

2022 State of the City Address

5/6/22

By Mayor Ryan L. Daniel

Common Council and Board of Works Members, Department Heads, Chamber Members, Distinguished Guests, and Citizens, I am honored to, once again, present the annual State of the City Address for the City of Columbia City. Over the past year, our City has continued its upward momentum, as a leader in Northeast Indiana. Where it once was true that Columbia City was just another dot in a sea of rural America, our City is now looked upon as a leader by regional and state leaders. I'd be remiss if I didn't start out with the highlight of our year, which was our growth rate. Now as we all know, a leading indicator of community success is whether people are actively choosing to move to our City. If people want to join our City, bringing their family and putting down their roots, we obviously must be doing something right! I'm proud to report that over 1100 more people call Columbia City their home, since 2010. In fact, Census data shows the Columbia City was the Second-Fastest Growing City in Northeast Indiana in percentage, and the Third-Fastest Growing City in Northeast Indiana by actual population growth. Friends, this can't be understated. The more people that are choosing to call Columbia City their home, the more dollars are then invested in local shops, businesses, and restaurants; invested in non-profits and community activities; and invested in our schools and beautification of our community. We have consistently chosen to invest in ourselves,

because our City's future truly depends not on what we do tomorrow, but rather on what we do today. I am so proud of the steps that have been taken by so many in this room and throughout our community to truly come together for the betterment of our citizens. From non-profits who have filled the void and tackled tough challenges, to volunteer groups who put on events that attract visitors from miles away, this City wouldn't be what it is today without you. From the entrepreneurs who have taken a chance and started a business in our community, to the unsung heroes who grab a trash bag and clean up our parks, we are stronger because of you. And from the Department Heads who put plans to action, to my fellow elected officials who guide your City Government, I am thankful for your leadership. The Unity in our Community is strong because we care deeply about our community's past, present, and future.

With all that being said, it is clear that the State of our City is bright! Now bright is defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary as "Radiating" or "Beautiful" or "Lively" or "Cheerful". How well does that define us! We are *radiating* out as an attractive place to live, work, and play. Our parks, places of worship, and even our downtown continue to shine *in beauty*. The First Friday and other community events are certainly *lively*. And our citizens and business owners are the *cheerful* welcoming committee to so many new residents. So, as you can see, Bright was an easy choice. The State of our City is Bright and will continue to be bright into the future!

So lets look at the past and future projects, as well as the challenges that lay before us as we shape our community to be better today than it was yesterday.

After literally 20 years of planning and constructing, the City's federally mandated Long Term Control Plan was finally finished. This final phase of the project, which came in \$2 million dollars under its original projected budget, provided three new underground retention basins and upsizing of pipes for heavy wet weather events. We also constructed a half-million dollar phosphorus treatment facility in order to comply with yet another unfunded mandate from our friends at the federal and state government. Currently, we are beginning an engineering study to reroute a portion of sewer forcemain that happens to run underneath the playground at Mary Raber. This project is funded through the American Rescue Plan dollars and engineering should be completed by the end of the year. Honestly, it's nice to be able to do a project we *want* to complete, rather than a project we are *mandated* to complete! We are also working on our 5-year Indiana Department of Environmental Management permit, and overhauling the Columbia Shores Lift Station this year.

In the Electric Department, after 11 years without a rate increase, we finally needed to make an adjustment. As you can guess, the prices of everything we do and provide had gone up significantly over the decade and it was putting our utility into a deficit scenario. After much discussion among the Utility Rate Advisory Board (a citizen board made up of

four city utility residents and a non-city utility customer) and the City Council, the group decided to enact this adjustment as a two-phase increase to allow customers to better manage the price increase. Even after the increase, our electric prices are still lower than the nearest utility. Our Electric Department has been working closely with AEP, the provider of the transmission lines into our City, who is working on an upgrade of their lines to effectively double the amount of power that can flow into our City. This project requires the upgrade of multiple City Electric substations and infrastructure, at our costs, to accommodate these changes. This is a multi-year project throughout the City. Also in 2021, we welcomed the City's first Solar Park on Opportunity Drive on the far Northwest side. Indiana Municipal Power Agency (IMPA) is the owner, but all power generated from this solar park stays in our community and at full capacity, can power over half of our power load with this green energy. We are currently assisting IMPA in looking for additional solar sites to power the future of our City. This year, we will install new street lighting along North Main Street to improve the energy efficiency and attractiveness of this area. This project should occur this fall. We are also on the verge of full implementation of our AMI automatic metering system, which shortens outages, while improving responsiveness and efficiency.

