

2023 State of the City Address

5/5/2023

By Mayor Ryan L. Daniel

I want to start by thanking Autumn Trace for opening this beautiful space to us, once again this year. I also want to thank the Whitley County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center for continuing to host the State of the City Address. I want to recognize the members of our team, *Team CC* as I like to call it. So, if you are a City Council member, Department Head, or other City Staff member, will you please stand and be recognized. As you know, I have a great team that continually works for the betterment of our residents and for the future of this community. Our path, our success, and our progress are because of the hard work of these and many other individuals.

Today's State of the City Address will be different from the normal speeches that I have given in the past. While I will still give an overview of the past and a preview of the future, I'm also going to require a bit more audience participation. So everyone, get our your smart phones and go to this website: www.PollEv.com/ryandaniel207 or text RYANDANIEL207 to 22333 or use the QR Code on the screen. It should show this page. Throughout the speech, I will ask you to give feedback. This feedback helpful for me to know the audience's thoughts.

Now, let's begin with a few questions!

First, What Best Describes your Occupation?

Next, Give One Word describing WHY you live in Columbia City.

Finally, What is your favorite Amenity in our Community?

Thank you for participating. We will be swooping back around to the questions in a little bit.

2022 was a year full of grant awards and numerous projects. The City was awarded multiple grants totaling over 3 Million Dollars! The first award was \$600K for Phase 1a of Eagle Park. Then we were notified that the City would receive \$1.8 Million dollars for the extension of the Blue River Trail from South Line Street to the new CCHS campus. Finally, we were awarded over \$600,000 for street paving to occur this year, in 2023. Overall, these three projects gave us our highest grant total in many years. Keep in mind that these grants are dollars that residents have already paid to State or Federal programs through their taxes, and we are working hard to bring those dollars back to Columbia City to benefit our constituents.

Regarding our major quality of life project, Eagle Park is the site of the former Columbia City High School. As you may remember, this generational project will completely transform that property into a park that has a little something for everyone. From athletic fields and an amphitheater to nature trails and blue river access, this site will be a gathering space for generations to come. As for an update on Phase 1a of Eagle

Park, the project has been designed and bids have been received. This project will install a new Skate Park, new Pickleball Courts, a trellis with family swings, and resurface the parking lot. As with almost all projects occurring across the country, the bids for Eagle Park came in significantly above the Engineers estimate. We are actively working to determine ways to get the project within our budget, while still preserving the installation of popular amenities. Please note, however, that if we are not able to get the price to a reasonable level, this project may be delayed. I certainly am concerned that this trend will continue into the future, as we are seeing higher prices across the board on everything from water pipes and electrical transformers to concrete and every-day items. Yet, we have a duty to continue our progress for current and future residents and will keep moving forward balancing costs and rewards.

The Blue River Trail Extension that will connect the Blue River Trail segments at Main and Vine Streets together and will connect the full trail out to the new CCHS campus, is in final design as we speak. The project should be going out for bid this summer with construction expected to last into the end of next year. We are excited to get this project started to create a safe way for students and other residents to get to and from the campus on bike or on foot. Ok, here is our next poll: Have you used the Blue River Trail, and if you have, how regularly do you use it?

Finally, we are, again, taking advantage of the fantastic Community Crossings Matching Grant program from the Indiana Department of Transportation. This program provides communities under 10,000 population with a 75-25 matching program up to \$1 million dollars. This program has been so beneficial for our community and allowed us to really make a huge improvement on our city streets – all for .25 cents on the dollar. In 2023, we plan to pave numerous streets across the city with these dollars.

Certainly, grants are great, but even without grants, we are working to invest the hard-earned tax dollars received from our citizens and businesses, into making Columbia City a safer, more enjoyable, more prosperous community. One example of this is in our public safety departments. As you are probably all aware, Columbia City continues to be one of the safest cities in Indiana. That is only the case because we have some of the best-trained, well-equipped, and community-minded police officers, firefighters, and dispatchers. 2022 was the 100-year anniversary of the formation of the Columbia City Police Department. From its humble roots to today, fighting crime has changed dramatically. Last year, our officers provided service for over 15,000 calls. We put a renewed emphasis on Drunk Drivers and Seatbelt usage thanks to a grant from the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute. We revamped the detective division and added a SoToxa instrument, which is used for drugs like a breathalyzer is used for alcohol. We hired many officers continuing the trend, like the vast majority of police departments across the country, replacing officers who have left for other departments, or are

