

2015 State of the City Address

Chamber of Commerce Luncheon

February 17, 2016

A year ago, I stood before you and delivered my first State of the City address, and said at that time that I believed that the leadership of this City was in the right place at the right time to make decisions and take actions that will significantly impact Independence for generations to come. I still believe that is true.

As outgoing Chamber Board Chair Brad Speaks remarked in his farewell address in December, there is a renewed energy and enthusiasm in Independence. I see and feel that excitement at the Chamber, the Economic Development Corporation, and newly-formed entities like the Independence Economic Development Summit and KC Rising. There is a sense of optimism in Independence and about Independence, not because we have solved all the problems, but because we have identified the obstacles and are using our collective resources to find solutions. We are experiencing an unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration and each of our institutions, and most importantly the citizens of Independence, is reaping the benefits.

I want to give credit to Ron Finke who not only describes himself as a persistent “do-gooder” but also declared at a recent Chamber Board meeting he is “All In.” While being “All In” isn’t an original phrase, it is so fitting for our city at this time. There is no holding back, no hesitancy. As a community we have never ceased to gather information about who we are and plan for who we want to be.

Way back in 1996 the Truman Heartland Community Foundation spearheaded a broad and inclusive effort to hear from and respond to citizens’ concerns and hopes for our city, assembling a group of more than 300 community members. The group was called “Fast Forward Independence”, and after months of community strategic planning the group developed six initiatives. They were:

- Improving streets and parks
- Developing neighborhood organizations
- Revitalizing and beautifying neighborhoods
- Enhancing post-secondary educational attainment
- Improving community communications; and
- Promoting cultural diversity and respect

It is gratifying 20 years later to see how much progress has been made in achieving the vision of “Fast Forward Independence”. Thanks to the dedication of so many, our streets and parks are radically improved, all our schools are within accredited districts and demonstrating high achievement, technology is allowing us to communicate in ways that could not have been imagined in 1996, and we are embracing and celebrating the many diverse cultures that have found a home in Independence.

Although we can point to great achievements in the six initiatives envisioned by “Fast Forward Independence,” we are far from finished. There is not one thing that I would strike from this list. The same priorities regarding neighborhoods and education and inclusion and communication remain important to our citizens because our values in Independence do not change.

Every day the City Council works to meet the needs of the citizens. Those days turn into years and years turn into decades, but our attention to the core ideals and expectations of those we are elected to serve remains the same. The aspirations of the community are clear and now it's time to execute.

Citizen satisfaction begins by effectively and efficiently delivering basic city service. In 2013 the City Council made a commitment to develop and use emerging technologies to improve operational efficiencies and increase citizen engagement. Every single dollar invested in technology is done for the express purpose of making City Hall more accessible to residents and businesses. And we are being recognized for our efforts.

Late in 2015, Independence was chosen as one of just 21 cities nationwide to participate in the Bloomberg Philanthropies "What Works Cities" Initiative. This funded program adds valuable expertise to two key projects the City had developed and launched. The first is Insight Independence, a performance measurement dashboard that allows the City to collect data on topics most relevant to the community and publish a digital scorecard that holds city departments accountable for their performance and lets citizens know whether or not we are meeting our service delivery goals.

"What Works Cities" is also assisting us to enhance our Open Data Portal, making public records more readily available than ever before. Information that once required a trip to City Hall can be accessed online from anywhere in the world virtually instantly. The resources of time and knowledge expended by the "What Works Cities" team allows us to further develop and perfect these programs at a much more rapid pace than we would be able to achieve on our own.

Technological investment has allowed us to produce a new utility billing system, making it easier to understand and pay your bill. We have also created an opt-in email notification system which allows citizens to sign up to receive full agendas and schedules of Council meetings and meetings of all our Boards and Commissions. This system was set up in direct response to comments from citizens that they did not feel adequately involved in the business conducted by the Council and our various advisory boards and commissions. We shared that concern and developed this system to address it.