In the Water Department, we continued to respond to the growth of our community by installing new automatic water meters, rebuilding one of our city wells, and replaced a section of water line on Jefferson Street that had multiple breaks over recent years. We

also continue to inspect, clean, and install new stormwater infrastructure throughout the City. In 2022, we will be working in partnership with the Whitley County Consolidated School Corporation to study the potential for a water main to provide water to Northern Heights Elementary School. We anticipate construction for this project to potentially occur in 2024. We will also continue to repair and replace problem areas in our water and stormwater systems.

Overall, our Utilities are in good shape. We continue to be proactive in improvements, while also being mindful of our customers and the costs to run this infrastructure. Over the last decade, I've heard from many people about the large amounts of rate increases we do at one time. Whether it be 25% or 20 dollars, it's clear to me that customers aren't fans of big bulky rate increases. We've explored this issue in depth over the past year and, in response to these concerns, will begin annually looking at all our utilities to determine if minor adjustments need to be made. It is my goal to stop this cycle of waiting until the last possible moment to do a rate adjustment and then slamming our customers with a massive increase. Only to do it again in 5-7 years. Instead, we are going to take a more responsible and responsive approach, looking towards the future and making yearly determinations on what is best for the customers and our utilities.

When our administration began in 2012, we took a wide view of our community and determined that over the years, multiple subdivisions had been annexed into the City

without being given the services they deserve. Specifically, we pinpointed that the WoodDale and Westgate subdivisions needed infrastructure overhauls to bring them up to the City standards. So in 2018, we completed an overhaul of the infrastructure in the WoodDale subdivision. With this major project under our belt, we then turned our sights to the Westgate subdivision. Because Westgate is three-times the size of WoodDale, we have split up this project into three phases. By doing one phase at a time, we can complete the project without any tax or rate increases, and without putting additional costs on the property owners. Thankfully, the City received a Community Crossings grant from the Indiana Department of Transportation in late 2021 for \$835,000 towards the project. Phase 1 will begin within the next month and will include new streets, sidewalks, curbs, stormwater drainage, and underground electric service. Subsequent phases are planned to occur in 2025 and 2026. We are also studying the drainage throughout this area and hope to have some solutions to the plethora of water that tends to drain to *and through* this area of our community.

Our Street/Sewer Department completed multiple street paving and other miscellaneous projects in 2021. Improvements were made to the Greenhill Cemetery drive and a few City streets, over 20,000 feet of sanitary sewer main was cleaned, and over 268,000 pounds of debris was collected by the street sweeper. One major project the department tackled was the brick crosswalks throughout downtown Columbia City. A product of the 1990's downtown renovation, the brick crosswalks had seen better days. Even after

multiple attempts to repair and replace the bricks, the wear and tear of 20+ years of vehicles, snow plows, and weather had brought us to a crossroads – excuse the pun. We decided the best and safest way to improve these crosswalks was to remove the bricks, then pave and stripe the crossings with a piano-keys look. The project was completed and they will be re-stripped soon as we get to warmer weather. You may not know this, but the street department is basically our jack-of-all-trades department. They handle many services, including limb pickup, leaf pickup, grave digging, sidewalk enhancement, snow plowing, alley trimming, asphalt patching, sewer televising, ADA ramp replacement, and many other services. For 2022, they have already started one major project, which is to pour new sidewalks around City Hall and installing the Ice Melt System. As you may remember, in 2020, we undertook the first phase of this project, taking care of the “X” shape of sidewalk in the middle of City Hall’s front yard. Now we have started the second part of the project, which we’ve split into two phases, that will include the main curb-face sidewalks that surround City Hall. By installing the ice melt system, which the County Government Center already has, we can cut down dramatically on our snow plowing and salting costs for decades to come, while providing safer walkways for citizens in the wintertime.

