

State of the City Address

3/15/24

By Mayor Ryan L. Daniel

Thank you to the Whitley County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center for, yet again, hosting the yearly State of the City Address. I also want to thank the Peabody Public Library for allowing us to use this great space and the sponsors of this event for making the event possible.

Councilmembers, Businesspeople, Department Heads, Citizens, and friends, I am happy to once again provide the State of the City Address for the City of Columbia City. This speech is a way in which your local government can communicate the accomplishments and progress of our city, while outlining the goals and aspirations for our future. It is truly an honor to provide this update as your Mayor.

Before we talk about what is upcoming this year, I want to recap 2023. To say last year was a challenge for the City is a huge understatement. I thought it would be best to be forthright and honest about how last year went for me and our organization. As you are all aware, almost one year ago today, a 20-year department head was found to be embezzling money from the city. As soon as it was discovered, the Clerk-Treasurer and I brought it straight to the Indiana State Police and Indiana State Board of Accounts, asking for investigations to occur by both organizations. Since that time, both agencies have released their findings and thankfully no one else in the organization was found to be involved. The State Board of Accounts report is available at their website, in case anyone would like to see the information for themselves. Certainly, we continue to advocate for justice on behalf of our citizens and look forward to a resolution of this case by the Whitley County court

system. While I will reserve my personal feelings and thoughts on the situation for another day and time, residents can be assured that since the incident, the City has put additional checks and balances in place to ensure these types of activities don't happen again. As you can imagine, we are all ready to move on from this difficult event.

Last year was also a rough year regarding projects and pricing, as multiple projects were shelved or delayed due to skyrocketing market prices and material shortages. I mentioned in last year's State of the City Address the numerous increases in materials and supplies that the City experienced, from asphalt and concrete to water pumps and electric meters. I also mentioned that the lead times of many of these products were extraordinary. While prices are still higher than pre-pandemic levels, and lead times are still longer than expected, we are starting to see a slight softening in the materials market. Nevertheless, pre-pandemic pricing is gone and the new reality of our economy is that everything is costing more for the average consumer, company, and yes, even your local government. Providing the best service for the lowest cost continues to be our mission, yet these price increases continue to put downward pressure on cash reserves. Further, major infrastructure projects continue to be necessary for the continued upkeep of our utility systems. Two years ago, in this speech, I laid out the reasoning and rationale behind a yearly evaluation of utility costs by the Common Council because it allows us to react in a much more gradual manner, rather than past precedence of waiting until the last moment before a large rate hit was enacted. Thankfully, last year, the Council began the first of a three-year rate review to help stymie some of these cost impacts. Yes, no one likes utility rate increases, but this smaller, more measured approach is not only easier on the consumer but also helps our utility plan for future projects. One last less-than-positive

note: last year was a contract year for our trash contract. Just like with utilities, our trash contract prices were increased with the new contract – so earlier this year, we slightly adjusted our trash fees to accommodate their increase. However, I should note that compared to similar sized cities, our trash rate is in the lower half of rates across communities our size.

So now that I've outlined how fantastic and wonderful (sarcastically) 2023 was, let me transition to what is on tap for the year ahead and why this year is going to be significantly more exciting and enjoyable.

In February, we awarded a couple major bids that will jump start our construction season and move some major projects forward. Eagle Park – Phase 1 was a project that was shelved for a year due to project bids coming in significantly over the engineers estimate. I'm happy to say that in February, after some changes to the bid package, the Park Board awarded the first phase of Eagle Park to Schenkel Construction and we should see dirt moving in the next month or two. The first phase of Eagle Park's construction will include four new pickleball courts, a new skate park, a creative family swing, and asphalt improvements. This project will be supported by a Department of Natural Resources Land and Water Conservation grant, economic development income tax dollars, and our newest revenue source for Eagle Park, the city-wide food and beverage tax. I'm thankful for the Indiana General Assembly's support, the fortitude of our Common Council, and the restaurateurs across the city who were supportive of this new tax. As I mentioned last year, the food and beverage tax is a consumption tax that equals 1 cent on every dollar spent for food at our local restaurants and food trucks. This tax is not on groceries, but

rather on prepared food – meaning served with a napkin, cup, or utensil. Every dollar collected by this tax will go directly into the construction of Eagle Park, which will drive additional visitors to our restaurants, shops, and businesses. I'm thankful for the support of the Whitley County Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, Columbia City Connect, and so many others who see the vision and the need to invest in our future.