None of these on-line services would be possible if it were not for the platform that they are built upon, our city website. Our site was developed, designed and is maintained entirely in house by our talented Technology Services team, and it was honored in 2015 as the best municipal website in the United States.

Functional neighborhoods and thriving businesses are the underpinning of all successful cities. They were important to Independence in 1996, and are still important today. Every member of your City Council is responding to the community's demand for a cleaner, more attractive, and more prosperous city. Under the Council's direction the city staff is utilizing the City's nuisance ordinance to the fullest extent of its authority. By focusing on repeat offenders, we have successfully abated 44 problem properties, and through heightened attention on commercial zoning enforcement, we have made significant improvements in problem properties along 24 Hwy. In conjunction with the EDC, the KCATA and other community partners we are meeting with 40 Hwy. business owners to address concerns and pursue future planning and investment on 40 Hwy.

2015 was a year to add to the City's trophy case, and I was particularly proud that David Dickerson, Property Maintenance Officer with the Health Department was named Code Enforcement Officer of the Year by the Missouri Association of Code Enforcement. Only public safety is more important to the citizens of Independence than property maintenance, and this honor for David and our City demonstrates our commitment to enforce property code in a professional, equitable, and effective manner.

Internally, the staff and Council have been working to create a new Comprehensive Development Plan, and in the coming months we will be reaching out to the community for public input. A city's Comprehensive Plan sets the stage for how we want our community to look and function far into the future.

Our current Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1993. The Chiefs had signed Joe Montana and Marcus Allen, Jurassic Park was tops at the box office, and the World Wide Web was born. It's time for an update.

In recent weeks the Council entered into an agreement with the EDC to make \$600,000 of Federal Community Block Grant Development Funds available for the development of a Graduate Center for Food Production and Manufacturing. This for-profit industrial kitchen and packaging plant will provide clients from our Ennovation Center business incubator, as well as burgeoning businesses from across the region, a facility where they can scale their production and increase market share.

The EDC began to identify the need for such a facility as incubator clients have begun to find success in the marketplace, but we have not been successful in recruiting a private developer to undertake this project. By securing \$600,000 of federal funds for job creation, we are optimistic that this project will come to fruition and demonstrate that Independence can be successful in supporting entrepreneurs and start-up businesses.

Yesterday we hosted the groundbreaking for the new Independence Utilities Building which is designed to be the first LEED Platinum Certified building in the region. This \$11 million project to renovate the former MCI office building will transform one of the busiest and most visible intersections of our city, help us to attract additional development, and significantly improve customer service to all our utility rate payers.

Conservation of natural resources and renewable energy options are part of our vision to build a healthy and sustainable community. We are excited about our recent solar power purchase agreement with MCP – Independence, LLC. Once completed, the solar farm on Salisbury Road will be the largest in the Kansas City region and could double the amount of power IPL purchases from renewable sources.

The City is reinvesting its own resources into commercial redevelopment and reliable public infrastructure, always aware of our need to operate from a solid foundation of sound financial management. Despite some of the advancements we have made in technology, we still are tied to some very outdated software systems that must be updated in order to more accurately and efficiently manage our financial and personnel records. The price to modernize our systems and provide services are high, and municipal revenues have not kept pace with costs. As owners of our municipal utilities, we are vulnerable to weather conditions that dramatically impact our revenues. Warm winters and cool, wet summers have a negative effect on our utility revenue in a city that is primarily dependent on residential rate payers. Regardless of the circumstances, we must manage our costs in proportion to our revenue, and complaining about the weather and other forces beyond our control isn't productive. We will continue to prioritize those services that are essential to the safety and welfare of our community and manage the budget accordingly.

