

Elected Officials, Department Heads, Businessmen and Women, Friends,

Four Years ago, I stood in front of you as a new mayor, ready to embark on a long and difficult mission of making Columbia City a leader in not only Northeast Indiana, but in all of Indiana. This mission was focused on improving our economy, reinventing the quality of life amenities our city had to offer, ensuring the trust and confidence of the citizenry, and leading our City government with a strong set of values. Four years later, I'm proud to stand in front of you with many of these goals being accomplished. Yes, friends, Columbia City has a bright future ahead of us and I'm proud to say the State of our City is Developing.

Now, developing isn't your typical word for one of these speeches. Typical words include "Strong", or "Stable", or maybe even "Successful". And while any of these adjectives would fit the bill for the State of Our City, I know we want to strive for more. We want to be THE leader, not A leader. We want the City to Improve, Grow, Expand, and Thrive. These words are captured in "Developing". Now I will admit that development isn't necessarily what everyone wants. We have those in our community that would rather see nothing happen, than for progress to occur. Yet I wasn't elected to just man the controls, nor was the City Council elected to just meet for the sake of meeting twice a month. No, we were elected to make our Community better than it's ever been before. This goal of improving and enhancing is being achieved and I want to highlight some of the successes that occurred in the past year.

The long-awaited Comprehensive Plan was developed and approved thanks to the help of many community leaders, volunteers, and planners at American Structurepoint. The 10-year plan is a roadmap for how we achieve success in a time of global competition. The plan lays out a strategy to enhance and improve our community through quality of life projects, improved pedestrian and vehicular transportation, upgraded utility systems, and economic development strategies. I would encourage our residents to take a look at the plan that they helped create. This document won't be a plan that sits on my shelf collecting dust, but rather a roadmap that we will be using for the next four years. In fact, many of the initiatives that we plan to accomplish this year come directly from that plan. Projects like improving our city sidewalks, extending trails, continuing work towards an Aquatics Facility, and improving our street infrastructure are all outlined in the Comprehensive plan and will be a focus for us in 2016 and beyond.

Another project that was completed last year that I believe will help us tell our story to the outside world is the new Website, Logo and Tagline. As a part of the Comprehensive planning process, we looked at how others see us, whether they were passing through the area, searching the web, or visiting friends in the surrounding counties. Our website was outdated, the logo had two or three different variations, and our tagline has changed multiple times in the last 10 years. So continuity was key. We decided to work on these three components with the help of Sound Ideas, a local marketing firm. First was the Tagline in which we decided on the phrase, "Building A Future Together" because it encompasses who we are. We're hard-working, friendly and hospitable, and continuously growing. Our logo encompasses the centerpiece of our community, our Beautiful County Courthouse, emblazon with gold and blue. And our Website is much more user-friendly, welcoming those who know nothing about us to check out the progress that is always occurring in our City. Many people don't realize the

importance that this front door (the website) provides to my generation, welcoming them to check us out. It could be the difference between someone stopping in and buying a sandwich at Downtown on the Square, or that same person headed down the road to Warsaw or Fort Wayne. In 2016, we plan to continue our marketing efforts to the outside world. Our community truly has so much to offer: Rated one of the Safest Communities in Indiana, Rated the 6th Most Prosperous County in Indiana, 7th Healthiest County in Indiana, hundreds of new jobs over the past four years, multiple new housing options in the next year, and the list could go on and on. We need to be proud of who we are and let the world know that Columbia City is open for Business!

Every Kids Dreamland was finally opened in the fall of 2015. The new playground was the culmination of the hard work and generous donations of people throughout our community, from the elementary schools to seniors. We will also be installing a new Expression Swing this spring. The Expression Swing is an experience where a parent and their small child can swing together, face to face, in harmony. The playground, as a whole, stands as the City's first ADA accessible playground, welcoming every kid, no matter the skill level, to come enjoy time outside.