The other major project awarded in February was Phase 2 of the Westgate Subdivision Reconstruction Project. You may remember back in 2022, we took 1/3 of the Westgate Subdivision and completely remade its infrastructure with new sidewalks, storm drainage, streets, and curbs. This year, we will be doing the same thing for the Buddale Drive and Lawrence Street areas. This project is funded, in part, by a \$1 Million dollar grant from the Community Crossings Matching Grant program from the Indiana Department of Transportation and is expected to be completed by mid-fall. The third and final phase of the Westgate project is scheduled for 2026. As a reminder, Westgate was brought into the City in the mid-1990s, but outside of some water/sewer infrastructure, wasn't really given the full City treatment. These residents have been paying taxes to the City for 30 years and it's time we ensure they have the same infrastructure as the rest of our City.

One more major project is quickly coming up for bid this year, which is the Blue River Trail extension from Main Street to Chauncey Street, then Line Street to the new CCHS property. This project has literally been at least five years in the making and crosses what I call "the unholy triumvirate" which is the railroad, a state highway, and the Blue River. As you can imagine, each of these elements create a difficulty by themselves, but matched together provides a high hurdle to clear. Yet, I appreciate the continued effort by our Community

Development Director and our engineering firm, Engineering Resources, as this project finally ramps up into high gear. We anticipate this project to be let out for bid in the next month or two. If everything goes to plan....and I say that on tippy toes...we anticipate construction beginning this summer and completion to occur before the end of 2025. This project is critical to connect the CCHS/ISMS/Little Turtle Elementary School campus to our trail system, providing a safer way for students and community members to get to these schools without walking down State Road 9. The project is supported by a \$1.8 million dollar Next Level Trails grant from the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, as well as dollars by the Dekko Foundation, the Community Foundation of Whitley County, and PDQ Workholding.

Multiple utility projects are occurring this year throughout the City and even in the County. The Wastewater Department is preparing to replace the current force mains that run from the East Jefferson Street and the South Main Street lift stations. The \$1.7 million dollar project replaces 65-year-old lines, increases flow capacity, and reroutes the lines that currently run underneath the Mary Raber playground. We are also making miscellaneous improvements at the Water Pollution Control Facility to improve our system, update our facilities, and ensure a long lifespan for our equipment. Currently, we are partnering with the County Redevelopment Commission to extend city sewers along 100 South from 300 East to the West in order to allow for new business and industry to locate within their TIF district. The cost of the project will be split evenly between the two parties and is the continuation of a decades-long partnership between the City and the County RDC.

The Electric Department recently finished a 69 KV conversion project that brings better, stronger, more reliable power to our customers. The project cost the department over \$1 Million in upgrades and was necessitated by an upgrade by AEP on their transmission lines. This upgrade will allow the city to provide more power to customers into the future as our city continues to grow. The Electric Department is also currently working to replace poles and move our wires underground in numerous areas of the City's electric territory.

In the City Water/Stormwater Department, our staff have been hard at work on numerous projects already this year. First, they are finishing up a project on South Chauncey Street near Ellsworth and Spencer Streets that will eliminate a sewer smell that is coming up from the stormwater catch basins. I am confident the neighbors will be thrilled once this project is completed. It will also provide benefits to the wastewater utility as more stormwater will be diverted to the blue river, rather than flowing to the wastewater plant for processing. The department will then transition over to Eagle Park where new stormwater piping and drainage improvements will be made in preparation for the first phase of park construction, as noted earlier in my speech. They will also participate in the Westgate project, where needed, to move water lines, fire hydrants, or other infrastructure. They've been troopers this year in handling all that has come their way and I appreciate their efforts. Other projects include installing water main to the newly annexed areas of 200 East and replacing the media in the filters at the water plant.

The Street/Sewer Department projects planned for this year include installing new sidewalks on South Chauncey Street, installing ADA-accessible sidewalk ramps in Westgate, televising sewer main, managing street maintenance, providing limb and leaf pickup,

trimming alleys, digging graves, sweeping streets, and a whole host of other miscellaneous tasks that keep them busy year-round. They really are the utility players of the city doing a whole host of jobs and responsibilities to keep our community in good shape.

