

State of the City of Columbia, Missouri

Presented by City Manager Bill Watkins

June 6, 2007

Hello. I'm Bill Watkins, and it's my pleasure to serve as Columbia's City Manager. This morning's discussion will provide an update on the state of the City of Columbia.

As required by our City Charter, the City Manager has a yearly duty to submit to the Council a statement of recommendations which he or she believes will be of benefit to the City and to let you know his or her opinion of the state of affairs in the community.

This is my second "State of the City" address and, as last year, I'll take this opportunity to share my perspective on the City's progress and its possibilities. The bottom line is: I am "bullish" on the future of Columbia and our local economy.

But I've got to admit, this year I'm balancing my optimism with a big dose of prudence. When we discuss emerging issues with the City Council at its annual retreat later this week, we will be very focused on holding our own in the coming fiscal year.

Instead of proposing many new programs or initiatives, I will stress the importance of handling what already is on the City's plate. Be assured...it rivals anything you pile on at the all-you-can-eat buffet.

Last year, I made a commitment to improve City government's ability to communicate with citizens, plan for proper development and coordinate our work internally and externally. These still are my core values, and they guide my recommendations to the Council.

I also said that we would direct public resources to seven community assets:

- Our vision and planning processes;
- Energy;
- Basic infrastructure;
- The central city and downtown;
- City of Columbia employees;
- The environment; and
- The local economy.

The decisions and investments we've made are paying off. The people to thank for this progress include a courageous Council that chewed through issues; citizen volunteers who serve on City boards and commissions; a City workforce that responded to policy directions; and a passionate public that demanded the best outcomes for tax dollars.

Let's briefly review some of those investments...

Community Visioning and Planning Assets

Last summer, we launched “Imagine Columbia’s Future,” an ambitious visioning process to chart a flight path for this community. Because we need to be sure our collective ladder is leaning against the right wall before we head in any direction, we said we would prepare the data and reasonable forecasts needed to enhance the vision process.

Since then, I’ve learned that visioning is not a project or a process...it’s a way of life! The hundreds of people who are participating are model citizens. Thanks to all of them for sharing their passion, knowledge and commitment.

Let me acknowledge Dianne Drainer, Jeff Williams and their talented committee of people who are facilitating discussions with 13 citizen topic groups. Those groups are made up of hundreds of citizen volunteers who care very deeply about Columbia’s legacy for the next generations.

I look forward to reading their report and working with them and the City Council to make the community vision a reality. Implementing the vision should be one of our highest priorities in the coming years.

In September, our citizens will have one more opportunity to review the work of the topic groups and choose the priorities that best reflect their own visions. Remember...there is a direct link between this plan and the hopes and dreams in your household.

As we implement that plan as expeditiously as possible, we need to use the best data that we have. A technical advisory committee connected to visioning produced an extensive fact book and “snapshot” of Columbia that’s now on our website.

New master plans for sewers and sidewalks were adopted this year, and we are working on master plans for transit and mixed refuse. At the Council retreat, we’ll propose starting an update of our airport and transportation plans. All of this data will support implementation of the community vision.

Energy Assets

I am pleased to report that the value of our community energy assets keeps on growing. Much of this progress is driven directly by voters.

The City of Columbia already exceeds voter-approved targets for renewable energy resources. We’re the first Missouri city to have part ownership in a wind farm. Assuming the Governor signs Senate Bill 54, our existing landfill gas capacity will increase as we compost yard waste in the landfill to produce more methane gas for “green” electric energy.

Last year, voters approved by a strong majority a \$60 million bond issue to upgrade the City’s electric transmission and distribution system. These projects include poles, wires, transformers and other unattractive things, but they make our system more reliable.

Although I hoped we would have gotten farther with our public dialog on increasing our relative energy-independence, we have not. With the help of a consultant, the Water and Light Advisory Board and Water and Light Department are reviewing this issue to look at all our options, including energy conservation. This is a discussion that should continue even as we make advances, and it will be a topic at the Council’s retreat.

