

## State of the City of Columbia, Missouri:

### *Manager's Programs and Priorities for FY 2009*

**Presented by City Manager Bill Watkins - June 4, 2008**

Hello. I'm Bill Watkins and, since my appointment in 2006, it's been an honor to serve as Columbia's City Manager. This is my third "State of the City" address to Columbia citizens.

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, the citizens*, know his or her opinion of the state of affairs in the community. This traditionally occurs immediately before the City Council's annual retreat.

Retreat is a time to discuss ideas for new approaches to community issues. This year, as last, retreat will be held at the Lodge of the Four Seasons and will start at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 5 and end around noon on Saturday, June 7. The retreat is an open, public meeting. The news media and other observers are welcome to, and usually do, attend.

Two years ago in my first address, I described my personal hopes and goals for our community. Last year I said that, despite some economic clouds on our immediate horizon, I remained "bullish" on Columbia.

I still am, and I want to share my perspective with you.

The southern view from my office in the Daniel Boone Building is dominated by the University of Missouri's Jesse Hall. It's a constant reminder of one of our community's most significant and promising economic forces.

As I look west, I see Broadway as a line that, in many ways, defines very distinct experiences in Columbia. The families who live in these neighborhoods have a lot in common, but economic and other forces have not always been kind to those living north of Broadway in the central city.

If I take my eyes off the horizon and look in the area immediately around the Daniel Boone Building, I see part of the small business and commercial engine that not only creates jobs but also leaves lasting impressions of unique and friendly service. People want to do business here.

What ties all these scenes together, for better or worse, are the threads of the economy.

- At a global level, we are subject to many forces we can't control, and we're competing for resources and attention like everyone else.
- Nationally and regionally, if we're engaged in the right partnerships, I believe that Columbia can project a louder, more credible voice.

But the local level is where we lay the foundation and exert leadership. That's what I want to discuss today.

In the upcoming year, our City government financial position – which continues to be sound – does not lend itself to increased revenues.

I've told Council that this can't be the year for new initiatives or major increases in existing programs. We must focus on using existing resources more intelligently.

It's my belief that a better economy and a re-focused commitment of government resources will help create "the tide that lifts all boats." City government can't do this alone. We must creatively use the full range of both our resources and other community resources.

I believe that a coordinated and planned approach will increase the number of jobs created in Columbia, improve the likelihood of success for all families and move us closer to the vision identified by our citizens who dared to imagine the future for our community during our visioning process.

**To improve our potential to attract and retain a diverse set of employers, I propose re-directing and increasing the City's financial support for targeted economic development activity and taking a greater leadership role to bring new jobs to the region. I ask our REDI partners, the County, the Chamber of Commerce and the University to do the same.**

Over the last 20 years, our regional economic development partnership (known as REDI) has worked hard to market Columbia and Boone County to employment prospects. We've had some success, but the playing field has changed worldwide, particularly in the last 5 – 10 years.

- Manufacturing jobs, along with their relatively good wages and benefit packages, are drying up in America and morphing into opportunities for workers in developing nations.
- The low value of the American dollar overseas increases the price of imported products that come into this country.
- Energy prices are at historic highs, affecting production and transportation of goods and the consumer's interest in making purchases.
- Basic food costs are increasing as farmers command higher prices selling grain to energy producers, again hitting consumers and the food industry where it hurts.

Luckily for us, the University of Missouri has formally added economic development to its research mission. Its interest in creating commercial ventures and products for the open market is a bold shift in thinking. I am convinced that it will lead to long-term benefits for the University and for those of us who live here.

But the University's action has not happened in isolation. Other universities, such as those in the "research triangle" in North Carolina, have a longer history with this approach, and they have seen big dividends in their regions. They are active, respected players in this competitive economic environment.

Although REDI is a partnership organization, it also is a part of City government. Therefore, I recommend that we take a leadership role to restructure REDI and re-direct its efforts from emphasizing traditional business recruitment to greater support for its partnership with the University.

There is a need to identify the commercial strengths of University research, find companies that want to be associated with these ventures and then convince them that Columbia is the place to locate.

This re-direction will require new staff skills and funds to support a competitive, technology-savvy and strategically sound marketing effort.

One selling point that we lack, however, is a supply of large, “shovel-ready” industrial sites with utilities and roads already in place. Large employers quickly lose interest when communities don’t provide this kind of accommodation for location.

REDI staff recently issued a report that shows the number of businesses that chose not to locate in Columbia because shovel-ready sites meeting their needs weren’t available.

Again, it’s not something that City government can do alone. But it can – and I believe must - assume a greater leadership role in assembling and creatively using a wide range of community resources to secure these sites.

We also need to do a better job helping existing businesses, especially as they try to grow and innovate. I recommend that the City take the lead with our REDI partnership to establish a business services ombudsman in the City Manager’s office.

In addition to being the City’s direct liaison with existing businesses in danger of shrinking or, on the other hand, facing expansion opportunities, the ombudsman would work to transform our permitting process into a welcoming, coordinated, highly efficient, one-stop shop.

For many years, the business community has perceived our review and inspection processes as a black box. After receiving required Council approval, a permit application comes to City Hall...it’s reviewed and massaged by several City departments...and weeks or months later, a decision is rendered:

“Go;”

“No go;” or

“We need more information.”

In my opinion, that’s a waste of time, money and opportunity that could have been spent securing capital and creating jobs.