choosing to leave the profession overall. It continues to be a tough environment for police officers across the nation, but our community (in general) are very supportive of our officers and their work. Thankfully, we have attracted multiple lateral transfers from other departments who bring their skills and expertise to our department, with multiple transfers having 10 or more years of public safety experience. In Dispatch, we've continued to focus on raising the specialized skills of our dispatchers, while keeping up with equipment improvements and changes. We replaced our headsets and made server upgrades for comfort and safety purposes. We also had an FBI audit on the security of our center and passed with flying colors. I'm so proud that we have continued to raise the bar in our community when it comes to answering and responding to citizens in their greatest hour of need. In the Fire Department, we've implemented a new training program for newly hired firefighters, replaced multiple pieces of equipment, and renewed the department's Constitution and bylaws. You are probably also aware that our firefighters mounted a great advertising campaign with the goal of attracting more volunteer firefighters and I'm happy to say that, while we didn't quite meet the goal of 15, it was still a very successful campaign! Multiple new recruits are in the process of training and taking the test to serve our community as volunteers. If you didn't see one of the many ads, here is a clip from the campaign. Nationally, there is a shortage for both firefighters and police officers. If any of you, or

anyone watching this later have an interest in serving your neighbors in this way, please contact our chiefs and they can get you connected.

On the Quality of Life front, we had multiple projects occur in 2022. We added free public WiFi to our downtown area, Morsches Park, and at the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center. This is not only a way to attract more people to parks and downtown, but also a critical need for those who struggle to access the internet at home. A new Veterans Monument was added to Patriotic Park, welcoming residents to add their loved ones names to bricks in honor, or memory of someone who served. We also started a new Columbia City Arts Commission as a way to elevate and expand the arts in our community. They will be partnering with Columbia City Connect to do an Art Crawl this year, as well as participate in our Summer in the City program...which will be discussed in detail later in this speech.

Infrastructure continued to be a focal point in 2022 with the Phase 1 construction of the Westgate neighborhood. The project brought new streets, sidewalks, curbs, and stormwater infrastructure to residents in this area. The project's total cost was 1.1 Million dollars, but thanks to an INDOT Community Crossings grant the previous year, our cost was only a mere 25% of that. We continue to plan for Phase 2 and 3 of Westgate which is projected to occur in 2024 and 2025. Last year, we also finished the sidewalk replacement at City Hall. This project not only addressed ADA accessibility

concerns and tripping hazards, but also installed additional ice melt lines in the sidewalk to ensure safety for customers in the wintertime, while saving dollars in overtime and salt purchases. A few other stats for you: The City Street Department picked up 220 tons of limb debris and over 2000 yards of leaves in 2022. The street sweeper also picked up 229,000 pounds of material from our City Streets. Our Water Department updated multiple wells last year, installed numerous stormwater lines, and began a study to bring City Water to Northern Heights Elementary School, at the request of WCCS. This project is still being engineered, but the end goal will be to provide clean, safe, reliable drinking water to the students, while eliminating the old wells. On the Electric side, many projects occurred including the Main Street lighting improvements, burying lines underground for reliability, and creating an outage mapping system that will help decrease response times. The department is also continuing work on a years-long project to upgrade our transmission system to 69 KV, as a response to the AEP line upgrades happening throughout Northeast Indiana. After many equipment delays, the North Substation Entry project is almost complete. This is only one part of the comprehensive upgrading of our system. In our Wastewater Department, we completed the engineering of a project that will move and improve a force main that runs from the Jefferson Street lift station to the Main Street lift station. The current line, which has experienced numerous breaks, runs underneath the Mary Raber playground. Obviously, that location is not easily accessible for repairs. We

anticipate construction of this sewer line to occur later this year. We also completed the redesign and construction of Combined Sewer Overflow #19. This pipe outfall was badly damaged due to high river currents, so quick and effective improvements were necessary. We also continue to experience the benefit of our Long Term Control Plan project that was completed in 2021. Ok, here is your next interactive question: What percent of CSO discharge was eliminated by the LTCP? Was it A. 57%, B. 82%, C. 97%, or D. 100%?

As you can see by the chart, we have eliminated 97% of our combined sewer discharge. Our 6-year average, prior to the project was roughly 10 Million gallons per year of combined sewer and stormwater going into our streams and rivers. In 2022, only 3% of that was actually discharged into the river. The rest of this combined sewer/stormwater was ran through the Water Pollution Control Facility and treated. This is fantastic news for our environment and for all those living downstream from us.

A few other miscellaneous items to cover from 2022, before we move on to 2023's plans. First, we continued the downward trajectory of city property tax rates with a decrease of 9 cents and an upward growth of development. As mentioned before, the City of Columbia City is in the bottom 25% of tax rates for cities in the state of Indiana. This does not include County, School, Library, and other tax rates that are on the bill. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to give a quick 2-minute lesson on Property taxes.