While we cannot control all our revenue streams, we can be pro-active in a coordinated effort to preserve municipal revenue sources that are at risk of being eliminated through government interference at the State and Federal level. Cities around the State and around the Nation are fighting to retain local control of our scant revenue sources as well as sustain our ability to govern. This is not a situation unique to Independence, or Jackson County, or even the State of Missouri. The 2015 Menino Survey of Mayors

which is published by the Boston University Initiative on Cities states as one of its key findings that Mayors are feeling increasingly constrained by state regulations and the aggressive efforts of some of their state legislators to limit local autonomy and local revenue-raising options.

The City Council members, fellow Mayors and County Executive White, who are in attendance today, as well as our colleagues across Missouri, are united in our determination to prevent further erosion of our revenue sources and local decision-making authority.

But we need your help. The civic community must get involved and deliver a clear and powerful message to our elected officials in Jefferson City on matters that negatively impact the very cities that are the economic drivers for the entire State. During this legislative session, Independence is focused on two critical issues:

The first is the repeal of the 1% motor vehicle licensing tax which is collected on any automobile, boat or other motor vehicle that is licensed in the City of Independence. Elimination of this tax will result in an estimated \$600,000 deficit to the City's General Fund annually as well as give car and boat dealers across state lines a huge competitive advantage over our local dealers. Just last week the House of Representatives approved a bill that would extend the deadline until 2019 for cities to put this issue before voters.

Secondly, the City Council and City staff are actively engaging with Senate and House leadership in Jefferson City to amend SB 572. This a substitute bill for SB 5 which was signed into law last year. Under SB 5 cities Municipal Court maximum fine authority was reduced from \$500 to \$300 for minor traffic violations and measures of enforcement such as the authority to revoke drivers' licenses, impose jail time, or assess additional fees for non-payment or failure to appear in court were deemed illegal. SB 572 seeks to further lower the Court's maximum fine authority from \$300 to \$200 for minor traffic violations AND all municipal ordinances with the same restrictions on enforcement.

Simply put, if SB 572 is signed into law we will have virtually no ability to collect fines for traffic tickets, property code violations, dangerous animal cases, or dangerous building cases to name a few. The fiscal impact of SB 5 is reducing General Fund revenue by \$900,000 in this year's budget and SB 572 will increase that amount to at least \$1.4 million annually, reducing our fine and forfeiture revenue by one-third. Perhaps even more ominous is the immeasurable deterioration of our neighborhoods and centers of commerce that will most certainly occur as our ability to enforce our ordinances is severely hampered.

It is imperative that our partners in the business and civic communities understand these bills and articulate to your legislators the effect on your neighborhoods, businesses and overall quality of life.

Though it is not an issue specific to Independence, I have made known my personal support for the Kansas City Earnings Tax. Again, it is essential to stand up for cities ability to control their own destinies and generate revenue in ways that elected leaders and citizens see fit. The Earning Tax represents nearly half of Kansas City's General Fund revenue, and Independence cannot afford to watch the heart of our region crumble from a devastating lack of funding. People say it's not a matter of money, it's a matter of priorities. I assure you that no priorities of Kansas City, Independence or any other city can be funded when we allow revenue sources, economic development tools, crime deterrence, and education to be decimated by state and federal mandates.

Civic involvement has never been more important, and I want to personally thank the Chamber of Commerce and its member businesses for leading the campaign to renew the Police Capital Improvements sales tax which voters will be asked to approve in just a few short weeks. The 1/8 of one

cent tax accounts for \$2 million annually to purchase and maintain police vehicles, equipment and facilities, all of which are essential to adequately protect our homes, families and workplaces.

Our prosperity is dependent upon concentrated preparation and planning, but we cannot afford to patiently wait for opportunity. We must aggressively pursue investment with a renewed sense of urgency. Independence needs to demonstrate that we can develop and support the industrial sector and entrepreneurs to successfully compete alongside other cities in the region for capital investment.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share with all of you just a few of the triumphs and challenges of this city we all love, and thank you for the privilege of serving as your Mayor.