

City Officials, Business members, residents and friends, thank you for attending this State of the City Address. Columbia City has come a long way over the past 15 years, and we continue to work together to make our community better today than we were yesterday and better tomorrow than we are today. From infrastructure investment and quality of life improvements to the challenges and concerns of the future, I am confident that our community is well-positioned for steady, focused growth long into the future. So, let's get into it!

Multiple infrastructure projects were completed in 2025 including the Jefferson and Main Street Forcemain project and the Dystor Cover replacement. The Jefferson and Main Street Forcemain project reroutes the flow of sewage from under the Mary Raber playground to underneath streets and alleys, making these new lines more accessible and direct from lift station to lift station. The Dystor cover is the bubble-looking cap on the city's digester tank which processes solids in the wastewater treatment process. The cover had served dutifully past its life expectancy, so the former cover was removed, the digester was cleaned and lined, then a new cover was installed. The total of both projects added up to over \$3 Million Dollars of investment and are crucial to improving our wastewater infrastructure.

For the Water Department, we replaced old drinking water pipes on North Park Drive, installed new chlorine pumps, and replaced the filter media at the water plant. Certainly, we have heard the concerns regarding discolored water coming out of the faucets. This can be caused by multiple factors including the broken well that we rebuilt this past year, pressure changes within the pipes due to water main breaks, excess iron in our water supply, or other projects within the water department. As a reminder, we test our water daily. Every drop of drinking water that goes into the system starts underground in an aquifer full of minerals and sediment. Our wells pump the water into the water plant for cleaning, which processes out as many minerals as possible prior to distribution to homes and businesses across the city. I want to stress that if residents are experiencing discolored water, they should call city utilities immediately, rather than first posting

on social media. We want to partner with residents to figure out problems that may be occurring in the system. Interestingly, some (although not all) of these discolored water issues are coming from the home plumbing and not from the city's water system, based on our department's on-site responses to calls. This slide, for instance, shows the picture that was posted on social media versus the water we pulled directly from that meter pit when we arrived.

While some minor water main replacement projects, like Jeffrey Drive, are on the schedule for 2026, the main project over the next decade will be the replacement of lead water lines throughout the city. This unfunded mandate by the state and federal government will replace lead service lines both from the water main to the meter, as well as from the meter to the home. We are thankful for the assistance from the G-L-O team (Get the Lead Out) as they help us identify where these lead lines are and work on a plan to replace them in a cost-effective and expedient manner.

Our Electric Department has worked diligently to upgrade our electric lines and move the most vulnerable lines underground for improved reliability and safety over many years. In 2025, they replaced over 100 electric poles that tested bad, improved infrastructure in the rural areas of our territory, and accommodated the growth of business and residential areas in our city. This year, the Electric crews will continue working on replacing bad poles, remove the former fuel pumps at the municipal services facility, and focus on additional reliability and safety improvements for all involved.

In 2025, the Street Department paved 44 segments of streets across the city, equaling almost 7 and a half miles of new asphalt, and replaced 35 sidewalk ramps throughout the community. This \$1.5 Million dollar investment into our infrastructure was made possible in part by the Community Crossings Matching Grant program from the Indiana Department of Transportation. We will be applying in the next few months to this same grant program for the third phase of the Westgate Reconstruction Project, which will focus on the final third of the Westgate subdivision. This project will rebuild the roads, add sidewalks and curbs, while improving drainage. This third and final phase, added with the previous two phases, represents a \$4.7 million dollar investment in the Westgate Subdivision over the past 6 years, with roughly 70% of those dollars coming from state grants. The street

department also poured a new 400-foot walk path in Columbia Shores in 2025 and improved multiple sidewalks and ramps in the Eagle Glen subdivision. While winter appears to be on its way out, we are already preparing for the 2026-27 winter season. I'm excited to say that we will be moving our trucks to spreading all salt on the streets, rather than the salt/sand mixture from past years. While we'll still have some salt/sand mixture in the barns, ready for those very low temperature events and alley ways, the vast majority of snows will be treated with just salt. This change in process will eliminate a large amount of debris that ends up in our stormwater system and significantly improve the lifespan of the drains throughout the city. It will also make sure that the remnants of winter storms – sand and debris on sidewalks – will be significantly lower than in past years.