We completed a new segment of the Blue River trail along Vine Street on the City's Southwest side from South Chauncey Street to South Oak Street. Originally, our plan was to then extend this trail over to Devol Field in 2016 to basically complete the path from Morsches Park to Devol Field. However, after reviewing the Long Term Control Plan, the path of the Trail coincides with the path of some additional sewer pipes. It made sense for us to wait until that project is completed to finish out the trail rather than waste taxpayer's money by putting in a trail that we would have to tear up in a few years. Instead, we are going to put our focus on developing the next leg of the trail, which will move towards the Westgate subdivision, creating a safe walking and biking trail for those residents to traverse. This

1.2 mile project will be completed over the next 5 years and will finally connect this far-west subdivision and the homes in between, to our downtown community through pedestrian-friendly pathways. Now many people ask why are we spending so much on things like Trails, the Aquatics Facility, Parks, etc? Well, it really is pretty simple. In the past, citizens would first find a job and then find a home nearby, effectively putting the pressure on bringing good jobs to the community. Now, however, citizens, especially Millennials, are First looking for a place they want to live, AND THEN finding a job that complements their skills set. If we want the best and brightest to live in our community, to pay taxes in our community, to grow our community, we have to create a community that is active and lively. Sure we have some great features, but we should always be striving to be better and develop more opportunities for recreation. I recently read an article about Northeast Indiana and the Parkview Health System CEO, Mike Packnett, was quoted regarding this push towards quality of life amenities. He stated, "If we want to bring world-class healthcare, world-class doctors especially, to our region, we have to build trails...because that is what they want to have as amenities in their community." Thus, our push for more trails and other quality of life amenities.

Which brings me to the Regional Cities Initiative. I am proud to be a part of a Region that has focused on improving the attractiveness and activeness of our communities. I am proud that we have regional business and governmental leaders who are saying that good enough isn't good enough anymore. I'm proud to live in a state that has decided to put their money where their mouth is by investing in the Three Regional Cities selected by the IEDC. Some Curmudgeons out there don't see value in this initiative. They've even gone so far as to call it "funding vanity" or "wasting taxpayer money". This couldn't be further from the Truth. If you truly believe that the current path of "good enough" is the right path, then look no further than the Journal Gazette. In a March 26th article titled "Numbers set

path on the road to a million”, it stated that in Northeast Indiana, population losses were found in Steuben, Huntington, Wabash, and yes, our dear old Whitley County. Stagnant growth occurred in Dekalb, Noble and Kosciusko. So what is going to happen if we do nothing? Population losses, less people holding the same tax burden, the same utility burden, but with an aging population, less discretionary income. If we don’t do something to change our trajectory, what will our kids say about their former home? We must be proactive and create a community that attracts people of all ages to join us in this grand experiment called life. With that in mind, I am setting the goal for our community to reach 10,000 people by 2025. Census Estimates from 2015 show Columbia City having 8,829 people living in our City. That means we need to grow our community by approximately 150 people per year for the next eight years. While this seems like a difficult standard; with the new housing options currently going in, multiple subdivision expansion planned in other areas, and the new Columbia City High School on the horizon, I truly believe we can reach this goal by 2025. Reaching 10,000 population for our city puts our community on a higher level of competition for good jobs, more stores, and additional restaurant options, not to mention filling the worker shortages that many of our largest employers have discussed. It would also expand our citizen representation through adding two additional City Council Members at the following census in 2030. If we want our community to be a leader, we need to grow like one, and the City will do everything in its power to continue to expand and grow our population.

