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Thursday afternoon, Mayor-Elect of St. Petersburg Ken Welch was sworn into office. Mayor Welch remarked on the historic nature of his election as the first black mayor of St. Petersburg, and promised a focus on fostering a common vision for inclusive, innovative, informed, and intentional progress for the city. A champion for continued change, Mayor Welch recognizes a need for practices that will keep St. Petersburg moving forward and maximizing opportunities to guide progress for generations to come.

Mayor Welch is a third-generation resident of St. Petersburg, who grew up in the Gas Plant district and attended the last segregated school in Pinellas County. He has previously served the city as the District Seven County Commissioner, where he represented the people of St. Petersburg for 20 years. While on the commission, Mayor Welch focused his time on economic development, transportation, equity, housing, criminal justice reform, and fighting poverty.

In his inaugural speech, Mayor Welch announced the appointment of Stephanie Owens as Deputy Mayor and Chief of Policy, Tom Greene as Interim City Administrator, and Rob Gerdes as the Assistant Administrator of Strategic Initiatives. Rob, serving in a new high-level role created under Mayor Welch's administration, will be tasked with addressing affordable housing upon entering the position. The newly sworn-in Mayor identified the previous year's 24 percent increase in apartment costs and the lack of affordable housing as a priority of his time in office, and the creation of this new role being the first step in addressing it. Additional appointments and organizational changes will be announced in the coming days, according to Mayor Welch, including new business process improvements and the implementation of an effective Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion program. The Mayor also noted environment, mental health, safety and security, and economic development as issues that will be addressed during his time in office.

In closing, Mayor Welch thanked his predecessor, Former Mayor Rick Kriseman, for his years of service as Mayor and the strides he and his administration made for the City of St. Petersburg. Through his term, Mayor Welch identified keeping St. Petersburg a leader in creativity and cultural growth and the "live, work, play, retire" lifestyle as goals for him and his team. In addition to working closely with his cabinet, the Mayor plans to strengthen the working relationship between the Mayor's Office, City Council, and County Commission through collaborative efforts and joint meetings, commenting that the relationship between the city and county leaders is vital and valuable.

In addition to welcoming a new mayor, St. Petersburg also swore-in new members of their City Council. Copely Gerdes of District One, Lisset Hanewicz of District Four, and Richie Floyd of District Eight were all confirmed to their seats on Thursday, and join exiting or incumbent council members serving the remaining five districts.

“It is important that we look at our diversity not as something that divides us, but rather it can be our greatest strength,” Mayor Welch remarked. “When we listen to each other and work to truly understand our viewpoints, we grow stronger collectively, by building on our individual knowledge and strengths. When we do that, we can — and will — move past the silos, the prejudices, the petty politics, and we will be able to build an inclusive path forward.”

Mayor Welch was inaugurated virtually due to testing positive for COVID-19. Work from City Hall is expected to begin on January 10th for the new mayor.

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