In Public Safety, our Police and Dispatch Department had a strong year. The Police Department provided services for over 17,000 calls in 2021, with 12,000 of those being self-initiated. They implemented a new drone program that can help find missing

persons and fleeing suspects. They continued the Patrolling for Presents program that assisted 100 children in our community. They also improved efficiency by installing wireless units in all City Police Cars, as well as judicial file sharing for the court system. These systems allow data to be transmitted between officers and dispatchers or the prosecutor, at the touch of a button. In 2022, we have already replaced a few aging vehicles, participated in a joint-training exercise with the Local Emergency Planning Committee, and continued to train our staff in a variety of tactics and expertise. We also plan to roll out a Citizens Academy in the near future which will provide residents the chance to get an up-close look at public safety and to engage at a deeper level in our City. Dispatch continues to lead in numerous areas through the expansion of trainings, usage of the Spillman dispatch system, and interaction with city utilities. All of these items move our dispatchers towards more reliable, effective, and responsive service for citizens. When we renovated City Hall to accommodate a new dispatch center, we made a conscious choice to invest in that stable and calming voice on the other end of an emergency phone call. We made a choice to be advanced in technology, provide ease to access to vital information, and build for the future, allowing for expansion and integration of staff. We did all these things knowing that people will continue to choose Columbia City as their home, if we provide a safe and welcoming environment. We also did it with the idea that our taxpayers deserve the best care in their worst moments. I'm

proud of the impact that these front-line workers have on not only our residents, but also on the police officers and firefighters who are our “boots on the ground”.

And speaking of Firefighters, our Fire Department responded to over 800 runs in 2021, with 62% of those being medical and 4% being fire related. As you can tell by these numbers, the department acts as a first resource for residents who have a medical issue. This continues to be a trend for the CCFD. Many times, our firemen are the first ones on the scene, comforting patients and providing basic life-support functions until the EMS arrives. Yet, we must prepare for any situation our staff may encounter.

On the morning of May 22nd, as I stood in my garage, speaking with a neighbor, a jarring boom echoed across our City. In fact, the sound could be heard as far out as Tri-Lakes. I looked towards the sound to see a massive cloud of black smoke rising from the North Line Street Area. I'm sure many of you may remember where you were and what you were doing at that moment last year. An explosion occurred at the former R&D Yamaha building that ripped apart a building, damaged nearby structures, and sadly killed a local resident. Amidst the tragedy, however, I was amazing at the response by our Firefighters, Police Officers, EMTs, Utility staff, and other public safety personnel from numerous volunteer fire departments. It was an incredible scene of cooperation, coordination, and expertise on display for the community to see. Yet, it also was a strong reminder that across our City, our county, and our nation, our Fire Departments are in desperate need of volunteers. As you may know, our department is a combination department, which

means we have a combination of full-time and volunteer firefighters. Yet, due to a increase in service hours required by the State and a decrease in the amount of interest in the fire service, our department, alone, is short 16 or more volunteers. We have attempted to combat this deficit through WCCS's fire academy at Columbia City High School, with minor success. At the end of the day, there is a national volunteer crisis that must be addressed either with new volunteers stepping up, or with more full timers being hired – meaning more tax dollars being needed from citizens to provide fire protection. This isn't merely a Columbia City issue, so we need to work collaboratively together in Whitley County to address this glaring issue. In the near future, you will be seeing a few short videos on social media that we will use as a recruiting tool, showing residents the impacts of volunteerism and how they can get involved in protecting their home community! In 2021, the Fire Department purchased new air packs for our entire department, upgrading their safety equipment, and improving their ability to fight fires inside of structures. They also cut the ribbon on the new Walt Crowder Fire Training Facility, which allows our department to train in live-fire training scenarios. This project was multiple years in the making and is a real asset to our community. This year they will be replacing an outdated generator within the department and implementing an even-stronger training program.