Our energy goals continue to include reliable, safe, adequate, environmentally responsible electricity at competitive rates. We periodically conduct our own internal cost studies and rate designs, but this year we’re using an independent consultant to give us a totally objective, professional view, open to

public scrutiny.

Since every kilowatt counts in this game, we have forged partnerships in coal-fired plants that use new technology to minimize pollutants. We offer a number of energy conservation programs to the community, and we will start working with citizens who want to produce their own solar energy.

Basic Infrastructure Assets

Here, again, voters set the pace when they approve tax initiatives and bond issues. We made commitments to improve our water system, public safety, streets and sidewalks. I said last year that we would strengthen a coordinated planning process to bring these threads together.

Not only are projects rolling out on schedule. We also are developing a stronger internal culture that favors getting together to talk about things...together...before we start laying concrete or bricks or sod.

And we like these internal discussions so much, that we're talking to more people outside City Hall. We're even asking for input, in the form that's most convenient for you.

I feel that I can portray this a bit humorously now, because it's something that makes sense to most of the rest of the world. It took us awhile to fully see that communication, cooperation and coordination are in the public interest. Now that it's becoming a common practice at City Hall, we can demonstrate progress.

There are about 14 Columbia road projects and a salt storage facility in design, bidding, survey or construction stages. These include improvements in both established and developing areas.

We're also making headway in our construction partnerships with MODOT. Nothing will make me happier than to eventually see gardens of orange cones at West Stadium Boulevard, at the Gans Road interchange, on Highway 763, Scott Boulevard and at other key places where MODOT and the City work together.

Fire Station No. 9, approved by voters and located at Providence and Blue Ridge, will enhance public safety in north Columbia. The Council recently approved a design contract that will incorporate "green" features and LEED (Leaders in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.

And, even though our open house has been rescheduled a couple times, Columbia's water treatment plant expansion project is complete and operating. This will provide the water supply capacity we need for the foreseeable future.

These are some of the big commitments we are fulfilling, in addition to continuing maintenance to roads, utilities and other pieces of basic infrastructure. Our future maintenance plans will include more capacity to remove snow and keep roads open across Columbia during snow events.

Central City and Downtown Assets

Two opportunities to add significant value to downtown presented themselves last year. The first was a set of decisions to address office space for City employees.

Previous Councils had considered major renovations to and expansion of the Daniel Boone Building. They faced two big issues: one economic and one philosophical. I felt for them.

The economics of renting office space all over town while also housing a core of employees in a big, aging, historic building tended to make sense for awhile.

The cost of the expansion and renovation needed to turn that policy around appeared to require more taxes and a public vote. Some believed, philosophically, that there could be no project without a vote. This tended to keep the rental option at the top of the list.

Last August, on the recommendation of a citizens' task force on public buildings, the Council unanimously determined that the tipping point for City Hall had arrived.

Over the long run... considering City workforce growth and rent inflation...and treating part of the financing as an internal operating expense... the Council authorized a project that will transform 8th and Broadway and be a catalyst for downtown development.

Maybe this is old news, but I want to keep the context fresh for citizens.

- We are demolishing two unsafe, inadequate buildings to prepare the construction site.
- The Daniel Boone Building will be renovated inside and out...in fact, we've already started work in the lobby in a historic, sensitive manner.
- The new wing will be visually compatible with the Boone structure.
- The project will incorporate public art, inside and out.
- The project will be LEED-certified and as energy-efficient as we can make it.
- The finished structure and plaza will complement our fleet of restored, reused City buildings in the downtown area.

Last year we completed work on the Howard and Gentry buildings over the past year. They're not just nice structures. They represent long-term relationships with the community.

The second downtown opportunity is frequently called the "Sasaki plan." Last year at this time, it was an interesting idea for assessing cultural, residential and commercial development in downtown Columbia. Today, people are kind of excited about the proposals and eager to see what's next.

The study is the result of a first-time planning partnership involving the City, the University of Missouri and Stephens College. We all have an interest because of common boundaries between campuses and public streets and sidewalks.