And speaking of striving for better, let’s chat about our Downtown. I was pleased, earlier this week, to see such a great turnout at our Downtown Summit. For years, we’ve watched our downtown decline with little decisiveness on what direction to take to stop the decay. For years, this portion of our community was known more for “rolling up the sidewalks at 5pm”, than it was for a thriving business

center. Well, I'm proud to report that through a collaboration of private stakeholders, quasi-governmental entities, business owners, and your City Government, we are working together to turn our downtown into something that we can be proud of again. Multiple new businesses are looking to locate to our downtown and its beautification is taking shape. Buildings are being spruced up and a new downtown plaza will soon be breaking ground. Sure we will still have our challenges, but I am confident that through these public/private partnerships, we can revitalize and renew our downtown for current and future generations. The City plans to assist in this endeavor by creating a downtown building tax credit program that we hope to roll out during the Summer months. The program will assist downtown building owners to make improvements on their buildings, while softening the tax impacts of those improvements. However, our downtown is an instance where Government can't solely save the day. We need the private sector to continue leading in the redevelopment and I am thankful for those partners who have stepped up to the plate to make our Downtown great again.

Public Safety, as always, is a high priority for our City. We believe this component is one that sets us apart from our larger neighbors. As mentioned previously, we've been considered one of the safest cities in Indiana for multiple years by some different national companies. Continuity of service to our residents is important to sustain this reputation not only to the outside world, but also with our residents. As you know, at the beginning of this year, I promoted Captain Hively to the position of Chief, after Chief Longenbaugh decided to step down. I don't think the public knows what kind of stress and strain goes into this position and I was thankful that both Chief Longenbaugh was willing to serve during my first term, and that Captain Hively was willing to make the jump with Officer Parrett in tow. Many retirements of some long-standing officers have occurred in our Police Department with seven new officers hired over the past three years. We've welcomed Officers Valentic, Carpenter,

Metzger, Meeks, Fearnow, Calhoun and Cook to the ranks and I believe our residents will find these officers to be helpful, caring, and forthright in their duties to the public. Also regarding public safety, the City and County are reviewing what opportunities and challenges are occurring in our dispatch centers and whether or not a combined system makes sense for our residents. As I've said before, we'll give this option a hard look and weigh the pros and cons of the switch. No matter the outcome, though, it's imperative that we continue to provide the same or better quality of service to our residents.

Multiple utility projects occurred in 2015 that will help with the long term stability of these enterprises. The electric department worked in numerous areas to bury the electric lines, helping to drastically diminish the threat that ice, snow and wind play against the reliability of our power grid. We also upgraded the North Substation to continue providing power to the community for decades to come. Our water department upgraded water lines along Park Drive and Shinneman Drive. They have scheduled different repair and replacement projects throughout the upcoming summer in areas like Jeffrey Drive and Squawbuck Road, and will be working, as always, to improve water pressure in areas that are lacking. Stormwater upgrades have taken place in locations of heavy flooding and of course, our Long Term Control Plan for the Sewer System has been completed. The new LTCP has been approved by IDEM and will end up saving city rate payers over four million dollars in projects that were originally projected to occur. I'm proud to say that through the hard work of our Wastewater Department, Community Development Department, and United Consulting, we will be accomplishing the Long Term Control Plan ahead of schedule and under the original budget. We will also be applying for grants and low-interest loans to help further defray the cost to our customers. As always, we are working every angle to try and save our rate payer's dollars on this state-mandated plan.

While not a city utility, our community has been plagued with lackluster internet service for many years. Some segments of our community aren't even served by the City's biggest providers because of lack of upgrades made by these national companies. I've read the constant complains from our citizens regarding customer service, speeds during the nighttime hours, and the lack of upgrades to their service. So we've decided that enough was enough. We are actively engaged with at least two different companies who have interest in bringing fiber optic internet to all Columbia City businesses and residents. This is an important step for our community to take as more and more, companies need bigger bandwidths and faster speeds to move information to suppliers and customers. Without taking this step, companies would relocate to areas that have much faster, stronger service. Without taking this step, residents would choose to live in other places where they can get more than one megabyte upload speeds. We are working to have a company move in to the City by the end of the year. So, today, I am setting a goal of providing fiber access to every home in Columbia City by the end of 2017. This won't be accomplished easily, but with the partnership of the Economic Development Corporation, Whitley County Government, and the City, we can make this goal a reality.