The Parks Department had a stellar year in 2021, with the opening of the new Morsches Park bathrooms, a new concession stand, and the new park maintenance facility. The

maintenance facility is over 7000 square feet, taking our maintenance equipment located in seven different barns and moving it into one singular storage location. We also began maintaining the former CCHS property, also known as Eagle Park. As you may know, we have applied for an Indiana Department of Natural Resources Land and Water Conservation grant to start what I call "Phase 1a" of the park master plan. This project would include a new skate park on the Northside of the property, a refurbished parking lot on the South side, the installation of sidewalks on the West end, a large trellis with swings, and new pickleball courts. We are waiting with bated breath on the announcement of the award winners, but feel strongly that this is the first of many projects that will dramatically impact our recreation for residents, and attractiveness to visitors. I would encourage you to visit the Master Plan for this site on our website, www.columbiacity.net . We are hopeful that construction on this project could start this year. Other projects happening this year include the building of new dugouts on baseball fields 3 & 4, managing a youth travel soccer team, and installing a Veterans Memorial at Patriotic Park, on Redick Avenue. This Veterans Memorial will honor all veterans, whether they served in war or in peace. I could think of no better place for this monument, then at a place that honors the most patriotic among us.

Information Technology continues to evolve and change as we look for better ways to interact and engage our constituents. In 2021, we changed out servers, improved our fiber network connectivity, added security cameras throughout our properties, and

moved all internal accounts to Microsoft 365. One major project that was finally accomplished last year was the upgrading of our City Council chambers to include video recording and broadcast capabilities. Since February 23rd, 2021, the Board of Public Works and Common Council meetings have all been broadcasts live, through this new system, on Facebook. Further, every recorded Board of Works and City Council Meeting can be found on the City's YouTube page "City of Columbia City, Indiana". This is yet another way your city government is increasing transparency and accountability. As a side note, you can catch today's State of City Addresses and others from past years on this same YouTube account. This year, our IT Director, Terry Wherry, has undertaken another major project to install free public WiFi throughout our Downtown area, as well as in Morsches Park and at the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center. Obviously, this will be a great addition to improve quality of life, while attracting people to our downtown and park spaces.

Speaking of Park Spaces, we were excited to open up Ohki Alley last year! The activated alleyway, named after the former citizen, businessman, and rotarian, Shinzo Ohki, was completed and opened on May 7th with Shinzo's great granddaughter joining us for the ribbon cutting. Since the opening, both sides of the pocket park have been occupied with Tokyo Steakhouse on the East side and Chapmans Restaurant and Brewery on the other.

Internally, we've made great strides towards being an employer of choice. As a City Government, we believe that the investment our Citizens make in their tax and utility dollars should return an equal or greater investment into our community. This investment begins with a highly-skilled workforce that is willing to go over and above to provide great customer service to our citizens and customers. Multiple years ago, we implemented an Employee Wellness Program that incentivizes employees to make healthier choices and taking an active role in their health. Every year, we've won awards ranging from Most Employee Engagement to Most Wellness Impact. At the beginning of 2022, we began a partnership with the Whitley County Consolidated Schools and Parkview Health in providing an Employee Clinic. The goal of these employee benefit programs are to drive-down our insurance costs and encourage healthier lifestyle choices. Beth Igney, our Human Resources Director, has continually advocated for all of these programs as ways to be an attractive employer of choice. Thank you Beth. The benefit to our residents are happier, healthier, and more productive public servants. Other items of note include multiple annexations that were requested and granted, including the new Columbia City High School property; and earlier this year, the Common Council approved new Council District Maps to accommodate the 2020 Census and our growth.

