

State of the City 2021

Delivered by City Manager John Glascock May 25, 2021

Hello, I'm City Manager John Glascock. Thank you for taking the time to join me today as I deliver the 2021 State of the City address.

This past year has been incredibly difficult. Businesses have faced one of the worst economic downturns in years. Our health care providers and our hospitals were pushed to their limits. Educators faced new struggles, having to find new ways to engage students at home, and many people have lost their jobs. Each of you here today has adapted in one way or another. It has been a year of change with many firsts. We here at the City of Columbia are not immune to the challenges that have come with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of our local industries still have a long road ahead before they will be back to normal, and some will feel the financial impacts of the pandemic long into the future. Restaurants and bars have seen a dramatic drop in business during tighter restrictions. Many of them have had to make difficult decisions of cutting staff and limiting hours for their employees.

One of the hardest-hit industries in Columbia and across the country has been the tourism and hospitality industry. Hotels and other small businesses that depend on visitors struggled through the pandemic with reduced staff and drastic cuts to revenues. Hotel tax revenues in Columbia are down nearly 40% with tourism-related spending down 9%. As the economy reopens, staffing for these industries has yet to recover and some businesses are finding it hard to fill needed positions.

This year has also impacted many people's social lives. Entire companies in some instances have transitioned to working from home and many of us have spent hours behind a computer screen each day for almost a year. We've had to distance ourselves from our families and the people we are closest to.

Telling people to take themselves off mute and bumping elbows have become commonplace, but during this unprecedented time, our City employees have adapted and continue to provide services in new and safer ways. I want to thank

them for their flexibility and their dedication to our residents and community. I can not stress enough how significant the work of our employees here at the City of Columbia has been over the past year and will continue as we move further into 2021.

During much of this time, the City of Columbia had been under a state of emergency. I want that word to sink in with you: emergency! We may be used to wearing masks and video conferencing, but we cannot let ourselves forget what this pandemic really means, and what our next steps toward recovery will mean years down the road.

The definition of an emergency is “a serious, unexpected, and often dangerous situation requiring immediate action.” Our actions have been just that. When this virus began to impact our community, the Mayor and City Council were there to support the staff and we did not hesitate to make the difficult decisions that were necessary to keep our community safe. We did not step down, but rather stood and faced the threat together as a community. Now that case rates are down and vaccines are readily available in our community we need to focus on moving forward to return to some form of normalcy.

I need to stress that this pandemic is not over, but under the leadership of the Columbia/Boone County Health Department, and with the cooperation of residents and businesses, we have been able to lift the health orders. Today, more than 40% of Boone County residents have been fully vaccinated against COVID-19, and that number continues to grow. Boone County has been a leader in the state for the number of people who have begun the vaccination process.

Now, instead of searching for open slots at a local pharmacy or grocery store, appointments can be found on the day of your choosing. Staff with the Columbia/Boone County Health Department are bringing vaccines into our neighborhoods. Our local health leaders continue to educate people on the importance of vaccines, so as many people as possible are protected from the virus, and we do not have to face additional restrictions.

I would be remiss not to give a special ‘thank you’ to director Stephanie Browning and her team. The hours of work they have put in each day have allowed businesses to remain open and students to return to the classroom. Trends are moving in the right direction, signaling the health orders we have had in place, worked.

During this pandemic, many of us have strengthened partnerships and formed new ones. These partnerships proved to be instrumental in our response. As some of you may know, throughout the pandemic I met with Health Director Stephanie Browning, Matt McCormick with the Chamber of Commerce and restaurant owners. Before each health order, we talked about how restrictions would impact businesses and their employees. Together we worked as a group, we were able to come up with safe ways to allow places to stay open later and increase business. This is only one example of these types of partnerships that kept the City moving forward instead of coming to a standstill.

