

Council Members, Business Representatives, Constituents, and Friends: I appreciate the opportunity to update you on the State of our City. Thank you to the Chamber for hosting this great event, each year. You may not know it, but this speech is actually a requirement of me, as Mayor, per Indiana Code 36-4-5-3.2. Statute requires me to give a statement to the City Council on the finances and general condition of the City at least once a year. I'm thankful that I have a City Council who is actively engaged in the operations of the City and that little (if any) of this speech will come as a surprise to them. Now let's dive in.

After reviewing the past year's efforts and what lies ahead of us for 2018, it was really challenging to cover everything, but I will do my best. I think it is most appropriate to lay out the past successes and future plans by focusing on what I consider to be the City's five "Big Goals". These goals are critical for our community's future success. They include reaching a population of 10,000 by 2020, continuing to be ranked in the top 25 safest communities in Indiana, improving and investing in quality of life amenities, retaining and attracting talent, and maintaining a strong and stable community.

The first goal is the most challenging of them all. The First Big Goal is to **Reach a Population of 10,000 residents by 2020**. In a time where Midwestern population growth has been at a net neutral or net negative, we look to set a higher standard. Keep in mind that more residents equal more business growth, additional housing choices, and more spreading out of utility costs and taxes. This is not necessarily a goal based on the wants of *the City*, but rather the wants of our residents. When residents want more restaurant and shopping options, population growth is the answer. When residents want utility rate stabilization, population growth is the answer. When residents want additional internet service providers, population

growth is the answer. Make no mistake, the Market is a determining factor on all of these issues and with a population below 10,000, the Market doesn't justify the need to build and expand into Columbia City for these companies, restaurants, and service providers. This is why it is critical that we find ways to grow our population and expand our market.

Housing fits into this Big goal for numerous reasons, not the least of these to be that you have to have a place for someone to live in order for them to be a part of our City, right?!? And boy, has housing been booming in Columbia City! Quail Ridge apartments are at capacity after opening in the beginning of 2017. They are considering adding a new building to their current development, as well as starting phase two this year. The ribbon was cut on the Historic Blue Bell Lofts in May of 2017. This creative reuse of the Blue Bell Jeans factory in the central part of Columbia City not only beautifies the neighborhood, but is now providing 52 apartments for seniors in our community. Houses continue to be built in the Cambridge Crossing, Brennan's Addition, Deer Chase, Lincoln Estates, Eagle Glen, and Oakdale Ridge Subdivisions, providing different homes throughout the economic spectrum. And just last week, we were notified of two ADDITIONAL housing developments that are going to begin this year in Columbia City.

The first project is a collaboration between the City's Redevelopment Commission, Biggs Development, and SCAN, Inc. The Van Buren Flats apartment complex, which will be built on the corner of West Van Buren and North Line Streets, on the old Eagles Lodge property, will add 25 single family units to our downtown. This public-private partnership was awarded tax credits from the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority and will add to the foot traffic and commerce in our downtown. The second newly-announced tax-credit project is identified as "workforce housing", which will build 22 new single family homes off of Hanna Street in the Ravenwood subdivision. This project is also being completed by Biggs Development. In the past two years alone, we've seen almost 80 new single family dwellings built in Columbia City. This doesn't include the 170+ Apartment Units that are now being

occupied in our City. The boom of housing in Columbia City is a welcome addition to our community that went throughout the early 2010's with very few construction projects and a tightened housing stock.

I'm often asked the question, "Where are these residents coming from"? My answer is, well, from all over. We have new residents from nearby locations of Warsaw, Albion, Wabash, and Fort Wayne. We have new residents from surrounding states of Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. We have new residents from places like Pueblo, Colorado, Haverhill, Massachusetts, Oak Harbor, Washington, and of course, Guaynabo, Puerto Rico. Our community is welcoming residents from every corner of the United States. I'm so proud of the efforts of so many in our community to welcome these new residents, showing them our hospitality, friendship, and love of neighbor.