In 2025, the Parks Department reorganized the staffing structure, refocusing our commitment to not just sports, but the totality of recreation for our citizens. This change allows our department to accommodate the broader need for entertainment and exercise, across all demographics of our community. While the parks of yesteryear focused primarily on youth sports, we have actively worked to widen how our community sees the parks and recreation department. Providing animal enrichment programs, adding a new and highly used skatepark in 2025, as well as a family swing set and new pickleball courts are just a few ways in which we can engage a wider audience in our parks system. The design for a new Amphitheater at Eagle Park is well underway with construction to hopefully begin by year's end. With a multi-use concept, plenty of green space, and in-ground seating, this facility will truly set Columbia City apart from other communities in northern Indiana. Our target date for the first performance at this fantastic venue is August of 2027. We also inherited the former FOP/Boyscout Lodge at Every Kids Dreamland. The maintenance crew will be making some minor improvements to the facility, including adding public restrooms, replacing the bathroom trailer that has stood for almost a decade, and providing a better space to accommodate parties and events. This upgrade will allow for more usage of our parks areas and enhance the programs we can provide to the public. We also opened the new segment of the Blue River Trail, which connects the CCHS, Indian Springs, and Little Turtle school campus to the community via a walking and bike path. This project has tremendously improved the safety of students who walk to and from campus each day, as well as the numerous athletic teams who utilize this path for training.

It also provides a safe pathway for residents of all ages to access the performing arts and athletics that are held at our schools.

I also want to mention the construction of a new dog park at Morsches Park. For many years, residents have yearned for a place to let their dogs run wild and free. So, this year, we will be opening a new dog park for residents and their furry pals. Now, I want to caution you, however, that a dog park is not just a free-for-all, but rather a strictly regulated area that ensures all pets and owners have a safe and enjoyable environment. There will be some sort of permit fee to enter, and the owners will need to agree to a code of conduct. However, we are excited about the opening of this facility, which is expected to be later this year. Whether individuals own one dog or 6-7 dogs (that one is for you, Aria), we believe this amenity will be a welcome addition for many of our pooch-loving residents.

In Community Development, we saw multiple new businesses and restaurants choose to open in Columbia City. Multiple other businesses expanded in 2025 to provide a wider array of services to our community. While small business is certainly tough in these days of online retailers and amazon, we still have courageous entrepreneurs that are investing in our community. We appreciate both the new and the long-lasting businesses of our community who are the building blocks on which our city flourishes. Multiple new housing developments are currently in the works for 2026 and beyond, balancing growth while keeping our small-town values. 2025, however, was not a banner year for growing our housing stock. From the lack of available land to the skyrocketing price of building materials, numerous issues continue to create a housing crunch in our community. Only 20 single-family housing permits were issued in 2025, compared to the average over the past 5 years being over 33 homes per year. I am hopeful that the additional housing stock in development – both single-family and multi-family – will create additional opportunities for current and future residents as we build a future together.

Other projects that are moving forward include finally starting up the test kitchen, creating a DORA – Downtown Outdoor Refreshment Area, finishing the update to our comprehensive plan, and working through the redevelopment of multiple properties throughout the city.

On this note, I want to say a quick word about the former Whitley County Jail. When we were given the Jail by the County Commissioners, we had a big, bold vision on how we could redevelop that space to be an important cornerstone for our downtown. Unfortunately, due to a high price tag and property tax cuts made by the state legislature, we had to abandon this project and seek a different path for the facility. Please know, however, that the city's full intent is to find a partner who can transform this facility into something that contributes to our downtown revitalization and adds value to our residents. This will not be a property that goes to the highest bidder but rather will be the selection of someone who believes in, cares about, and wants to add to Columbia City's core.

As we think about our downtown area, we look ahead to a future transformational project that will occur in the next few years. We are currently in the preliminary stages of planning for a downtown revitalization construction project that will target the first two blocks of West Van Buren, and the North and South 100 blocks of Chauncey Street. This project will include a refresh of our downtown core, with above ground and underground infrastructure being the primary focus, yet enhancements of lighting and design elements will also be included. We are working on grant opportunities to lessen the cost of this project and hope to see it come to fruition in 2028. Since we are on the topic of downtown, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the recent huge accomplishment by Columbia City Connect who are now a Nationally Recognized Main Street Organization! This is a huge deal, as they are just one of twenty-one Indiana communities with this recognition, and around 800 communities across the nation. I am so proud of Columbia City Connect's efforts to not only receive this national recognition, but also their focus on continuing to grow and enhance our downtown area.

In the public safety sector, the Fire Department has ordered a new Fire Engine, and we are currently preparing for its anticipated arrival this summer. This \$1.2 million dollar piece of equipment replaces a 20-year-old engine, which is crucial to the safety of residents inside and outside our city. As with all things, this engine's price tag is exceedingly high, basically costing double the price of the one we purchased in 2015. This is just another example of the price increases we've experienced as a city since Covid. We also added a new position to the fire department by welcoming Captain Toby Fralick to his new role as Deputy Fire Chief. This is important as we hit

our highest run total in recorded history last year at 873 runs. Keep in mind these runs aren't only fire, but also medical, fluid leaks, odor reports, and assisting other agencies. In 2026, we will be upgrading our radios to provide better interoperability among our public safety departments not only in Whitley County, but across the state.

