, El Cajon advanced critical infrastructure projects across the City—resurfacing more than 10 miles of roadway and installing 102 new streetlights. Believe it or not, there’s an actual rating system for streets. Because of our investment in infrastructure, El Cajon streets rank as some of the best streets in San Diego County.



City Crews resurfacing roadways.

In 2026, we will continue to invest in:

- Roadways and sidewalks;
- Stormwater and drainage systems;
- City facilities that support staff and public services; and
- Sewer mains and pipes.

Our Public Works staff works tirelessly to keep our storm channels clear. Because of our staff’s work and the City Council’s investment in our stormwater infrastructure, El Cajon did not flood, while many areas of this County did.

Also, the City continues to work with our partners in East County on the significant water reclamation project known as the East County Advanced Water Purification program.



East County Advance Water Purification facility

Goal 3: Economic Development

A strong local economy benefits everyone.

Over the past year, the City took meaningful steps to strengthen El Cajon's economic foundation, support local businesses, and attract new investment.



Clockwise from upper left: "El Cajon" arch; Art studio frontage; Inside an art gallery; Clock and Christmas Tree in Prescott Promenade; Woman poses in front of a butterfly wall mural.

Key efforts included:

- Continued focus on Downtown El Cajon, including partnerships that support arts, culture, and activation. This past year, we worked with our Downtown Business Partners to contract with New City America, who operates dozens of successful

downtowns around the United States, including Little Italy. New City America and the Downtown Business Partners are re-envisioning what our downtown can be.

- At the same time, the City Council initiated targeted policies designed to support a more vibrant and welcoming downtown. These policies will support existing businesses, future businesses, and The Magnolia. By the way, last year the Magnolia, which is operated by the world-famous Live Nation, presented 86 shows, making El Cajon a premiere destination for live music & comedy.



"Parkway Plaza Reimagining" logo with mountain silhouette.

- Progress at Parkway Plaza and surrounding areas continues. Me and the City Council are well aware that Parkway Plaza has declined over the years. There are many factors for this, most of which are out of the City's control. But we are not sitting back to see what happens at Parkway Plaza. We are proactively developing plans to reimagine this important property.

- El Cajon continues to be the friendliest place to do business in the County. When we make it easier to open, expand, and operate a business, we send a clear message that innovation, investment, and hard work are welcome here. We cut red tape to strengthen our local economy and support our small businesses that form the backbone of our community. In fact, we put our money where our mouth is, while other cities charge development impact fees, El Cajon does not, making it easier to develop housing and commercial properties in our community.

In 2026, our economic development focus will include:

- Re-imagining and develop Parkway Plaza,
- Revitalizing important commercial corridors, like our Downtown,
- Supporting our small businesses,
- Attracting new employers and investment, and
- Ensuring El Cajon remains a place where businesses can grow and succeed.

I also want to point out that you will find that El Cajon does not charge for parking and we don't plan on it anytime soon. This reflects the City's ongoing strategy to encourage economic development, support local businesses, and remove barriers that make it harder for people to visit, shop, and dine in our community.

Economic development is not a sprint, but a marathon—it’s about building a resilient local economy that serves residents today and far into the future.

Goal 4: Homelessness

We know that homelessness is the biggest challenge we face today. It’s what keeps us all up at night. I recognize that there are many conflicting interests and various ideas of what will work and what will not work to solve the challenge of homelessness. El Cajon’s goal is to be innovative in developing solutions. These smart decisions are based on data.



Interactive Homeless Dashboard screenshot.

Through our Interactive Homeless Dashboard, which includes a StoryMap, we track trends, outreach, and response activities in real time, allowing us to adjust strategies as conditions change.

This focus on transparency and data is why the City earned a Golden Watchdog award from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association.



City Staff posing while accepting Golden Watchdog Award.

I call on all governments in our County to be more transparent. When governments do not share how they spend funds or who they give contracts to, they are vulnerable to fraud and fiscal abuse. Earlier this year, I sent letters to the County Supervisors and to the leadership of the Regional Task Force on Homelessness to be more transparent in their funding of homeless programs.

In 2025, the City continued to make significant investments in addressing homelessness and improving quality of life throughout our community. Through 14 active homeless-related programs, the City allocated and expended over \$1.4 million to support individuals in need. As a result of these efforts, nearly 440 individuals were placed into permanent housing, more than 200 into transitional housing, and over 900 individuals received support through emergency shelter services.

At the same time, our Public Works teams worked tirelessly to keep our streets and storm channels clean and safe. The work that they do is difficult not only physically, but emotionally, and they show up every day to keep our City looking great.



Homeless encampment cleanup efforts.

We are committed to not allowing homeless encampments. Last year, our Public Works teams cleaned up 120 sites and removed more than 800 tons of debris from public spaces—protecting neighborhoods, improving environmental health, and enhancing the overall livability of El Cajon.

In 2026, we will continue to:

- Improve transparency and reporting,
- Strengthen partnerships, and
- Balance compassion with public safety and quality of life.

Last month, our staff conducted its own homeless point-in-time count. With this count, the City is able to collect more useful data, helping me and the City Council make better decisions of how to allocate funding in the future. I look forward to seeing staff's report later this month.