But it's not just new housing stock that we are focused on, however. The Columbia City Housing Authority is now in its third year of offering the Owner-Occupied Rehabilitation Program for homeowners. This 90/10 Loan program is focus on making sure low to moderate income families in Columbia City are living in Safe, Sanitary, and Secure housing. Currently, the CCHA is working on a couple additional programs to aid homeowners in beautifying their home, while also improving their neighborhood.

Also happening later this year, the City will roll out the Neighborhood Beautification Grant Program. This program will incentivize neighbors to work together on projects that improve their neighborhood. Whether it is flower boxes, new sidewalks, trees, or signage, this Public-Private Partnership will make an impact on the aesthetics of our community.

The Second Big Goal is to **Continue to be Ranked in the Top 25 Safest Communities in Indiana**. This is as much a Quality of Life issue as it is anything else. Columbia City is known

to be a safe, friendly, and welcoming community. However, we have also established a reputation throughout Northern Indiana as a place where no Drug Dealers want to be caught, because of the strong sentences given to their crime. We are a place where even petty crimes are dealt with, rather than being brushed off, as in bigger cities. We are a place in which neighborhood watch encompasses all of our residents because we look out for each other. We're even known to have "too many police officers". Now, I'm sure that Chief Hively wouldn't agree that we have too many police officers...I don't either. Know that it is critically important that we maintain a successful police presence throughout our community, patrolling every neighborhood and every street that passed through our City.

In 2017, we introduced Cas, our first K-9 unit in several years, to our department and the community. K-9 Officer Archbold and Cas have made a tremendous impact on our community, helping to seize thousands of dollars in drugs, and numerous arrests. In just 8 ½ months, K-9 Cas has been deployed over 160 times. With no other K-9 units permanently in Whitley County, we believe it is the right time to secure another K-9 for the CCPD. This past Tuesday, the Board of Works gave the go-ahead to Chief Hively to work towards the acquiring of a second K-9 Unit. The best part of this program has certainly been the outpouring of support by our community. Businesses and residents alike have stepped up to the plate to help fund this program into the future. In fact, you all has been so generous that very few public tax dollars will go towards the purchase, training, and outfitting of the new K-9 unit.

Dispatch is also a very critical public safety department that can truly determine life or death for residents. For 2017 and into 2018, we continue to replace outdated equipment and find new and innovative trainings that will give our dispatchers all the tools they need to respond quickly and efficiently to crisis situations that are only a phone call away. We've hired additional dispatchers to make sure that when residents need help, someone is at the other

end of the line to send assistance. We have also upgraded security at City Hall for the sake of our employees and public documents.

The Fire Department has also been expanding to meet the current and future needs of our Citizens. In 2012, the City had 7 full time firefighters. Now, six years later, we are getting very close to a minimum staffing of two, with a total (after the current hiring process is complete) of 11 full time firefighters. Partner them with the numerous volunteers that dedicate time, energy, and personal safety towards their fellow citizens and we get a community that is safe and protected.

A Community that is safe, is a community that people want to join. We're working hard to make sure our public safety officials in all three departments are equipped to do the job that is needed to maintain our ranking as one of the safest communities in Indiana.

The Third Big Goal is to **Improve and Invest in Quality of Life Amenities**. I've said it time and again: Columbia City must be a place that people WANT to live. We must have desirable amenities for residents and visitors of all ages. One key addition to the City's Quality of Life continues to be constructed out on South State Road 9. The new Columbia City High School is going to be a tremendous asset for our population, both current and future. With this new facility being the only new High School under construction in the State of Indiana, Columbia City and Whitley County will have a competitive advantage against other communities throughout Northeast Indiana as well as throughout the northern half of the state. In fact, WCCS has already seen an increase in student population in this current school year. There is no doubt that families have been and will continue to be giving strong consideration to joining our school corporation.