Over the past couple of years, our Economy has experienced some of its best quarters in over a decade. We've worked with local entrepreneurs to open new stores like Dollar Tree and Wings Etc. We soon will be welcoming a Holiday Inn Express to our City, and additional future development opportunities are being negotiated currently. We have the upcoming Quail Ridge Development that will bring over 150 new units of Market-rate housing to our community, while the Historic Blue Bell Lofts project is under construction, ultimately bringing 52-Senior Apartments to our Community. I'm ecstatic that outside investors are seeing the potential that we have as a City. We'll continue to recruit

new and exciting businesses, with the understanding that more shopping and dining options, as well as more housing options, improve and enhance the standard of living for our residents.

Another piece of our community development that shouldn't be overlooked is the new Columbia City High School, which is scheduled to open in 2020. This component is so critical to our future development and I am thankful that so many residents supported the project. Whitley County Consolidated Schools is literally competing for each and every student against the newer, renovated buildings at Carroll and Homestead, not to mention the private schools like Canterbury. By providing a new, innovative and engaging learning environment, free of mold and bursting with technology, we can start attracting students and families back into Whitley County. Education and the condition of our schools are a high priority in the development of our City and our County. If the goal is, again, to attract grow and enhance, the education piece is a top priority. A special thanks to Superintendent O'Connor, the WCCS School Board, and the many volunteers, parents and teachers who made this project a reality.

US 30 has created many opportunities for our City and County over the years. With over 20,000 vehicles per day passing through, we've been given opportunities that rarely get presented to sub-10,000 population cities. Unfortunately, last year we encountered a proposal put forth by the Indiana Department of Transportation that would have divided our city in half and created traffic nightmares like we had never seen before. The proposal, as you know, called for some highway upgrades and the installation of Michigan Left's, also known as J-Turns. The plan was given to me after the groundbreaking of the State Road 205 project, without any input from any City or County officials. In the consistent way that Indianapolis thinks, they knew what was good for us. Unfortunately, they didn't and we fought back with passion and vigor. Meetings with Senate President Pro Tempore David

Long, the Fort Wayne INDOT representatives, and finally, Brandye Hendrickson, the Indiana Department of Transportation Commissioner led to the stop order being given to the plan. My many thanks to Commissioner George Schrumpf, John Sampson from the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership, Dennis Falkenberg from Appian Inc, and the many others that assisted in stopping this proposal. At the end of the day, however, the real motive was realized. The ultimate goal was to improve US 30 into full interstate standards. Many reasons precipitated this change including the traffic backups during rush hour, the numerous accidents at the main intersections, and the waste of time and gas at the stop lights. Furthermore, projections of 80,000 vehicles per day by 2035 call for us to lead this effort and play a key role in making our community safer, while not being a detriment to our economic development efforts. Seven Counties with the Cities included put together the US 30 Coalition which will be a voice for all of us as we move forward towards an enhanced interstate. At the Coalition level, we will work towards state funding for the project, while at the regional level, we will work to connect the interstate from one County to another. Finally, at the local level, we will work with economic, planning, elected, and agricultural officials to map out a route with interchanges and frontage roads to provide the least negative impact possible. As you can guess, this is no small task, but we must be the leader for fear of having a plan developed on our behalf like last year. Towards the end of 2016, we will start to host stakeholder meetings with residents and businesses to propose an idea of what US 30 could look like in the future. Certainly not everyone will be happy with whatever ends up to be the final proposal to the US 30 Coalition and INDOT, yet I want residents and businesses to know that we are working as hard as we can to take all ideas and issues into account, while still working within INDOT standards. Stay tuned on this issue and consider attending the public meetings that will be occurring in a matter of months.