The planning partnership continues to involve businesses, residents and adjoining neighbors in public discussions. In a public meeting last month, we talked with state officials and economic development professionals from Springfield and Kansas City to learn how financial incentives might unlock the potential for some great projects.

To a person, those speakers said:

- You must clearly define development goals;
- You must include all stakeholders;
- You must be sure that everyone is going in the same direction;
- You must honestly assess risks and benefits; and
- You must do the research needed to attract enthusiastic investors and quality partners.

This work represents significant public investments in what some people might call "Wow!" projects...things that surprise you with their impact. But the central city is full of smaller-scale activity that is directly meaningful to the people who live in its neighborhoods.

Last March the Council adopted a sign and awning ordinance for the Special Business District. I

applaud the downtown business owners who not only decided that it was time to dismantle the canopy. They also are working to cover the scars left by demolition.

After many months of negotiating, the business owners offered a balanced approach that, in my opinion, keeps downtown signs distinctive and lively. I am pleased that the City could help with this.

We also have memoranda of understanding with two organizations that want to locate next to the ARC, or the Activities and Recreation Center at Ash and Clinkscales.

Sustainable Farms and Communities and the Columbia Youth Basketball Association will be welcome neighbors. Each is involved in fund-raising to make this central city dream come true. Finally, I want to talk about my personal definition of a “Wow!” project: the transformation of problem properties. This is the mandate of the City’s Neighborhood Response Team and part of my personal mission.

I drive these areas, and don’t like seeing broken windows. They’re slippery slopes leading to messy, unsafe and unsanitary structures. Empty run-down properties can attract people who just have no business being there and who may bring a criminal element with them.

Problem properties can emerge anywhere, but we’re concentrating most of our rehab and demolition resources into a defined “NRT area” in the central city.

Since January 1, 2006:

- We’ve spent about \$700,000 in federal funds there;
- Demolished nine structures;
- Completed 24 major housing rehab projects; and
- Finished reconstructing Hope, Hardin and Donnelly streets.

Promoting confidence and security in neighborhoods is one of the most important things we do. In my mind, it creates a sense of emotional ownership. It makes you want to keep raising your family there.

City Employees

Last year I said and continue to believe that our workforce is City government’s greatest asset. Consider these stand-out examples.

Mark Grindstaff, a supervisor in our Public Works Transit Division, responded to a call from an individual with a service dog who could not assist her at a bus stop. It was too close to a busy street, and the dog’s hearing was overpowered by traffic noise. Mark visited the site and, in a matter of minutes, agreed to move the bus stop 100 feet. Now the service dog can hear and help his companion use this City bus stop near Services for Independent Living.

The Columbia/Boone County Animal Control Division was recognized by their peers statewide for improving life for companion animals and excellence in meeting industry standards.

George Gering, a plant maintenance supervisor at the Columbia Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant, saved the public a half million dollars with his ideas for housing new centrifuge machines.

Columbia Water and Light and public safety workers who helped southwest Missouri recover from last winter’s ice storms were heralded by many communities in the area as “angels.”

Off-duty Columbia Police Officer Mike Hestir received the Fire Department’s Emergency Services

Lifesaving Award for activating an emergency response and administering CPR, saving the life of a boy's mother.

These individual acts combined with the excellent service our employees provide every day create a huge public resource. A little later I will discuss our continuing attempts to add even more value.

Environmental Assets

In my opinion, actions over the past year significantly enhanced Columbia's environmental assets. Last March the Council authorized a contract for aerial photography and image analysis, using state-of-the-art technology, that will allow us to inventory local natural resources and finally factor that information into our planning processes.

More dramatically, I am extremely pleased that the City will close on the purchase of the Crane property in September. This achieves our goal of banking land for a southeast regional park that will be comparable, in many ways, to Cosmo Park. It is a true gem whose value will only increase in the coming years.

Other new environmental assets include:

- A partnership with Boone County and the Atkins family, to develop two long-needed baseball fields at the 80-acre Atkins tract, located north of the Boone County Fairgrounds;
- New ordinances regulating second-hand smoke, commercial lighting and nuisance properties; and
- A stream buffer ordinance aimed at reducing unfiltered run-off from bare ground and other sources.