My intent is to break down government silos created when we don’t talk to each other or coordinate our work. I believe we can nurture a creative business environment without cutting corners or sacrificing safety.

A well-rounded economy has opportunities for everyone, and that’s a goal on which we can all agree. But good fortune is not a 24/7 thing.

Consider what the “Boone County Indicators,” developed from government data sources, tell us about our community...

- In 2006, more than 26,100 households were living at or below the poverty level
- That year, the federal poverty guideline was \$9,800 for an individual and \$20,000 for a family of four
- Between 2005 – 2006, the number of jobs in Boone County decreased from 80,272 to 77,546, about a 3.4% drop
- In that same period, the average weekly wage of a newly employed person dropped almost 8%,

from \$607 per week to \$559.

- The Central Missouri Food Bank's client load increased 28% between 2005 – 2006, to more than 20,400 families and individuals
- In Columbia, almost one-third of public school students were eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches

Although we may not see it every day, the truth is, our neighbors and friends are hurting. If they're not in stable employment situations, they're looking for help...some times in very quiet ways, impacting every resident and business indirectly.

**I believe that City government has a leadership role to celebrate with families in the best of times and help them in the worst. Therefore, I propose making a significant effort and investment to improve our ability to efficiently address health and human services issues.**

Citizens should be proud of the Columbia/Boone County Health Department and the dedicated men and women who work there. They do their best to prevent and solve public health problems and often are on the front lines responding to complaints and emergencies.

Our Health Department also partners with other health and social service agencies to identify local needs and target financial resources to local programs. It has a history of coordinating its work with Boone County, the United Way, Columbia's health care providers and others.

Last year the City alone put \$900,000 into social service programs. This not include the CARE program administered by our Parks and Recreation Department.

Thousands of citizens have been helped using this approach but, as we've seen with our traditional economic development strategies, the world has changed around us.

The demand for social supports has increased dramatically; the available resources, not so much. We literally must "work smarter" to see real, long-term results. And we must acknowledge that our mission extends beyond matters of public health.

I recommend changing our health agency's name to "the Department of Health and Social Services." Instead of focusing on individual social programs, the department and its partners will focus on people.

We will do that with data...those numbers that represent the issues and daily challenges in every household.

Our goal next year is to continue working with the University, the County, United Way and our other partners.

We will complete an assessment of local needs; implement a new community-wide information system being developed at the University; map our available assets and services; and identify best practices that could or are already working here or elsewhere. The numbers should tell us where our resources can make the biggest impact.

Certainly, one area that's commanded wide attention this year is the crime spike that's affected families, businesses and individuals.

**Citizens must feel safe and secure. Therefore, I will be directing the Columbia Police Department to further strengthen our community's approach to all law enforcement issues and**

**to come up with a strategic plan with our partners to get us there.**

Normally, I would place this responsibility on the shoulders of Chief Randy Boehm. Many of you know, however, that he is retiring at the end of this month to start a new career with University Hospital and Clinics.

So, this assignment will rest with the new police chief and his or her staff. We are starting a recruiting process to find the best match for Columbia but, realistically, it will be late this year before a new chief is on board.

As I have said in the past, my core values are good planning, good coordination and good communication. Therefore, I suggest that strategic plans and – once again – *partnerships* are the places to start. Simply put, the Columbia Police Department by itself cannot be the sole response to the crime issue.

The Police plan, in my opinion, must assess our community's public safety environment, collect reliable data, identify assets and resources and focus on people and issues. If this sounds a lot like my approach to Health and Human Services, there's a reason.

An individual or family facing intense pressure can be a convergence point for many of the needs addressed by our social and public service agencies.

I suggest that the Columbia/Boone County justice, government and education communities come together this summer to consider better coordinating all aspects of our justice system.

Can we create public safety indicators that highlight trends and guide our decision making? Can we act collaboratively to prevent crime and mitigate its effects? I believe that we can and must.

I will be happy to convene the meeting.

And let me add that effective law enforcement, like other services, comes at a cost. Plans can guide our decisions, but implementation usually requires more resources for people, equipment and support.

One area where we need to add more resources is law enforcement. Our challenge, as always, is using public dollars as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Last year was extremely tight, financially, and I don't see much relief for FY 2009. The economic conditions that reduced growth in local sales tax revenue are still with us. They're aggravated by high prices that increase the cost of doing public business.

The ideas I've proposed today re-direct and re-focus our public investments more than they create new programs with additional administrative costs.

They reflect my core administrative values and my judgment about where to use public resources... your tax dollars...to get the greatest long-term public benefit.

And they also are grounded in the community vision developed by citizen volunteers over the last two years. If you're interested in the full text of our vision plan please visit the City's website at [www.GoColumbiaMo.com](http://www.GoColumbiaMo.com).

Let me assure you that visioning already is guiding and influencing local decision making, and the

City Council will further discuss implementation at its retreat. In fact, it's the first topic on the agenda.

I believe that the proposals I've shared with you are consistent with the vision statements expressed for Community Facilities and Services; Economic Development; and Health and Social Services.

My understanding of the roots of those statements is this...

- Citizens value a safe and secure community along with equitable treatment for all;
- Good jobs, caring and compassion help even the playing field for all families;
- And, as always, you treasure Columbia's high quality of life.

I do, too, and I look forward to discussing these matters with the City Council over the next few days. Thank you for your attention and for making Columbia the treasured place that it is.