Regarding roads, I did want to make a note about the US 30 Planning and Environmental Linkage study that is being completed by the Indiana Department of Transportation. A PEL study is unique to INDOT in that it takes into account a LOT of public input throughout the entire process. They are currently working on the Level 2 Assessment of the study which will start to put different types of intersections onto maps throughout the US 30 corridor, which will help determining a couple of alternative plans for the current US 30 setup. Once this assessment is completed, I want to strongly encourage residents to give their feedback on the maps to the planning firm and to INDOT. Residents can sign up for alerts on the PEL Study by going to PropelUS30.com. I remain steadfast in my belief that US 30 needs to be upgraded into a freeway for the safety of residents, economic development of the city, and mobility of all involved. You can rest assured that we have had consistent dialogue with INDOT on this topic and are always advocating on behalf of our citizens and businesses.

In Human Resources, we have continued to invest in the health of our employees and, again, received awards and accolades for our wellness program. Last year we received the “Most Strategic Initiative” Award, while in the past have won “Most Employee Engagement” and other Gold and Platinum awards. We also instituted the Marshall Wellness Clinic which is an employee clinic that is in partnership with our friends at Whitley County Consolidated Schools. This year, our Wellness Committee and Safety Committee will continue to focus on ways to reduce workplace injury, elevate employee wellness, and make Columbia City an

employer of choice that attracts and retains the best talent. One challenge, however, that we are facing as your city government is the continued changes to the CDL (Commercial Drivers License) program. The Federal Government continues to try and standardize the CDL program, no matter the usage of the license. While we are all for safety, this standardization puts our water, wastewater, electric, street, and other employees at the same standard as long-haul and heavy-haul trucking companies driving across the US. You may be asking why this matters to you. The main reason residents should care about this is that the price of the CDL Training and to obtain a license has increased over tenfold, which increases the amount of taxpayer dollars leaving the city and going to feed the federal bureaucracy. I urge our Senators and Congressmen to rein in the Department of Transportation and provide carve-outs for civil servants and municipalities. Employees should be able to drive our equipment without having to jump through all the hoops and mandates of long-haul truck drivers.

In public safety, we continue to put an emphasis on training to ensure our staff are the best trained and prepared police officers, firefighters, and dispatchers possible. In the police department, we continue working to get up to full staff. This has been a years-long process, which is not made any easier when looking at wage ranges in Fort Wayne or the Indiana State Police. Yet, we continue to draw high quality applicants and attract individuals from other departments. Last year, the CCPD replaced our old shotguns, replaced our fixed site duty handguns, and revamped our detective division to better handle drug and other cases.

On the fire side, we replaced our multi-gas meters, hired two new firefighters, and replaced the station bay floors in 2023. We also participated in discussions that continue into the current year on a potential fire territory. Columbia, Jefferson, and Washington Townships, along with the city, are investigating ways to provide better fire service to the residents of our areas. More to come on this concept in the future, but, as I mentioned last year, the need to improve our firefighting capabilities is crucial to the safety and wellbeing of our citizens. Volunteerism continues to become more and more scarce in the fire service and we must continue to offset this decline with full-time firefighters which ensures a minimum staffing for responsiveness and saving lives. We also recently took bids of a new fire truck. As I mentioned earlier in the speech, prices are up significantly on just about everything the city purchases. A fire truck is no different. The bid for our new fire engine came in at over \$1 Million dollars, doesn't include equipping the truck, and has a lead time of over 600 days. So, we anticipate taking possession of this truck sometime in 2026. Financing options are being considered, but as you can guess this vehicle is critical to fire safety in our city.

Our Dispatchers continue to show they are at the top of their class through customer service, training, and efficiency of service. This year, we will be implementing fire response dispatching plans, replacing outdated equipment, and expanding community notifications through the RAVE System. Now, if you haven't yet heard of RAVE, let me clue you in on this great new offering from the city. For years, I've heard from the public that they rarely know what goes on in the city because they don't have Facebook. I can understand this concern and we finally found a way to try and address it. Earlier this year, we rolled out a text, email, and phone alert system named RAVE notifications. Through RAVE, residents and visitors can sign up to receive direct notifications from City Government regarding street closures,

emergency situations, utility bills, softball or baseball practices, the aquatics center capacity, upcoming public meetings, lunch with the mayor programs, and many other choices. The program allows the customer to decide what alerts they want, on what topics, and which way they want them delivered. Further, if the individual decides they want to change or adjust their alerts, it's as simple as a few clicks. SO, if you haven't signed up yet, take out your phones, click on the camera button and scan this QR code on the screen. It's a great new offering that puts information in your hands, quickly and effectively.

