

## **State of the City Address**

**3/5/2021**

**Mayor Ryan L. Daniel**

Council Members, Residents, Business Representatives, Friends;

I want to begin by thanking the Whitley County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center for hosting today's event, as well as our high school radio station 91.5 The Eagle who will broadcast this speech in the near future.

I have to admit that getting this speech down to a manageable timeframe has been challenging. With last year's State of the City Address getting cancelled due to the onslaught of the Pandemic, I've had to pare back how much of the past two year's events I can cover. And there has certainly been a lot of progress and growth that has happened over the past two years.

However, I first want to take a moment to remember the 37 residents of Whitley County and over 12,000 Hoosiers who have been lost to the Covid-19 pandemic. Those individuals all had a unique role within their family, friend groups, and community. We honor them today and pray peace and comfort for all who knew them. Thank you.

Now, let's go back...way back...to a time without masks, social distancing, and greatly reduced handwashing. The year was 2019 and many projects and programs were taking off.

Planning was taking place for the new Park on the former CCHS property. Community input was sought from all age ranges, with multiple public planning sessions that culminated in the Master Plan. Third Graders created playground ideas, Youth Council members pointed out ways to best utilize the space, and residents of the community got creative on what features were vital to the future of recreation in Columbia City. The finalized plan is available on the City's website at [columbiacity.net](http://columbiacity.net) . The Parks Department also built the new Outdoor Synthetic "Eagles Ice" Skating Rink at the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center, installed new bathroom facilities at Devol Field, and constructed the Pickleball and Basketball courts at the Aquatics Center.

A Series of short introduction videos were produced for the City's webpage as a way to welcome newcomers and give them a glimpse into life within our City. If you haven't seen them, here's a taste...

The Street Department secured a large Community Crossings Grant to provide over \$1 Million in street paving throughout the City. We opened the new Dispatch

Center with state-of-the-art functionality and high-tech communications technology, after 30 years in the previous space. This upgrade provides more effective and efficient dispatching of our Police Officers, Fire Fighters, and Utility Workers for quick response times. We also had to adjust water rates to address increasing maintenance and equipment costs. However, I'm proud to say that our Water Rates remain in the lower third of all public water utilities. We also installed the County's first Safe Haven Baby Box in the Columbia City Fire Station to assist mothers and babies in times of greatest crisis.

Some other miscellaneous accomplishments in 2019 include the Holiday Inn Express opening, Refinancing of City Bonds – which saved over \$350,000 over the life of the bond, celebrated 25 years as a Tree City USA, made improvements to the sewer lines in the TIF district on the County's East Side, improved multiple ordinances, and saw the City Redevelopment Commission demolish an old dilapidated industrial factory at the end of Chauncey Street in preparation for brownfield site cleanup. Remediation of the site, both water and soil, started earlier this year and will continue into the future. Overall, 2019 was an impactful year with many accomplishments.

As we prepared for 2020, no one knew the impending changes that would occur. The economic impact was sudden and harsh for many. From the changes in school protocols to the closure of many businesses, restaurants, and shops, our lives were all dramatically changed in March of 2020, just one year ago. Yet, I was encouraged to see the resiliency and dedication show by so many Columbia City and Whitley County residents and businesses who, frankly, just don't quit that easily. We saw neighbors being creative on how they interact, support for local restaurants providing carry-out, Go Fund Me movements to support local businesses, lots of drive-by events, and who could forget those special "Wave-O-Clock" moments every night where people met in their neighborhoods to safely socialize, even if for a few minutes.

On a personal note, I found myself interacting and conversing much more with my neighbors because of the Pandemic. Learning their names, their occupations, what struggles they were going through, and how we could band together to help one-another. The key word within Community is Unity and if nothing else, Covid-19 taught us how much we needed each other outside of the fake realm of social media. I want to encourage you, as life gets back to some assemblance of normal, to not let that fade. It's so easy to pull into the garage, shut the door behind you, and block out your neighborhood. Yet, we find out more about ourselves, our

community, and our world by physically, verbally, and emotionally interacting with the people around us. It's so quick and easy to post our thoughts and opinions on Social Media, yet I would encourage you to take the time to learn about the people around you. Again, we create the Unity within Community, and we can't let those efforts and interactions go to waste.