Of course, the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center is going up, block by block, yard by yard. This effort would not have been possible without the help of so many people include the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Family, the Dekko Foundation, Whitley County Community Foundation, Lutheran Health Systems, the Northeast Indiana Regional Development Authority, Lori Shipman, Billy Reffitt, Whitley County Government, Whitley County Consolidated Schools, the Columbia City City Council, Clerk Treasurer Rosie Coyle, the literally Hundreds of residents and businesses that donated, and of Course, Columbia City Parks Director Mark Green. This facility was recognized by the Regional Development Authority as a priority project for not only Whitley County, but for Northeast Indiana as a whole. When opened, the facility will welcome thousands of citizens and visitors to a fantastic quality of life amenity that will be beneficial for all ages. Currently, we are behind schedule due to unsuitable soils that were found during the digging of foundations. What else do you expect was underneath an almost 60-year old pool??? However, we are confident that by the end of June, the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center will open its doors and welcome all to come and enjoy the many benefits of aquatic recreation!

In 2018, we will have a route study performed on the best way to get from our current trail system to the new CCHS site. The Study will evaluate the aesthetic, topographic, and logistical challenges that stand between the Blue River Trail on South Line Street and the new CCHS property along State Road 9. This trail is critically important to the safety of walkers and bikers who are going to a sporting event at the facility, or just trying to get to school. The trail will also assist in expanding the mileage of our trail system to give additional opportunities of recreational exercise. We also continue to consider pedestrian routes to connect the Westgate and Deer Chase subdivisions to our trail system.

A new school, new Aquatics Center, expanded trails, and many other growing amenities are exciting additions to our community that will help cultivate growth into the future.

The fourth goal is to **Retain and Attract Talent to Columbia City**. To be fair, this goal really is more of an overarching goal that fits as a part of the previous three goals. However, it is so important that I needed to set it apart from the other goals. This goal, of retaining and attracting talent, is not only a Columbia City goal, but is also a Whitley County, Northeast Indiana, and Statewide goal! Whitley County's Economic Development Corporation has hired Riley Hollenbaugh as the Director of Workforce and Community Development, with his *main focus* being retaining and attracting talent to Whitley County. The Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership has multiple staff working full time on attracting people to our area and trying to keep the high quality people that already live here. Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb has set this goal as one of his priorities for the rest of his term as Governor. Make no mistake, the objective of Retaining and Attracting Talent is working to address the number one threat to our future. Indiana, like most of the Midwest, doesn't have mountains, or oceans, or sun 365 days of the year. We have to overcome our dreary winters, humid summers, and perceived lack of "coolness" among younger populations. We've seen precipitous declines across the Midwest as more residents pack up and move to the coasts. So how do we fight back?

Well, one way is the often-referenced, great business environment that exudes throughout our state and region, which has attracted many new companies from other states and countries. Having an attractational business environment brings new companies and new jobs to our city. Over the past year, we've seen a dramatic renovation to the Kroger store which incorporated a new Starbucks coffee shop, Sushi availability, and expanded grocery offerings. We've seen renovations to the Kentucky Fried Chicken and Wendy's restaurants. We've seen multiple shops open downtown and are currently seeing the construction phases of a new Verizon

Wireless corporate office, a long-awaited Holiday Inn Express, and Patterson Family Dental's large facility. In 2017, we saw construction values of Commercial and Industrial Building rise from \$2.4 Million in 2016 to over \$3 Million in 2017. If you take out the construction values of the new CCHS building and the Aquatics Center, Columbia City saw a total of over \$16 Million Dollars in new construction value in 2017. Overall Building permits were also up from 87 in 2016 to over 180 in 2017. In speaking with many business owners throughout Columbia City, it's clear that our economy is growing and thriving.

