

State of the City of Columbia, Missouri

Presented by City Manager William H. Watkins

June 21, 2006

To Mayor Hindman and members of the City Council:

It is an honor to discuss the well-being of Columbia with you. As required by our City Charter, the City Manager has a yearly duty to submit to the Council a statement of recommendations which will be of benefit to the City and to **let you know** about the state of affairs in the community. For me, this is more than a legal requirement. It's an opportunity to share my perspective on the City's progress and its possibilities. It's an opportunity to share ideas for new initiatives that we'll be discussing with the City Council at its annual retreat later this week.

I also want to use this forum to thank a man who did so much to lay a strong foundation for this community...former City Manager Ray Beck. Ray was an excellent steward of this asset we call "Columbia." His work was all about making our town a "full-service city," one that is virtually unmatched in Missouri or the Midwest.

Our current condition and the attainment of last year's accomplishments are due, in large part, to Ray's steady direction. I am pleased to report that Columbia has a growing population, a vibrant economy and a strong fiscal position.

No one can replicate Ray's work or step into his shoes. But **my goal** for Columbia is to keep adding value to our asset...this place where we make our homes, raise our children and build our lives. **My belief** is that Columbia is poised to take flight, if we share a common vision. And **my hope** is that citizens and their government will be proud champions for Columbia and its future.

The central city, including downtown and surrounding neighborhoods, contains our genesis...**our original public asset**. The place where we're standing today is part of the Columbia established in 1826, after settlers decided that Smithton was not a healthy place. You don't neglect your roots, **and you don't diminish your asset**.

I see a center City where unique businesses thrive in a lively downtown...where the public and private sectors make long-term capital commitments...where new investment reaches into older neighborhoods. City government has the capacity to add value here, and I will urge the Mayor and City Council to aggressively pursue this course.

Over the last few months, I've often posed this rhetorical question: "What does Columbia want to be when it grows up?" **Anyone who has helped a son or daughter take flight** knows the challenge of finding the answer. When poised for change, both communities and individuals need critical information.

We need to examine our aspirations...Do they make sense for us? We need to look at ourselves in context...What's happening in the world around us, and how do we compare? We don't live in a vacuum. We need facts that help lead us to reasoned choices.

And we need support from others. I see a Columbia where an inclusive community visioning process creates a public consensus of what is important to us. Other communities have shown that a broad-based, shared vision helps answer the question about grown-up aspirations. It can generate a set of core values that marks Columbia as a very special place.

You could say that **I am one of Columbia's official champions.** And I'm not just saying this because of my position. It would be impossible, after living here and working for the City for so many years, not to feel an immense pride in what we have. Let me take a moment to thank the Mayor and Council members, our City employees, the volunteers who serve on City boards and commissions and all those who give their best every day. You are the people who make things work.

I see a Columbia where **everyone** wants to be a champion for the community...where open communication leads to mutual credibility and trust between citizens and their government. Where, even though people may disagree with some of government's decisions, they still choose to support Columbia's cause because they know that the process is fair. I will continue to make a personal commitment to improving the connections between citizens and government and among those who work within City Hall.

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Fiscal Year 2007 starts next October 1, but we are in the final stages of preparing the budget, our blueprint for action, which the Council will begin publicly reviewing in just a few weeks. Let me speak briefly about my priorities and initiatives for the next fiscal year. Because they add exceptional value to community assets, they deserve special emphasis.

Asset: Community Visioning and Planning

For me, Stephen Covey's perspective on management and leadership sums up the link between visioning and planning. Covey said that:

"Management is efficiency in climbing the ladder of success; Leadership determines whether the ladder is leaning against the right wall."

It makes no sense to quickly get up the ladder if it doesn't take us where we need to go.

It's important to have solid data on population projections, income and education levels, age distribution and housing needs. Our vision may be driven by hopes, but planning and implementation must be driven by data. We owe citizens a planning process that points to "the right wall" with accurate facts and reasonable forecasts. In the upcoming year, we'll prepare that data.

Asset: Energy

Columbia will continue to add renewable energy sources, most probably including landfill gas and wind, to its energy portfolio. It is urgent, however, that the City does whatever it can to assure that its electric system remains safe and reliable and that it maintains some level of independence from volatile energy markets. Our ability to enter into cost-efficient partnerships and contracts is critical to serving homes, businesses and institutions. During the upcoming year, we need to complete our community dialog as to the best way to accomplish this.

Asset: Basic Infrastructure

Citizens want better roads and traffic flow. Voters approved initiatives to improve water, public safety, streets and sidewalks. Their message is clear, but sometimes our response is not. The City will redouble its efforts to strengthen a coordinated planning process aimed at bringing these threads

together.

Asset: Central City and Downtown

We have two exceptional opportunities before us. The first is a major renovation of City Hall. The Daniel Boone Building has been a downtown landmark since it was built in 1917. This building, now the focus of our local city government, needs to continue to be a prominent landmark we are proud of. I strongly believe that local government has a stewardship responsibility to maintain this and all of our buildings in sound condition.

If we proceed, this investment will add significant value to the downtown area; will provide safe, decent working conditions for City employees in a central, accessible location; and will take care of our office space needs for many years. Office space is a cost of doing business, and we can and should accomplish this without asking for a tax increase.

The second opportunity is particularly exciting and initiates a joint planning partnership involving the City, the University of Missouri and Stephens College. This planning partnership will coordinate public and private development in a corridor between Providence Road and College Avenue.

For the first time, these entities will coordinate work to keep the boundaries we share vibrant and to provide locations for special opportunities. A new, joint non-profit development corporation can allow the partnership to implement projects and take advantage of state incentives. We can complete our planning efforts this year and be better prepared for new initiatives next year.

Asset: City Employees

Our workforce is City government's greatest asset. Our employees are committed to public service but, even with that level of excellence, we must add value to meet future challenges.

In a relatively short time, I think we'll see a significant number of long-tenured, high-experience employees leave our workplace. This trend already has begun. The City must develop strategies to attract a new generation of workers, with a very different set of expectations, into public service.

While preparing for this shift, we must develop an organization that instills internal coordination as a public service value. Faulty communication and inefficiency are what citizens dislike most about bureaucracies. This year, we must initiate a workforce planning and development program.

Asset: Local Environment

Citizens treasure Columbia's natural areas and expect development to be balanced by reasonable preservation. I think we need to assess and catalogue the natural treasures we have, to identify the stable and vulnerable areas and to make this part of the City's regular planning process. We should begin this work in 2007.

And we treasure our parks, but our recreation fields are at capacity. Columbia needs a new, regional park to accommodate sports and family uses – a "Cosmo" park for the next generations. Park development on this scale takes a long time, and we need to start work now if we want to add exceptional value and another jewel to our environmental assets.

Asset: Our Local Economy

Last, but arguably most important, we must insure our local economy remains vibrant and robust, both short- and long-term. We should continue our support of Discovery Ridge and the University's business incubator. We should maintain a business climate where new, 21st Century jobs **for all our residents** can come and grow.

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When I think of Columbia, I like to recall the words of naturalist John Muir. He said, “When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world,” He was so right.

Geographically, Columbia is in the middle of things. It’s a major crossroads attached to the rest of the world through learning, transportation, culture and the economy. I believe that what makes Columbia particularly special is that we are a community of optimists, attached to each other... neighbor-to-neighbor...interest-to-interest.

We also are strongly attached to our history and our tradition, but we’re feeling the tug of the future. As your City Manager, it is my honor to serve you at this time of decision. My door is open to you at any time.

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