So, while 2020 was a set back in many ways, for many people, much good did come from it. The City continued to provide our normal public services in different ways to protect citizens and employees. We completed numerous projects including a state-mandated Phosphorus Removal process at the Water Pollution Control Facility. This process will help decrease the frequency of algae blooms throughout the state's water ways. We also installed new anti-icing sidewalks in front of City Hall. This project was critical due to both the many tripping hazards throughout the sidewalk area, and the slippery areas during ice and snow events. We plan to install more of these sidewalks on the perimeter of City Hall in 2022. The Street Department also received another almost-\$800,000 Community Crossings grant to complete another \$1 Million dollars in street paving throughout the City. We also partnered with Whitley County Consolidated Schools to introduced a new Therapy Dog, Jack, who is working with School Resource Officer Thor Hodges to provide an alternative method to reach WCCS

students. We replaced the Playground Equipment at Patriotic Park and modified our Independence Day Celebration, hosting the first (and hopefully only) Drive-In Fireworks Celebration in late September.

The Van Buren Flats, Moo Over, Pickles Café, and Penguin Point opened their doors, along with many other businesses. This is a testament to their courage and commitment to our community – opening up during a global pandemic when unemployment rates were hitting 17+%. We had a major wind storm that took multiple weeks to clean up, but I'm proud of the efforts of all of our departments to ensure streets were opened, electricity was on, and residents could recover quickly. Between our departments doing major limb and brush removal, and our residents helping each other cut up fallen trees, Columbia City – once again – showed its resiliency. AMI Meters were installed for all Columbia City Municipal Electric Utility customers to provide accurate and up-to-date information, as well as reduce outage times and increase employee efficiency.

Ohki Alley was constructed, and participated in the Mural Fest project from the Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership. The alleyway will be formally opened with a Ribbon-cutting this spring, but I am in awe of the transformation that occurred thanks to the generous donation of so many residents and businesses,

along with the help of Patronicity and the Indiana Housing and Community Development Authority. The Columbia City Housing Authority Bought and Renovated a dilapidated house on East Van Buren Street. This was the first project of its type undertaken by the Housing Authority and the transformation of this property has been amazing. We anticipate that house will be on the market within the next month. I'm proud of their focus on improving the housing stock in Columbia City, especially for low to moderate income residents.

In 2020, we saw a significant challenge in the financing of our Junk Pickup days. The Trash Committee considered multiple options to drive down our costs for this service, but in the end the decision was made to downsize Junk Pickup days from One in the Spring and One in the Fall, to just One pickup per year. We also worked on our City Ordinances to ensure that the service was being provided only to City Residents and ensure that Junk Pickup Day wasn't just an opportunity for non-residents to come dump their junk in our city, receiving a service that they weren't paying for. Ultimately, we ended up cutting the cost of this service in half, providing a sustainable program into the future.

Now all of this was well and good in 2020, but the highlight for our community was the grand opening of the new Columbia City High School. While I know many

residents have still not been allowed to have a tour due to the Pandemic, I speak from experience when I say that it is breathtaking. As a graduate of “the old CCHS”, I am jealous of the students who get to call this new facility “their school”. A quick story: When touring the facility with former Superintendent Dr. O’Connor, we stepped into the Auditorium and I was taken aback. As a former drama/show choir kid, I was in awe of the performance space that current and future generations will be able to utilize for musicals, plays, and concerts. I turned to Dr. O’Connor in that moment and lamented what a shame it was that the community who so whole-heartedly supported this new learning center wasn’t able to tour it. She quickly added the word “yet” ...”they aren’t able to tour it yet.” I look forward to a true opportunity where residents of Whitley County will be able to step into the facility that will shape generations of future Eagles.