The CCPD replaced all in-car computers, replaced multiple rifles, and changed shift schedules in 2025 in order to provide better coverage for residents. In total, our officers provided services on over 14,000 calls last year. We also provided a handful of public safety courses for residents and businesses, updated malfunctioning tornado sirens, received multiple grants focused on reducing drunk driving and seatbelt violations, updated internal equipment, and started the Code Enforcement Coordinator position. The CEC, in short, focuses on proactive and reactive enforcement of ordinance violations as a way to ensure our community is not only safe, but also clean and maintained. For many years, the city has struggled with how best to enforce ordinances like unkept properties, unsafe porches, and the storage of junk vehicles. By providing a code enforcement coordinator, the city can come along-side the property owner to clean up the property, while acknowledging the needs and challenges of the individual. On this note, the CEC will be working to update our minimum housing standards ordinance with the Planning and Building Department this year. This ordinance has been in place, without updates, since 1965 and is woefully out of date. I look forward to seeing a new ordinance that incorporates the new building codes and ensures a safe, sanitary, and secure living environment for all.

In 2026, the Police Department will work on additional public safety classes and engagements, review potential expansion opportunities, and work to update all department policies. Dispatch, meanwhile, will work to implement fire response plans into their system, update some minor areas of the dispatch center, and work towards enhancing the capabilities and capacity of our dispatchers to improve responsiveness to citizens.

For our information technology department, we set up many new cameras throughout the city to monitor city properties, replaced hardware and software, and extended the city's free public wi-fi network to Eagle Park. This now means that downtown, Morsches Park, the Aquatics Center, Every Kids Dreamland, and Eagle

Park now provide free wi-fi to the public. Over the next year, we will continue to modernize our network, increase reliability, and enhance our city website to make it easier to navigate for all residents and visitors.

This year, we mark the 250th anniversary of the United States of America. The start of this Semiquincentennial Celebration took place on June 14th, 2025 and will run into and past July 4th of this year. Many different events will take place as our city celebrates the birth of our nation. Yet none will match the historical nature of the opening of the time capsule that has sat in front of City Hall for the past 49 years, 8 months, and 9 days. To put this into perspective, the time capsule has been in front of City Hall for approximately 435,600 hours, or 18,150 days, or 596 months – depending on which way you want to count it. That’s a long time! We will celebrate the Semiquincentennial by opening this 50-year-old time capsule and closing a new time capsule on July 4th, 2026 on the Courthouse lawn. I hope you will join us for the historic occasion!

A couple other notable projects for 2026 include updating the pole-hanging Christmas lights on Main Street, INDOT replacing the bridge decks on US 30 at Morsches Park, and the creation of a historic district in our downtown. We’ve been able to do all of this while continuing to decrease our tax rate, which is now down to the lowest city property tax rate since 2008. In fact, our property tax rate for the city is in the bottom 25% of all city property tax rates in the state of Indiana!

Last year I mentioned that Senate Enrolled Act 1, the property and income tax reform bill, was going to create issues down the road for our residents. Thankfully, the legislature started taking steps this year to shrink the impact on local communities. While we have a long way to go to ensure we can provide city services that our public demands, I’m grateful to our legislators for hearing our concerns and making some improvements. I am hopeful that even more improvements will be made in the legislative session next year. This year, I have the honor of serving as the AIM – Accelerating Indiana Municipalities – President, which is an organization that serves all cities and towns in Indiana. I’ve had a front-row seat to the workings of the statehouse this legislative session, and I’ve advocated on your behalf not just to our local legislators, but to legislators across the state. While there are always a large batch of bad bills that take away your voice and give special treatment to specific industries, this year seemed to be full of these kinds of bills.

Thankfully, we were able to effectively kill a lot of these bad bills, while advocating for good public policy.

As AIM President, I've gotten to interact with many other communities across the state, both big and small. I've heard their challenges and victories. I've toured their communities, while seeing their growth or decline. Yet I'm always happy to come home. These trips outside our community have bolstered my outlook for our city. Where some communities are waiting for a miracle, we are proactively recruiting new housing developments and commercial properties. While other cities rest on their laurels, we are actively planning and anticipating the future. It is clear to me that Columbia City is unique and special, not because of what we do, but because of who we are.

With all this being said, it's no wonder that our community continues to punch above its proverbial "weight class" for populations growth, safety, and quality of life. For this reason, the State of our City is **Advancing**. We are advancing the goals and ideals of our community, while keeping a keen eye on maintaining the small town feeling and personal connectivity. We are advancing our city into the future by investing where it matters most – the lives of our residents. From the expansion of utilities to the construction of unique amenities, Columbia City is a leader in Northeast Indiana. Few months go by without a fellow mayor, council member, or commissioner reaching out to me, from another community, asking how we did something or what they could do to replicate our progress. Please don't see this as being about me, but rather that our collective focus and shared responsibility has made our community what it is today. We are advancing the lives of our people, the businesses that invigorate our city, and the organizations that ensure no one gets left behind. I'm thankful for all that you've done individually and collectively to help advance our community and I'm confident that with focused leadership, stable partnerships, and a collective motivation, our community will remain on a path to greatness long into the future.