It's important to know that all of these entities combine to determine the overall tax rate of the individual. Further, it should be noted however, that while the Tax Rates are declining, Assessments are rising. There are multiple reasons for this, many of which can be much better defined by the County Assessor. The main reason, however, has to do with the mandate by the State that assessments are based on market value. As the housing market has become more tight, with less housing supply, the value of homes have risen dramatically over the last few years. *Supply and Demand*. As an example of that, the median single family dwelling construction costs has almost doubled since 2016, going from an average \$170,000 to over \$320,000 in 2022. These cost increases have been passed on to new home buyers, which impacts the market value of all homes, thus creating a higher assessed valuation and raising the tax amount due. Again, I want to reiterate that the City's tax rate has gone DOWN for the last 6 years, but Assessments have continued to go up. The tax rate is determined by taking the cost of government (in this case, the City), and dividing that costs by the total amount of assessed valuation, minus deductions. So as mentioned, the more we grow, the last burden of city costs will be on each individual property owner because the Assessed Valuation and the City Tax Rate have an inverse relationship. Over the past 6 years, the City's Assessed Value has increased by 183.7 Million dollars, or roughly 70% due to new development, businesses, and value growth. This is the main reason why our property tax rate has decreased by 22% or 21 cents per 100 dollars of assessed

valuation. So, here is the most important part to know: We will continue to push our tax rate down through growth and responsible spending, while providing a good return on investment of those tax dollars. Lesson Complete. *I hope I didn't lose you!*

On the development side, we had over \$28 Million dollars in estimated construction value with a third of that number being new home construction, and another third being commercial or industrial construction. Our building permits in 2022 was average for the last 6 years, around 200 new permits filed, with an additional 150 or so improvement permits filed.

Second, we partnered with CGI to replace the welcome banners on State Road 205.

The banner design was created by Alina Houser, CCHS students, and was at no cost to the City. These banners were sponsored by many local businesses. We plan to roll out similar banners on State Road 9 this year on our new street light poles. In 2022, our City Council renewed our precincts and council districts to accommodate growth and ensure balanced representation in City Government. This is a mandate to occur every decade after the Census and, thanks to the hard work of Jess Hockemeyer in the County Clerk's office and members of our Council, it was a quick and effective process. We welcomed multiple companies and restaurants to the City in 2022, as well. I'm so proud of our community. The steps we have taken, together, to move our community into the future is impressive. So impressive, by the way, that Columbia City was named

one of the TOP 20 Suburbs in the United States by SmartAsset for our safety, quality of life, affordability, and job growth. Imagine that...little ol' Columbia City being Nationally Ranked! As I've mentioned before, this isn't an anomaly. It is because of the hard work and dedication of our small businesses, non-profits, our team at the City, and of course, our residents! The tagline that we chose in 2015 is truer today than ever. We are truly Building a Future Together and people across the country are noticing. But this isn't a time to be resting or sitting back. No friends, this is a time to be Bold and courageous. It's a time to double-down on our success and attractiveness for current and future generations of residents. And that is exactly what we plan to do.

I've mentioned for quite some time that we have a need for a long-term, sustainable source of revenue for building out Eagle Park. When looking at options that takes advantage of our location, is not mandated on residents, and doesn't penalize employment, the Food and Beverage Tax checked all three boxes. This 1-cent per dollar fee is put on all prepared food and beverages sold within the City limits. That means that if you go and get a value meal at a fast food restaurant, or you sit down at a downtown eatery for a steak, this additional fee will be put onto the bill. It will not, however, be added to groceries that you purchase. Fort Wayne, Shipshewana, and many other cities and towns across Indiana have already instituted this tax as a mechanism to fund quality of life projects. Further, there is an included 20-year sunset provision that mandates the tax goes away after 20 years. The Food and Beverage Tax

has the support of many local restaurateurs, the Whitley County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, and Columbia City Connect. It takes advantage of our location on US 30 with many visitors helping to pay for Eagle Park. Further, it is reciprocal, where the more amenities we build in the Park, the more people we will attract. The more people we attract, the more people will eat and the more income we will be able to invest in Eagle Park. I am thankful for the Indiana General Assembly for supporting this effort and look forward to the Common Council taking up the matter in the near future.

Connecting people together is a hallmark of our community. It is what keeps us tight-knit, unified, and hospitable. This summer, thanks to the work of my Executive Assistant Ashley Buckles, we will be rolling out a Summer in the City program that provides an activity each weekend for families to enjoy throughout the summer months. With First Fridays, Third Thursdays, Old Settlers Days, the JA Car Show, the Farmers Market, and so many other events occurring in the City throughout the Summer months, this is yet another opportunity for residents to get out and enjoy all that our City has to offer. From Family Bingo Night and a Film and Float, to the Munch and Mingle and Public Safety Fair, residents of all ages will have plenty to do this summer while enjoying the company of their neighbors.