Another way to address population stagnation and decline is to ensure a lively community with many options for recreation. Besides the many Quality of Life amenities I've already addressed, it's important to recognize the growth of the heart of our community – our downtown. So many things are occurring in downtown Columbia City that it is hard to know where to start. First Fridays was launched last year as a collaboration between the Columbia City Downtown Business Alliance and the Columbia City Main Street Association. Thanks to the foresight of the steering committee, this event continued to grow, month after month. The Main Street Association partnered these events with two *Movie on the Square* events that saw over 600 families in attendance. Numerous new businesses located downtown with a few others in the works for 2018. We also had the standard Old Settlers Day Festival, JA Car Show, and many other events take place in the heart of our community. These events are critical in connecting us to our neighbors and fellow residents. This connection can mean the difference between someone living here, versus someone moving away. In fact, at one of these events, a new couple who was looking for a place to locate in Northeast Indiana stopped me as I walked from one event to another. The guy specifically sought me out to tell me what he thought about our community. Now I have to admit, I'm always hesitant about these kinds of things. It's rare that someone seeks me out to say *nice* things about the community, but surprisingly, he spent 10 minutes raving about the generosity of our residents, the cute little shops that line



downtown, and the pace of life that permeates our community. It's those kinds of interactions that reinforce my belief that our City is truly a place like no other and we must continue to reinvest in ourselves.

So, in 2018, we will embark on a Downtown Revitalization study that will review the current infrastructure downtown and consider new and creative place-making options to enhance the look, feel, and shopping experience in downtown. I hope you'll consider joining us at public input session later this year. This study will set up a future revitalization project that can aesthetically transform our downtown. The business environment, connecting points, and downtown growth all focus on retaining and attracting talent to our fair city.

The Fifth and Final Goal is to **Maintain a Strong and Stable Community**. This is an all-encompassing goal that includes keeping up with federal and state mandates, ensuring quality streets and sidewalks, and providing good Government services to the public. Utilities are a cornerstone of City Government. In Columbia City, we are proud to have four strong utilities that continue to serve not only our residents, but also many county resident including citizens from Lincoln Pointe, Big Lake, the County TIF District, and Crooked Lake.

With safe and affordable drinking water, much below neighboring communities' rates, we continue to pump increasing flows to our residents and beyond. While it is never an easy thing to discuss, additional improvements need to be made to our drinking water system and additional revenues are needed for maintaining the system we have. Even with the growth in our community, the Water Department has financially declined to a spot where a rate increase may be needed. We will continue to evaluate this predicament, but after six years of no increases to the water utility, a very modest cost of service increase will need to be looked at in the year to come. Even with a potential increase, though, Columbia City would STILL have one of the lowest drinking water rates in Northeast Indiana.

The electric utility continues to re-invest in our system through burying previously overhead electrical lines, and re-engineering projects to provide shorter and shorter outage times. We have begun working with AEP on a conversion of our power grid to increase the amount of power coming to our growing community. The project will also create additional points of connection, lessening the opportunity for outages. Finally, the project will allow us to decommission our oldest substation, while still providing reliable power to all customers. In 2018, we will also embark on a pilot program that will allow for the reduction in costs to the utility which ultimately keep rates stabilized. The Automatic Metering (AMI) pilot project will be rolled out as a test case for a larger build-out in 2019. The pilot project will test an electronic mesh system that will eliminate the need for a meter-reader to drive throughout the city and into the country to pick up electric meter reads on the over 4,300 households who receive Columbia City Municipal Electric. It will also allow for customers, after full implementation, to get real-time readings on their home's electricity usage. In the future, we will consider moving our water meters to this same technology. Overall, this upgrade will create additional efficiencies and more interactive customer features.

The Water Pollution Control Facility and Wastewater Department have a full plate of projects ready to roll out in 2018. Soon the final engineering of the Long Term Control Plan – a state and federally mandated list of projects – will be completed and ready for bidding. The project will create additional in-pipe and underground storage facilities for our combined sewer system for heavy rain events. It will help control the amount of combined sewer overflows that the city experiences each year, which dumps untreated wastewater and stormwater into nearby streams and rivers. The project, originally at a \$10-12 Million dollar price tag, is expected to come in around \$8.5 Million dollars.