When I think of partnerships, I am especially proud of the services and assistance they have allowed us to provide to our citizens. The City of Columbia, Boone County, Community Foundation of Central Missouri, Heart of Missouri United Way and Veterans United Foundation created CoMoHelps. The organization has served as a resource for managing donations to support nonprofit organizations during the pandemic. CoMoHelps has granted more than 1.5 million dollars to over 40 different organizations in Boone County. That money has helped keep roofs over people’s heads, food on the tables, and helped people find new ways to make a living and more.

We will continue to help our residents who have been impacted by this pandemic, but now we need to shift our focus to recovery. In just four days we will no longer be in a state of emergency. I hope all of us have emerged with a refreshed sense of what our goals are. This year we have a much clearer picture of upcoming priorities, and where the City sits financially than when I stood before you last year. We have to begin shifting our focus toward recovery rather than reaction, and I am confident we have the tools and staffing to do that. 2021 will be a year of growth and strengthening our ability to face new challenges and expectations.

The road to recovery will be especially challenging financially to our residents and businesses, and the City is prepared to meet these challenges. We have set aside \$1.8 million for public assistance. That money will be used for housing and will provide utility assistance. The money will also be used to help our local industries strongly impacted by the pandemic. We will have a business license and health inspection rebate program and will provide reimbursements for COVID-related expenses for the hospitality industry and concert venues.

For individuals and families, there will be additional federal assistance available. The State Assistance for Housing Relief program will provide rental assistance for tenants and landlords impacted by the virus. The Low Income Household Water Assistance Program will provide assistance to low-income households with water and wastewater bills.

Going into the pandemic we anticipated the worst, but financially, we are in a much better position than we expected. The City's reserves are above the restricted target and much higher than anticipated. These funds can be used for a number of projects, but we are committed to the financial security of our employees.

In fiscal year 2022, I am proposing that city employees receive an increase across the board along with the full implementation of the current pay plan. The City has also committed to funding a wage and benefits study. This will help us ensure we pay our employees a competitive wage and proper benefits. It is the administration's priority to craft a better system that will allow employees to climb the success ladder of their careers.

Sales tax revenue is more than 2% higher than this same time last year. Property taxes have surpassed last year's total and unemployment remains low at 3%. Manufacturers are hiring to fill full-time positions paying at or above Boone County's average wage of more than \$42,000. Columbia will soon be home to a new processing plant for Swift Prepared Foods, further solidifying our place in the food manufacturing industry. This global company will bring 251 living-wage jobs to the area.

Columbia values entrepreneurship and expects to see growth occur in our business community especially amongst minority and women-owned businesses. As of April, Regional Economic Development, or REDI's Entrepreneurship Program has been working with more than 40 ventures, including 19 minority-owned businesses and 26 women-owned businesses.

During the recovery process, it is important that we continue to seek opportunities for our new businesses. It is a priority for me to ensure the money we have through the next round of federal funding will reach those who need it most. If we miss the opportunity to help those small businesses, minority or women-owned businesses, we will feel those impacts for generations to come. Our decisions now can be the difference between striving, diverse opportunities for people of all different backgrounds, or seeing those opportunities vanish for good.

Further down the road, Missouri could soon have a Wayfair tax which would help local businesses like our own to compete with online commerce. Leaders at the state level have passed legislation to the Governor's desk. Voters could adopt the tax on an upcoming ballot to help our local businesses compete with stores that are online and oftentimes out of state.

I am happy to say our Parks and Recreation department has continued to complete key projects associated with the 2015 Park Sales Tax over the past 12 months including the development of Magnolia Falls Neighborhood Park, renovations to Worley Street Park and Again Street Park in Central Columbia and the completion of renovations to the Talbert Thurston Shelter at Kiwanis Park. Our plan is to give voters the opportunity in November to vote to extend Park Sales Tax. If approved, the money would be used to renovate existing parks, trails, and facilities; enhance facilities such as the Columbia Sports Fieldhouse; continue trail projects such as the Hinkson and Perche Creek Trails, and much more.