Moving into the Information Technology department, we continue working to fortify our fiber network ensuring security for our citizens personal data and providing top of the line communications throughout our city buildings. We installed free public wi-fi throughout the downtown area, at Morsches Park, and at the Russel and Evelyn Fahl Aquatics Center. This new amenity provides improved connectivity, invites visitors and residents to enjoy our amenities, and gives those outside the city a place to come and do e-learning, work, or messaging with friends. We anticipate expanding this service to Every Kids Dreamland and to the totality of Eagle Park within the next year.

And speaking of our Parks Department, after a tumultuous couple of months, our staff really rebounded and continued to provide great services to our citizens. New pads, logs, and other smaller enhancements were added to the aquatics center. They repainted the inside of the pavilion at Morsches Park and rebuilt the overlook at the pond. However, the biggest change at the Parks Department was the change in offices. Thanks to a generous donation by the Community Foundation of Whitley County, we were able to move our Parks Department offices from Morsches Park over to the former Foundation office on Whitley

Street. Besides a nicer setup and certainly more space, the office is conveniently located right in front of the Aquatics Center and next to Eagle Park. With future construction and the addition of amenities, this is a perfect location to accommodate the growth within our Parks system. For 2024, besides the construction of Eagle Park – Phase 1, we will be replacing some equipment, renovating the former CCHS locker rooms at Eagle Park, and bringing additional programming to our parks department.

In Community Development, we partnered with The Retail Coach to attract additional retail and restaurants to our community. After they completed the data analysis phase of their work they noted to us, “Based on the data, Columbia City is a hidden gem that should be an easy sell to restaurants looking to expand.” We’ve already had some really good connections established and I anticipate that we will start seeing some movement within the next year. The goal in this partnership, of course, is to diversify our business ecosystem while being cognizant not to attract restaurants that will draw away from local businesses. Also in 2023, we completed the Downtown Revitalization Plan thanks to the hard work of many community members and the team from HWC Engineering. The plan lays out the need for a revitalized downtown, areas to celebrate life together, and improvements to the infrastructure in our city’s core. Many residents of all ages, businesses, and stakeholders groups gave input into what they wanted to see in our downtown area. I would encourage you to check out the plan at Columbiacity.net. I am anticipating a major downtown project to occur sometime within the next four to five years. This year we are working on the voluntary annexation of the Connie Dye Property on 200 East and look forward to the development that could bring as many as 300 new homes to our community. As you are well aware, the housing market is very tight for three reasons: first, interest rates have

increased and up to this point don't show signs of declining significantly into the future. Second, the lack of available homes in our City due to the growing population continues to put a strain on the pocketbooks of potential homeowners. And third, the cost of materials (are you picking up a trend in this speech?) continues to drive home prices higher and higher. As an example, the median home value in Columbia City in January of 2020 was somewhere around \$175,000. Today, that median home value is up to around \$265,000. That price is literally above every city around us, including Fort Wayne. This data comes from Rocket Homes and Zillow. If this doesn't show the true need for a wider and more diverse housing stock, I'm not sure what would. We need more apartments, more single-family homes, more senior apartments, more affordable housing, and yes, even more high-end homes. A well-balanced community, which we strive to be, needs an all-of-the above approach to the housing market. We believe the new development on 200 East, as well as additional developments that are in the works, will help grow our housing market, help balance off the average home value, and ultimately help with property tax assessments that also continue to climb.

Under the Community Development umbrella are multiple city boards and commissions that are doing great work on behalf of our citizens and businesses. The Arts Commission began their inaugural year by completing multiple projects that enhanced the beauty and uniqueness of Columbia City. From downtown murals and painted sidewalks, to art crawls and musical performances, the Columbia City Arts Commission accomplished a lot in a short period of time. I'm excited to see the multiple upcoming projects they will be offering the City again this year.

The Housing Authority used most of 2023 to renovate the home at 301 E Van Buren Street. This is the second home remodel project by the CCHA. This was a significant investment of time and energy, but the home is now beautiful and awaiting new owners. As you may know, the goal of the Housing Authority is to improve the housing stock in Columbia City. They have multiple programs from the Owner-Occupied Rehab program to the Residential Façade Program to help residents invest in their properties, while also beautifying our city.