The department will also be working with Steel Dynamics, Inc., and the County Redevelopment Commission to help facilitate a \$75 Million dollar addition to their Steel Mill. The project is anticipated to result in additional wastewater flows to our system, which is necessitating the construction of a new line to convey flows from SDI. We're excited to partner with both SDI and the County on this project which will also increase economic opportunities for Columbia City and Whitley County. More information on this project is coming in the future.

Our stormwater utility continues to focus on areas of flooding. In the past few years, multiple projects have been undertaken including Vine Street, Squawbuck, Columbia Shores, Dogwood, and other locations. In 2018, the main focus of the Stormwater Utility will be on improving stormwater issues at the WoodDale Subdivision as a part of a major overhaul. Over twenty years ago, WoodDale (North on State Road 109), was brought into the community through annexation. For too long, that neighborhood had narrow roads, drainage issues, no curbs, and no sidewalks. In 2017, with the help of the neighborhood, we undertook a planning effort that will culminate next month in ground being broke on a subdivision overhaul. The project will include new drainage, wider newly-paved streets, new curbing, sidewalks, and new signage. This project was partially funded by the Community Crossings Grant program from the Indiana Department of Transportation. The six-month project will result in a nicer, safer, more beautiful neighborhood. I'm thankful for all the public participation in this project. I promise you, residents of WoodDale, it will be a project you can be proud of when completed.

And speaking of Streets and Curbs, in 2017, we installed new curbs and/or sidewalks on South Walnut, Catherine Ave, Wallace Ave, and Redick Ave, focusing on the safety and walkability of our community. We also paved many different portions of City streets including Columbia Shores, South Walnut, West Lincolnway, and West Jefferson. In 2018, the majority of our paving, sidewalk, and curb budgets will be going towards the WoodDale project. However, we

will continue to install multiple ADA ramps throughout the City and pave some small sections of City streets, all without going into debt. At a time when State and other municipal roads fall into disrepair, I'm proud to say that the vast majority of our streets are in good or excellent condition. A quick story: Last week, the Columbia City Youth Council took a trip to the Statehouse to learn about State Government. The condition of Interstate 69 and the City streets in Indianapolis was deplorable. It's so bad in Indy, that this week (per the Indianapolis Star) their City Council passed a spending bill (endorsed by the Mayor) that will drain \$14 Million Dollars from their Rainy Day fund to "strip patch" portions of streets across the City. I'm proud of Street Superintendent Kelly Cearbaugh's leadership and forethought in our City's street infrastructure. In 2018, we will be applying for funding of a 2019 major paving package that could reach almost \$1 Million dollars in new road paving projects, all without raising taxes or dipping out of our Rainy Day fund. Let's not forget that every dollar spent on improving the quality of our roads equals less money being spent on alignments, fixing bent rims, or popped tires for our citizens.

A Strong, Stable Community is important as residents choose where to live. Through our growing municipal utilities, sturdy road infrastructure, and increases in walkability, we are able to continue providing a community we all can be proud of.

No matter what corner of our community you look in, you'll find expansions taking place. We are so blessed as a community, with an expanding workforce, expanding businesses, expanding housing opportunities, and expanding quality of life amenities. I could think of no other word to describe what is happening in our community. **The State of our City is Expanding** because of residents, businesses, community leaders, and developers who believe, who trust, and who invest in the future of Columbia City. We cannot and will not stop investing in the things that matter to our community. We are at a crucial point in our history,

friends. The things we do (or don't do) right now will determine our course for decades to come. Last night I read the article from INWhitleyCounty regarding Techtmeyer Ace Hardware. As you know, Jim Techtmeyer served as Mayor in the early 1990s, and I was reminded last night of all the initiatives, citizen boards, and community projects he undertook that put us where we are today. Whether it was the Blue River Trail, the Housing Authority, or the Downtown Beautification Project, Mayor Jim knew that for the future of Columbia City, they had to capitalize on that moment in time. By choosing to be innovative, focused, and forward-thinking, we, together, are capitalizing on this moment in history, setting up Columbia City for a bright and prosperous future for current and future generations. For such a time as this.

Thank you everyone.