This year staff will continue to improve infrastructure which will increase safety for our residents while expanding capacity for growth. Crews with public works will extend the roadway at Discovery Parkway, creating a major collector in an area that will continue to grow as a technology/manufacturing hub. On the south side of town, crews are continuing the Nifong Boulevard Corridor and Forum

Boulevard improvement project, adding vehicle lanes, bike lanes, sidewalks, and improving intersections. Up north, construction will be completed this summer on 3,000 feet of sidewalk along the north side of St. Charles Road from Demaret Drive to Battle Avenue, making it safer for residents and students in that area to walk and bike.

Our crews have made significant progress on improvement designs for the wastewater treatment plant and we anticipate construction beginning this year. That work will extend the facility's operational life and improve efficiency. We have also made the switch to the Pay As You Throw Program in our Solid Waste utility. Early numbers show it has encouraged residents to recycle, with less trash going into the landfill. This aligns with our Climate Action and Adaptation Plan.

We will continue work on one of our largest infrastructure projects. Earlier this month crews demolished the hangar where the new terminal will stand at Columbia Regional Airport. This project will allow us to improve the passenger experience, expand our reach, and help us become an even larger travel hub. We anticipate the project being completed in early summer next year. During the pandemic, we saw a significant dip in revenue from our lodging tax used for the terminal project, but as travel starts to rebound, there is still time to collect the money from that tax in the 23-years allotted. The City has also received \$10.7 million in CARES Act funding through the Federal Aviation Administration that will be used for the construction of the terminal.

With interest in travel growing, airlines have begun to bring flights back to Columbia Regional Airport, with additional flights daily to Dallas and Chicago. Recent research shows that many are planning to take trips this summer as attractions reopen and festivals are planned. We look forward to welcoming back visitors to Columbia and understand how critical their economic impact is to our community.

Along with infrastructure like roadways, our community consistently lists public safety as a top priority. The pandemic has changed the way we respond to things, but the Columbia Fire Department and Columbia Police Department did not allow

this to slow them down, and both departments are expanding their outreach in the community.

The Columbia Fire Department is currently looking at designs for a station that will be built on the south side of Columbia. We have also made progress on identifying land to build a new station on the east side of town. These will help reduce response times in those areas of Columbia as they continue to grow. As things begin to return to normal our crews will start actively engaging with the public again. You will begin to notice doors open to fire stations and fire trucks where the citizens are always welcome to look in. Columbia Fire is also planning to have a captain on each shift for training, safety and to keep the public informed.

This month we unveiled the Molly Thomas Bowden Neighborhood Policing Center in north Columbia. This new precinct is helping officers build relationships in the area they police, which are critical for effective community policing. It is the first police station we have been able to tailor to our community's needs, even before shovels hit the ground. Our police department is also committed to addressing disparities. Internally, we now have an equity officer who is reviewing policies to break down barriers and promote unbiased policing. Externally, CPD is working closely with the University of Missouri to come up with recommendations to ensure we are policing more fairly.

As the pandemic has taught us, change is inevitable. It will come whether you plan for it or not. We have to be forward-thinking as we plan all of our work. The pandemic has forced us to do things differently, and now we can look through that same lens. This year the City will implement key priorities in our strategic plan including organizational excellence, having a resilient economy, reliable infrastructure, inclusive communities and safe neighborhoods. We will be sharing more about our strategic plan in the weeks ahead.

We still have so much to look forward to here in Columbia. This year we will celebrate our bicentennial. CoMo 200 has already hosted several events this spring, and we will have a larger celebration over the Fourth of July weekend. I hope all of you will join us in celebrating Columbia's past, present and future. In looking at

the months and years ahead, I see great things happening in the City. I see our community and residents on a path to achieve great things together.

As we continue to recover from the pandemic, I know all of us will continue to strengthen relationships and truly make Columbia the best place for people to live, work, learn and play.

Thank you for attending, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have.