In Community Development, many new businesses opened their doors, while others remodeled and expanded. From boutiques and pizza shops, to restaurants and antiques,

entrepreneurs from inside and outside the community are choosing Columbia City to be their home base. In 2021, we saw over \$25 Million dollars in construction taking place, an increase of over \$4 Million from 2020. We also saw almost 300 permits issued throughout the City, also an increase from 2020. So far this year, we've seen multiple new businesses open up, with many others in some phase of construction. We also have many new houses being built, yet still struggle to attract developers to keep up with demand. Land values and a lack of interest in selling land appears to be the major sticking point for many home builders. We continue looking for options on ways to increase home building in and around the City. On November 3rd, we broke ground on a city-wide fiberoptic internet project with Surf Broadband Solutions. After literally a decade of working towards fiber-to-the-home, we found a partner to provide this service, without the need for taxpayer subsidies. While the project is behind schedule, mainly due to factors outside of our (or Surf's) control, we are very excited to see fiberoptic cable going into the ground. We anticipate the project will be completed in 2023. A few weeks ago, we received some fantastic news that we are receiving a \$1.8 million dollar Next Level Trails grant from the Department of Natural Resources. This grant will help us complete the South loop of the trail from Main Street over to Line Street, and from Line Street to the new CCHS/ISMS/LTES school site. We anticipate construction to commence sometime towards the end of this year or beginning of 2023. In 2022, we will begin the process of creating a Downtown Strategic Investment and Streetscape Plan. This planning

effort will focus on the future of our downtown, its attractiveness, and will provide a creative strategy to improve the area for all ages. We plan to kick off this initiative in the fall and I hope many of you and all of our downtown stakeholders will get involved in the process. There will be plenty of opportunities for feedback, input, and creativity! This plan is primarily funded through the American Rescue Plan. Another exciting development on tap for this year is the creation of the Columbia City Arts Commission. Like a few other communities, our City is looking to create a more enhanced arts culture. As you may know, "Arts" is a word with a very broad definition. It can include visual, dramatic, auditory, musical, or any other form of expression. The goal of the Arts Commission will be to encourage recognition, expression, and presence of public art in the City of Columbia City. With the rise of murals, musicals, and other forms of art in our community, there is no better time than to institute a specific local commission that is tasked with partnering together for the collective good. I will be asking the Common Council to institute an Arts Commission in our code of Ordinances to begin the formation of this fantastic group.

In all, 2021 was a year that was filled with ups and downs. We started still-in-the-grip of a worldwide pandemic, mask mandates, and shortages on consumer goods. We ended the year with inflationary pressures and shortages on just about every material we use. Yet, despite these issues, 2022 started with tremendous investment from individuals inside and outside our community. Our residents also saw a fifth straight year of tax rate

decreases! Make no mistake, as we move forward we will continue to stretch your dollars and invest it in the places with the greatest return – our infrastructure, our utilities, and our amenities.

Late last year, we heard from a researcher at Indiana University, by the name of Drew Klacik, about what the future holds for rural Indiana, based on decades of data from the Census. The trend was a bit jarring as more and more individuals are choosing to live in metropolitan and micropolitan areas (cities and suburbs), than in the rural areas of our state. Quality effects quantity, when it comes to communities. If you have a low cost community, yet nothing for families to enjoy, you're going to experience population decline. If you have a high amenity community, yet have a high crime rate, you're going to wither on the vine. Cities that invest in themselves and in their residents, while keeping reasonable tax and utility rates, will not only grow, but thrive. Specifically, Drew told us point-blank, "As a City, you have to choose whether you want to Manage your Decline, or Invest in your Future". Boy isn't that a wake up call.

As I'm walking downtown during the Farmers Market, grabbing a bite to eat at Pickles Café, or taking a bike ride with the family on the Blue River Trail system, those words ring over and over again in my head. Now, I've been Mayor long enough for you to know where I land on that proposition. It is crystal clear that if we want to keep tax and utility rates reasonable, if we want to attract your kids and grandkids back to Whitley County, if

we want to expand the dollars invested and active participants in our non-profits, we absolutely, positively, whole-heartedly, and unequivocally must invest in our future.

Failing to do so is to give up on ourselves, our past, and our future.

Friends, this choice could not be clearer to me, and I hope you, too, see that this choice is clear. If we keep investing in ourselves, the future is awfully bright! And at this moment in time, so is the State of our City. We are on an upward trajectory – together, as a team, working for the betterment of our neighbor, investing in ourselves, and preparing the way for those who come after us.

So I'll leave you with this thought: Henry Ford is credited with saying, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success." In that continuum, we are achieving massive success. Arm and Arm, we continue to build our future together. Thank you.