And why is the School so important? Some of you have heard this story already, but I wanted to share it because of how much it impacted me. We were recently speaking with a housing developer who came to us wanting to put a development in or around Columbia City. As we met, I asked him the question I ask all developers and businesses wanting to locate in our Community, “So Why did you choose Columbia City?” His response was clear and concise, “Three reasons: Schools, Schools, and Schools.” He went on to note that the biggest indicator of

the future success of a community is its school system and based on the continuous improvements and additions to our schools, Columbia City and Whitley County are set up for massive success in the future.

And Success is what we continue to strive for in our Community. As we have moved into this new year, Covid-19 positivity and infection rates continue a downward trend. The vaccine continues to be given to the population and sooner rather than later, we will resume life in a new normal. Yet, our City hasn't really missed a beat. We've been planning and building the future of our community in partnership with so many residents, businesses, and non-profits. In a time when many cities and towns are concerned about the coming years revenues, Columbia City is effectively doubling down on our success. We are building our future together – as the tagline goes – and I'm excited for what the future is going to bring.

As I mentioned earlier about the planning for the former CCHS property, we are already looking at what type of projects we can do first to continue the expansion of quality-of-life amenities for residents and visitors – and we haven't even been given the property yet! Imagine pulling into the Aquatics Center Parking lot. On one side you can hear the sounds of kids squealing and splashing around at the Aquatics Center, while on the other side, you hear music being performed by a

local band. Off in the distance is the skate park where bikers and skateboarders are performing tricks and flips, while nearby, residents walk among flowers and trees stopping to observe some artistic sculptures. A little farther east, you hear the laughing of children as they run around the natural playground, rolling down hills, climbing on trees, and jumping across blocks. These are a few features that we are starting to plan for – and hope to bring to the property in the next few years.

Meanwhile, a project that is almost two years old will soon be coming to a close. The final phase of our Long Term Control Plan for Sewer improvements will be coming to a finish in the next two months. This final phase - a \$10 Million dollar, state-mandated Combined-Sewer-Overflow mitigation project - include three underground storage basins, raising overflow points, increased piping, and upgrading lift stations. Keep in mind that the overall LTCP started back in the early 2000s and has now cost the City over \$40 Million dollars in improvements. While frustrating, multiple administrations have secured millions in federal and state grants to cut back on the rate increases needed to fund this project. In 2019, I was proud to be joined by my two predecessors - former mayors Ron Glassley and Jim Fleck – to break ground on this final phase. I want to publicly thank Mike Cook, Wastewater Superintendent, for his hard work and efforts to ensure we are not

only keeping up with Federal Mandates, but are also doing our part to keep our waterways clean.

After the success of our subdivision overhaul of Wooddale in 2018, we turned our sights to the Westgate neighborhood – one that is 4 times the size of Wooddale, but was similar in that it wasn't given the same amenities as other areas of the City in terms of infrastructure. In 2019, we began meeting with residents of the Westgate neighborhood to determine the needs to be addressed in the project. From those meetings came the preliminary planning for improvements such as widening of the streets, curbing, improved drainage, new street lighting, and new sidewalks. We have applied for the first round of the Indiana Department of Transportation's Community Crossings program to begin the first phase of the Westgate overhaul in the Eastern-most portion of the neighborhood. We anticipate hearing from INDOT in the next month regarding the grant award. If awarded, construction is scheduled to begin this summer and continue through the end of the year. We will continue the engineering of subsequent phases which are planned to be constructed over the next 2-4 years, depending on funding.

Connectivity – in all sense of the word – is critical to meet the needs of our residents and businesses. On the internet front, we hear how important reliable

internet is to everyone. We have continued to follow up with many different companies, encouraging them to expand their fiber footprint within the City and provide reliable internet options to our residents. While we continue to recruit these companies, we are currently working on a plan to provide free public WiFi to our downtown area. We know that this is yet another incentive to drive residents and visitors to our downtown, which subsequently will help it continue to grow and thrive. Small Business is the lifeblood of our economy and the City of Columbia City wants to be a partner in helping them grow in our community. As a part of this commitment, we will continue to support our Main Street Association, Columbia City Connect, as they create new ways to boost tourism and shopping in our downtown core. Just recently, they were awarded a grant from the Office of Community and Rural Affairs to provide businesses with e-commerce and web presence improvements to continue their laser-focused mission.