This progress is the big reason that I'm bullish on Columbia. It tells me there is a collective optimism in this community that warrants continuing investment. People are convinced that Columbia will thrive and be a welcoming place for families, business and diverse outlooks.

As a "full-service city," Columbia will continue to provide what citizens want, within available financial resources. And this is where prudence enters the equation.

It's no secret that our General Fund revenues have not kept up with our expectations of a year ago. To meet this year's budget, we have postponed some major equipment purchases and are closely monitoring our spending.

Sales tax growth usually exceeds budget, but this year it's growing at a much slower rate. Building permits are down which reflects the slowing construction economy.

Overall General Fund spending is higher than planned, due mainly to costs associated with responding to last winter's record-breaking snow.

We used more supplies, burned more gasoline, paid staff overtime, repaired and outfitted vehicles and paid private contractors.

Because we traditionally budget and spend very conservatively, we usually carry funds over from one fiscal year to the next. That carried over money helps support continuing and new programs.

Compared to last year, I expect to see less revenue carried over to FY 2008 and possibly to 2009. This affects the major policy priorities I will be able to recommend at Council retreat this week.

First and foremost, the City must continue to develop strategies to attract, hire and retain a new generation of workers, with a very different set of expectations, into public service.

This includes providing competitive salaries and adding value through career ladders and other professional development opportunities.

This year we began laying the groundwork for meaningful performance evaluations because I felt our current system was broken beyond repair. Coupled with a new approach, I recommend that the Council allow us to reward exceptional performance with sensibly-administered merit increases.

The City can and should be a significant partner in the local economy. To protect the public investment in downtown Columbia and encourage others to make commitments, I recommend that the Council:

- Formalize the City's current partnership with the University and Stephens College aimed at achieving common development goals;
- Participate in the legal entities needed to evaluate financial incentives for development;
- Enact zoning and development standards that facilitate common goals; and
- Begin planning two new parking structures that will anchor development projects.
- We should develop partnerships to insure we have appropriate acreage of prepared, "shovel-ready" industrial ground for new manufacturing employers.

The City should launch new partnerships to plan for critical local and regional infrastructure.

If we're ahead of the curve in our thinking and preparation, we can better guide our economic destiny. I recommend that the Council:

- Work closely with Boone County to extend, improve and share the costs of roads needed to accommodate continuing growth;
- In consultation with the Boone County Regional Sewer District, identify projects to include in a Spring 2008 ballot issue for water and wastewater facilities; and
- Push the envelope on airport planning and operations. I don't believe that we can be the captives of carriers that don't deliver. We must engage major stakeholders and demonstrate a commitment to improve the facility, its services and its employment base.

And I'm putting people on notice: this won't be cheap. Our airport did not reach its current state overnight, and it won't be fixed overnight.

While there are sensitivities in play, the City must engage the Boone County Fire Protection District in negotiating a new territorial agreement, and we must address local concerns relating to the Columbia Police Department.

These public safety professionals bring their hearts to their work everyday and sometimes leave a little blood and sweat behind. They depend on a high level of public trust and accountability. I recommend that the Council start working now to assure that the territorial agreement is fair and representative of the public interest, that responsibilities are clearly defined and that goals reflect current policies.

Changes are needed. While the current agreement won't expire until January 31, 2009, it must be put on-notice in July,

Chief Randy Boehm and the Columbia Police Department are working on an internal reorganization and communications plan for both up and down the chain of command. Part of this will be implemented in next year's budget.

They are re-writing their internal affairs policies to reflect best management practices, with a public progress report to be made at the July 2 City Council meeting.

The department will update it's strategic plan this fall to assure that we are getting the maximum value from police resources and that they are appropriately directed to community priorities, such as traffic control.

In my opinion, the City of Columbia not only serves the public, it is an active, civic partner. Government does not do its work alone.

I think our future will only be as strong as the enduring partnerships we forge with others, and we can look to our citizens who are involved in community visioning as a model. They are imagining a Columbia where good partners make great things happen.