And speaking of neighbors, we are working on a Neighborhood Captains program to continue the hospitality we all know and love. The idea behind the concept is that a family or two in each neighborhood -which is loosely defined – will be “captains” who welcome new residents to the neighborhood, and work to keep everyone informed of what is happening in the city and in their micro-community. When new residents move into town, we need a friendly and welcoming face to be the welcome mat for our growing community. More information on this is coming.

We continue working with the City Plan Commission and County Plan Commission on the expansion of our ETJ or Extra-territorial Jurisdiction. The ETJ is NOT annexation, but rather planning territory. It allows the City to plan for future infrastructure and housing growth that may occur outside our City limits. As you may know, it has been over 50 years since this territory was expanded. Further, our City Limits have hit our territorial limits on two sides, mainly because it has been 50+ years. I am hopeful that the City and County can work together in a positive way to help all residents prepare for whatever the future may hold.

One other partnership project between the City and the County is the construction of a Sewer Line on 100S. The project is important for future development in the County Redevelopment’s TIF (tax-increment financing) district. It is important to the City to expand our customer base and provide a connected access point for sewer along this

stretch of road. This isn't the first, nor is it the last time that we will work together to tackle tough economic development projects for the growth of jobs and wages in Whitley County.

One major issue that no one like to tackle is City utility rates. This City has a history of waiting until we are in dire straits, and then tremendously increasing rates in one fell swoop. After our Electric Rate adjustment a few years ago, the Council and I determined that it made more sense for us to review utility rates yearly, then systematically address what needs addressed. The City is mandated by law to maintain decent cash reserves, and to ensure that no utility is operating in the negative. Make no mistake, this topic is never an easy one to discuss. But by reviewing the utilities yearly and determining minor changes each year, the City is being so much more sensitive to the financial concerns of residents, while also ensuring that no surprise 25% increase will occur again. In the very short future, our Council will be considering a 2% across-the-board increase in utility rates as a response to a dramatic uptick in supply costs. To give you some perspective, here are a few examples of what our city departments are experiencing: Concrete costs up 8%, Soil costs up 10%, Asphalt costs up 11%, Wastewater pumps up 23%, Chlorine costs up 80%, Meter bases up 133%, and transformers up an average of 200%! We are continually working to find areas to conserve and stretch each dollar in order to keep any increase at a minimal level to

our customers. But at the end of the day, these cost-increases continue to eat into any potential cash reserves and certainly, into the bottom line of the departments.

Now something a little more fun to discuss: a test kitchen. We are actively working with Whitley County Consolidated Schools and Ivy Tech to create a new Test Kitchen for our aspiring culinary entrepreneurs. The concept would utilize space within the Marshall Community Center and provide opportunities for chefs, restaurateurs, and food manufacturers to hone their craft in a commercial kitchen, while utilizing the wrap-around services of business plan development and customer analytics. For many years, we've discussed the need to continue growing our culinary environment. This Test Kitchen provides a space for this growth to occur locally. Don't misunderstand me – we have a great group of restaurants in our community as it is. However, if we want to continue being an attractive place for current and future residents, we have to broaden our palette and encourage growth in this sector. So, it's time for you to let me know: What type of new restaurants would you support in our community? On the Poll Everywhere site, write the types of restaurants you'd want to see in the community.

So as I've mentioned before this isn't a time to sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labor. Instead, we need to be proactive in our planning and effective in our growth. You've probably heard me say this multiple times, but I have no interest to be like the Indy suburbs of Fishers, Noblesville, or Carmel. Our growth must be measured, carefully

considered, and planned for. We must finish what we start, rather than be distracted by the fads of today. We must continue to invest taxpayer and ratepayer dollars wisely in long-term improvements. Most importantly, we will accomplish big dreams together. A rising tide raises all ships and we need to make sure that all ships truly are rising as our community grows and improves.

Now before I give you the adjective that I selected that describes the State of our City, I want to see what you have in mind. So on the PollAnywhere site, give a word or two that finishes this sentence: The State of our City is....

With all that in mind, **the State of our City is Vibrant!** Vibrant is defined by Merriam Webster's Dictionary as "Pulsating with life, vigor, or activity". From economic and residential growth to community projects and expanding events, our community truly is active with life, vigor, and activity! The more we double-down on ourselves, the more vibrant we will become. This City, These People, This Mission gets me ready and excited for the future, and I hope it does the same for you. Thank you.