The Redevelopment Commission continues work on the former LML/Cardinal Grain property on South Chauncey Street. The property which was extremely contaminated has been working through a remediation plan and we believe the light at the end of the tunnel is finally nearing! Funding of the project was not from tax dollars, but instead from insurance proceeds from an insurance recovery program. Future development of the property is being considered, but I want to congratulate and thank the City Redevelopment Commission members on their steadfast support of turning one of the most blighted properties in the city into a clean and developable property. The RDC will also continue to provide façade grants to downtown businesses this year, as well as work towards beautification of the entryway into the City on South State Road 9.

The Tree Board continues to work on improving the street tree inventory, as well as maintaining our Tree City USA status. I'm proud to say that this past month, Columbia City was honored for being a Tree City USA for 30 years! This demonstrates our commitment to maintaining our urban forest.

Our Plan Commission and Board of Zoning Appeals continues work on ensuring new developments are safe, beneficial, and fit appropriately where they belong. In 2023, the city

experienced over \$55 Million dollars in estimated construction value, with 30 single family permits, 5 commercial buildings, and a variety of other construction activity. It should be noted, however, that after you consider \$35 million of that value was the County's jail project (which took place inside the City Limits), the \$20 Million figure ends up being a normal year on par with the previous 3 years. Compared to a decade ago, however, we are over double the amount of construction value than was present in 2013. Overall, we continue to be growing at a measured, but consistent pace.

Before I leave this part of the speech, I wanted to mention one other project that will be occurring this year in the city, which is Summer in the City. We will be continuing this program from last year, thanks to the hard work and efforts of my assistant, Ashley Buckles. The program will again include a dive-in movie at the aquatics center, a scavenger hunt around the city, a Taste of CC event that will be expanded this year, as well as other miscellaneous events that will bring families together and help residents enjoy Summer in our Community.

Your City Government had a rough 2023, no doubt. Yet, we continue to grow our population, our businesses, and the influence we have throughout Northeast Indiana. We are truly a leader in our region, and I get calls almost weekly from other Mayors asking how we did this, or how we get the residents to support that. My answer is always the same: our community wants to be better today than it was yesterday. That is why we've been able to do big, bold things together like build an aquatics center, expand our trails, invest in our downtown, become the second fastest growing city in northeast Indiana, attract a higher percentage of millennials than other cities our size, and rank as one of the best suburbs in

the nation. Yet, you all know me well enough to know that we don't rest on our past successes. We aspire to a brighter tomorrow. So, I could think of no greater adjective than that. The state of our city is aspiring. We aspire to greatness. We aspire to accomplish big goals, arm in arm. We aspire to build a community together. From businesses to non-profits, and from our residents to even our visitors, this community has shown time and again that we aspire to be better today than we were yesterday, and better tomorrow than we are today. Businesses aspire to grow their clientele and create a more attractive building. Nonprofits aspire to serve the greater good and a wider audience to truly address the needs of our citizens. Residents aspire for nicer properties, better jobs, and a safer environment to raise a family. And your city government aspires to provide the best service at the lowest price, while making life better for everyone. Make no mistake friends, if we continue to invest in ourselves; better jobs, more restaurants, more shops, and a growing community is what we can expect. Time and again, Columbia City has proverbially "punched above our weight class" beating our neighboring cities in category after category. What is our secret sauce, one might ask? It is its people. It's the Jackson Longenbaughs of our community who started the piggy bank pals program as a kid to help kids with health challenges. It's the Shawn Ellis's who see fellow residents struggling with addiction and says, "I will step up and serve". It's the Gary Bird's who sees veterans' gravestones falling into disrepair, and decides to gather people to restore honor and respect back to their final resting place. It's the Heart of Gold award winners who invest in their neighbors, and It's the camaraderie that is shown between citizens at every First Friday event. The list could go on and on, but the point is that our community is special. Our community is blessed. And our community is strong because of its people. That is why we are aspiring for greatness.

We aren't accepting of past precedence or the "same 'ol, same 'ol". We don't believe that good enough is good enough anymore. We've shown time and again that we can accomplish big, scary goals together. I'm excited for the future of our community and the direction we are heading. Sure, challenges are still on the horizon and battles continue to be waged, but I have faith and confidence that the projects we are building now will provide tremendous quality of life benefits for current and future generations. The State of our City is aspiring, and I hope you will join me as we shoot for greatness and continue leading our city into a very bright and prosperous future. Thank you and may God Bless you.