Furthering the conversation about connectivity, I was so happy that the Indiana Department of Transportation has agreed to undertake a Planning and Environmental Linkage (PEL) study for US 30. As you may know, the counties and cities along US 30 have been advocating for over 6 years now to upgrade this vital corridor. The first step in upgrading this highway is the planning study – and while it isn't a full Environmental Impact Study, the PEL will review and investigate

many of the components of the EIS. I have been assured by INDOT Commissioner Joe McGuinness that we will have ample opportunity to give input along the way, and you can be assured that my focus will be on the Safety of our Residents and the Economic Viability of whatever options they determine to be best. The US 30 Coalition is steadfast in believing for these two reasons – safety and economic viability – that a freeway is the best option for US 30.

Arts and Culture has been a growing focal point in our community as numerous murals, gathering spaces, and dramatic arts have grown in Columbia City. In 2021, besides the opening of Ohki Alley, we will be expanding the artist influence in our community by creating a Columbia City Arts Commission. The Arts Commission will help grow the arts culture within our City, while supporting memorable experiences that enlighten the heart and spark the mind. We also will continue working towards a downtown revitalization plan that encourages public art and beautification.

The Growth of the City is always a balancing act. We want to grow because – as you know – communities that stagnate are communities that die. Further, growth of a community helps provide greater competition, expands dining and shopping options, and provides more residents who are engaged and actively working

towards the improvement of our city. Growth also has to be planned and structured so as not to overwhelm systems and infrastructure that are already in place. We also don't want to lose that small-town charm that we all know and love. That is why planning is so critical to our future. In 2021, we will be working with our friends at the County to expand our Extraterritorial Jurisdiction. I want to be clear; this is not annexation. We are not annexing anyone, nor do we have any plans to annex anyone outside of the City in the near future (besides properties that have requested annexation). The expansion of our 2-mile jurisdictional boundary is important, however, to help plan for the future – whether than be 2 year or 52 years. As our City has grown, we have hit the previous 2-mile Jurisdictional boundary on two sides. This expansion of our planning territory merely helps us plan for the future.

Along that same line, we haven't received the latest Census numbers yet. We do know, however, based on housing permits, apartment developments, and new subdivision expansions, that our City continues to be a place where people want to be. Certainly, 2020 put a crimp into the growth – mainly due to the shutdown and the rising costs of construction materials, yet we saw some continuation of developments and many residents improving their own properties. It's obvious that while some portions of our local economy took a hit, there are still plenty of

people investing in the growth of our community. We look forward to seeing how our community's growth has compared to other communities of similar size throughout the State, when the Census numbers are provided.

A few items have already been completed for the year in the area of our utilities. After waiting for over a decade, we made an Electric Rate adjustment that helps provide financial stability and accounts for many of the changes in the electric grid. We are currently working with AEP – American Electric Power on a 69 Kv conversion project that will change the way we receive power through their lines. Without giving you an in-depth look at how the Electric Grid is set up, the short story is that our power provider – Indiana Municipal Power Agency- effectively ships us power through AEP transmission lines, which we then convert (through our substations) into power that can be distributed to the homes and businesses of our customers. With this conversion occurring with AEP, we must prepare our electric systems to handle this change in voltage. For customers, this will provide greater reliability in the long run. IMPA – our power provider - has also built a new Solar Energy field at the end of Opportunity Drive. This Solar field will have a maximum capacity of 4.3 Megawatts and, on a sunny day, will be able to power 25% of our Columbia City Municipal Electric's energy usage. We are excited to

partner with IMPA on this project that will provide renewable energy to our community's power grid and provide additional sustainability into the future.