Goal 5: Public Safety

Public safety remains a top priority for the City of El Cajon.

In 2025, the City continued to invest in our Police and Fire departments:

- We successfully secured a grant, that will expand its Fire Department presence by adding Engine 208. This new engine will provide significant value to both our community and the broader region.
- We continued leveraging technology and data-driven tools to enhance our Police Department's effectiveness.

El Cajon, remains a Class 1 ISO Fire department, despite having some of the busiest engine companies in the County.

Our Police Department, is close to being fully staffed, which is rare in the State of California today. I want credit our community that is so supportive of public safety for making that happen.



Engine 208 in front of Fire Station 8



Left: Police officer on motorcycle. Right: El Cajon Police Station Building.

Our Police and Fire Departments continue to serve this community with professionalism, courage, and dedication. I want to thank Police Chief Jeremiah Larson and Fire Chief Bent Koch and all the officers and firefighters for their dedication to our community.

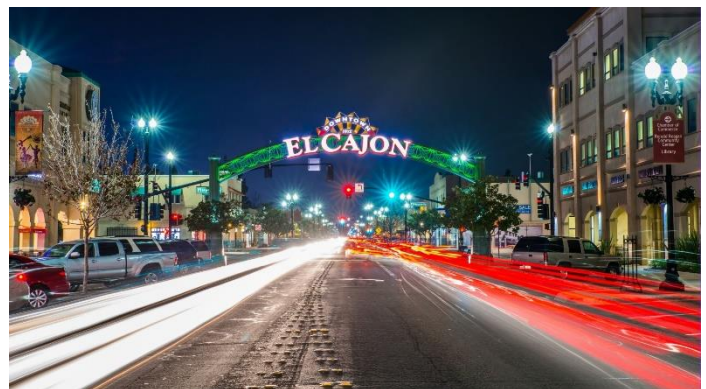
In 2026, we will continue to support our Fire and Police departments with resources and technology. One of the initiatives that my colleagues and I all agree on in 2026 is to reduce motorist speeding. We will be taking a comprehensive, innovative, and aggressive approach to resolving this serious community challenge.

Public safety is foundational—it allows families, businesses, and neighborhoods to thrive.

Additional Initiatives & Highlights

In addition to our five core goals, the City is advancing several important initiatives,

We will continue work on the new Veterans Memorial.



"El Cajon" archway.

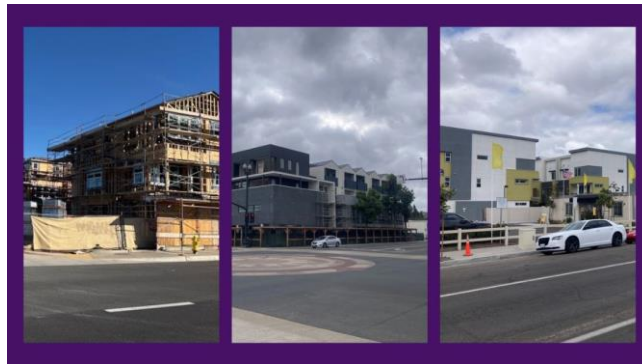
As you saw in the video, we completed new pickleball courts in Wells Park in November and we will continue to promote these pickleball courts so that community members can continue to enjoy this popular sport.

On the topic of recreation, I want to thank our Parks & Recreation Department. They provide classes and places for our community to play; they support our youth and adult leagues—all the things that make a community fun.

Closing

As we look ahead to 2026, El Cajon is well-positioned.

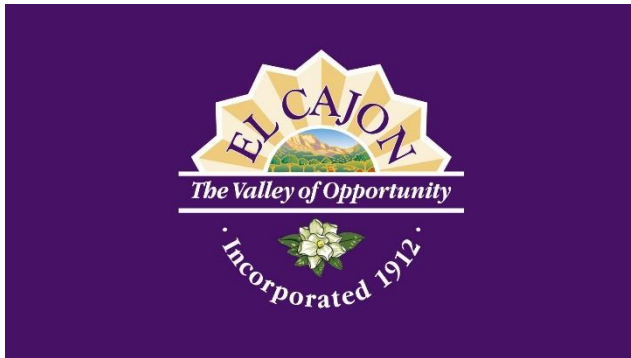
Over the years, because of our fiscal responsibility, we have a healthy general fund reserve. It's currently at \$62 million. We know that sales tax has been flat this past year, while our costs have not been. Because of our healthy reserve, we have been able to preserve programs until the economy turns for the better.



From left to right, Citywide construction projects at 1056 E. Main Street, 101 E. Main Street, and 300 El Cajon Boulevard.

We are also bullish on development opportunities in our City. Last year, 194 housing permits were issued. Between Lennar's townhomes, KB Homes's Gateway project, and mixed-use development in our downtown, we see a resurgence in housing development and we'll continue to promote that in 2026. We will also continue to work

on Parkway Plaza, as I mentioned earlier. We will also work with Kaiser Permanente to eventually build a hospital.



City Logo

Together, we are building a city that is safe, vibrant, and full of opportunity. A great place to live, open a business, and raise a family.

Thank you, and I look forward to another strong year for the City of El Cajon.