State matters are a mixed bag from year to year. As you know, there have been times that the Legislature and I have disagreed and other times we've agreed. This past legislative session was a decent one for Cities across Indiana. A big thank you goes to Representative Ben Smaltz and Senator Randy Head for championing legislation that would curb the production of methamphetamine while balancing the purchase ability for law abiding Hoosiers. Representative Chris Judy supported this legislation and I appreciate his help in fighting this epidemic which is costing taxpayers thousands of dollars and destroying hundreds of lives. Another big bill was the Regional Cities Funding and the transportation bill. I was pleased that the legislature chose to fund all three regions, rather than have the money split three ways. While I know the original legislative intent was for two regions to be selected, I'm thankful they chose to support the Governor's wishes on this issue. At least one step was taken towards additional transportation dollars and I hope that the legislature will take even more steps to help cities, counties and INDOT to fix our broken infrastructure. Just a quick trip down I69 will show you that at times, tax decreases can end up costing taxpayers even more, as both drivers and repair shops have experienced with bent rims and new tires, due to poorly maintained roads. Finally, I want to thank both Representative Judy and Senator Banks for supporting some minor tweaks to Annexation. After last year's disaster where the legislature made it extraordinarily harder for cities to grow, this year's tweaks made some minor improvements. One issue, however, that we need to address as a State is what role the legislature wants to play in the lives of municipalities. Cities and Counties are constantly nit-picked through what they call "pre-emption" with bills like placing moratoriums on apartment inspection fees, or not allowing the regulation of plastic bags, eroding the flexibility of TIF districts, or dictating who can and can't have a food and beverage tax. It seems, at times, the legislature wants to play City Council, more than allowing the elected officials in our cities

and counties to decide what is best for their constituents. To quote the Indianapolis Star, “First it was a ban on setting a local minimum wage or regulating guns. Then came prohibitions on paid sick leave and housing regulations. Now, its worker schedules and plastic bags. Lately it seems whenever an Indiana city even thinks about passing an ordinance that the General Assembly disagrees with, state lawmakers strip local officials of the authority to do so.” I believe it is important to recognize that the same people who sent our Senators and Representatives to Indianapolis, are the same people that voted me in, or Commissioner Schrumpf, or Councilman Weigold, or Councilman Barrett. I would ask that the people who we send to Indianapolis every year would at least allow locals to hold some authority, as the voters gave. Let the concept of Home Rule play out in our Cities. Frankly, if the voters hate what is happening in the City, there’s a process to fix that. Let the process work the way our founders meant for it to work. I’m asking to allow local government at the City, Town, County, and Township levels to do their job and stop the yearly dictation coming from the halls of the State Capital. By doing this, our state can work more harmoniously with locals to fix the tough issues and address the challenges of tomorrow.

OK, enough about our friends at the legislature. I do want to touch on roads and streets one more time before I conclude. The State Road 205 project was finally completed last year. If you’ve driven the area, you know how much safer and aligned it is. The project has not only lined up the park entrance to Towerview Drive, but it has also created opportunities for further use of the Little Turtle Woods property and created a much more beautiful entrance into the City’s largest park. We will have some major projects occurring in Columbia City over the next few months, however. State Road 9, also known as Main Street, will be milled and filled throughout the City this year. State Road 205, also known as Van Buren Street will also be milled and filled from the bridge near the YMCA to Main Street.

These projects will cause some major changes to traffic patterns in the downtown over the coming months. Rest assured, we've been coordinating with the Indiana Department of Transportation on different logistical matters like conflicts with our utilities and the Old Settlers Days Festival.

Columbia City has a bright future ahead. I've seen it in the eyes of third graders at Mary Raber, Coesse, Little Turtle, and Northern Heights elementary schools. I've seen it in the hard work of the many city employees and all of the great department heads I have. I've seen it in the neighborly way our citizens care for one another when tragedy strikes, and I've seen it in the business owners who take pride in their stores. I'm so proud to be a part of this community. We work hard. We achieve together. We celebrate each other. We show love to our neighbors. We are the definition of Hoosier Hospitality. No matter the national political climate, no matter the state political climate, I can assure you that your City government is working to make Columbia City the best community in Indiana. The State of Our City is Developing and I hope you will join us as we continue to improve and enhance our community for current and future generations. Thank you and may God Bless you.