In the area of Stormwater, we continue to improve our stormwater management through greater attention on developments and a contractual relationship with the Whitley County Soil and Water Conservation District. With their assistance, we have improved the runoff from construction activities, continually cleaned storm drainage to reduce the amount of dirt and debris ending up in our streams and rivers, and provided multiple programs for residents to reduce the amount of stormwater headed to the Water Pollution Control Facility like the Downspout Disconnection Program and the Rain Barrel Rebate Program.

Our Water Department will be working throughout the year to convert our Water meters into the same AMI technology that our Electric Utility is using. This project will allow real-time readings and remove the need for a dedicated person to go drive throughout the community collecting water readings. It will also standardize the process in the Utility Office.

Public Safety has continued to improve for residents in both the Fire and Police Departments. While Covid-19 has change processes, these departments have continued to provide a high-level of public service. As you may have noticed, the

faces within our Police Department have changed a lot. To give you a little insight into this, when I started as Mayor in 2012, our least-tenured police officer had almost 10 years of service on the force. As of today, we have 17 of our 22 officers that have less than 6 years of experience. As you can imagine, training has been the name of the game for the police department. Thanks to CARES Act dollars in 2020, we were able to equip their vehicles with mobile command units which basically allow them to do about everything they need to do in an office available to them in their car. We have also activated a Judicial Sharing module that makes it easier for our officers to share files with the court system.

Our dispatchers' responsibility continues to grow, as does our staffing. Just a few short years ago, there were multiple shifts each week that would only have one staff member manning the CAD (computer aided dispatch) system, the 911 Phone lines, and City utility calls. We have moved to a minimum of at least two members per shift to ensure that residential calls are responded to in a quick and efficient manner. Further, the new dispatch center provides plenty of room for expansion and the ability to take on additional responsibilities.

The Fire Department has just received new Air Packs for all Columbia City Firefighters. These new air packs will allow our firefighters to have the latest

technology when entering smoke-filled buildings in and around our city – which hopefully will be a rare occurrence. They also plan to install a new training space that will help them train for many circumstances long into the future.

Many other projects are being planned for this year including a new storage facility for the Parks Department, replacing the brick crosswalks in downtown that are breaking apart, putting up new banners along State Road 205, and working with multiple new businesses that plan to open up or expand here in Columbia City this year.

So, as noted, you can tell that while the economic environment has been uneasy, we have continued to move towards the future with improvement projects across all departments and real-life impacts to our citizens and businesses. But here is the best part: all of these improvements noted today have happened with City taxes decreasing. As mentioned in past Addresses, the more we grow – in a balanced way – the more stable our tax rate gets. In fact, since 2017, the City tax rate (for just the City of Columbia City) has gone down over 10 cents per 100 dollars of assessed valuation. That is real money staying in the pockets of our residents. Properties are also worth more in Columbia City, which also helps residents – especially in this sellers' market. Assessed Valuation within the City

Limits, which is the total value of all taxable property in the City, has grown by over 78 Million dollars, or 31% since 2017. The point I am making is that the continual investment into our community is having a direct reflection on – and driving down - the City's Tax Rate, making Columbia City a welcoming place for new residents and businesses.

Friends, The State of our City is excelling. We are not only improving, but excelling at Building a Future Together. Whether businesses, residents, nonprofits, or others, our City continues to excel. We are excelling in talent attraction and retention, quality of life growth, business development, and hospitality. We've not only managed to make it through Covid-19, but have improved many of our positions as a community. None of this would be possible without so many of you continuing to put your head down and running straight into the headwinds of political, social, and economic upheaval. Our collective focus on the future has provided a prime opportunity for success. And make no mistake, we will continue to grow collectively as a leader as long as we continue to do it arm-in-arm with each other. I'm so proud of our efforts, our team, our community, and our citizenry. And I look forward to continue serving as our City's leader into the future because our best days remain ahead of us. Let's continue to excel in 2021.

Thank you.