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## City Manager Zach Walker's 2019 State of the City Speech

At last week's Chamber of Commerce Board meeting, outgoing Board Member Whitney Watson gave each Board Member a copy of Zig Ziglar's *Little Book of Big Quotes*. I found this quote to be particularly fitting to our present circumstances. "Sometimes adversity is what you need to face in order to become successful." Exactly 365 days have passed since I addressed this gathering, and friends, we have certainly faced our fair-share of adversity in the past 12 months, haven't we? Several high-profile initiatives have either been delayed or defeated. We strive to provide world-class municipal services against a strained budgetary backdrop in which expenditures grow by nearly 2.5% each year, but revenues only climb less than one percent each year. There is a steady stream of vitriolic rhetoric aimed at City Hall on a near daily basis. Most harrowing of all, we carry a heavy heart as we continue to mourn the loss of one of our own, Independence Police Sergeant Jason Young.

It would be impractical to revisit every challenge, every setback, every hard-fought battle in the last year. But, suffice it to say, it has been a challenging 12 months. Though they pale in comparison, the turbulent times in which we live remind me of President Abraham Lincoln. When considering the trials and tensions he would endure those first weeks as president, he would confess to a friend, "They were so great that could I have anticipated them, I would not have believed it possible to survive them."

And yet, here we are. Not only have we survived, but, by almost any measure, your City continues to thrive. How, you ask? Start with our strategic plan, *Independence for All*. We remain right on schedule to deliver upon the commitments made in this groundbreaking plan. Three years after its adoption by the City Council, we have completed 60% of the strategies outlined. In the past year alone, we have adopted an Economic Development Incentives Policy to guide our decision-making, continued implementing advancements in technology and innovation to more efficiently and effectively conduct City business, and adopted a 6% rate decrease for our Independence Power & Light customers.

But, the raw data doesn't tell the whole story. We have built, something even more powerful: hope. Consider the words of the 2019 Time Magazine Person of the Year, Greta Thunberg:

*Right now we are desperate for any sign of hope. Well, I'm telling you, there is hope. I have seen it, but it does not come from the governments or corporations. It comes from the people. The people who have been unaware, but are now starting to wake up. And once we become aware, we change. People can change. People are ready for change. And that is the hope because we have democracy and democracy is happening all the time. Not just on election day, but every second and every hour. In fact, every great change throughout history has come from the people. We do not have to wait. We can start the change right now. We the people.*

All around this City, meaningful change is occurring. Hope is being built. Lives are being impacted.

We have hope today because of people like Linda Pringle and Mark McDonald. Linda and Mark were part of an extraordinary group of citizens who recognized the need to pass the Use Tax to help fund basic services in our City. Theirs was not an easy task. Just 14 months earlier, 62% of Independence voters had said no to this very idea. Undeterred, these community advocates lobbied the City Council to put "Proposition P" on the ballot, then labored tirelessly to convince their fellow residents of the critical need to support "pets and police". This time, 56% of the voters said yes, and now our police force will grow by 30 new officers, and the City-run animal shelter will have the resources necessary to continue operating as a no-kill facility. Thank you Linda and Mark, for showing us all what unwavering faith and vision can produce.

We have hope today because of people like Bob Sorenson. Bob has become one of the most unlikely friends I have ever made. As the Independence Examiner reported, "City Manager Zach Walker caused an uproar-but a needed debate-when in early summer he presented a city budget that included changes to City retirees' health care plans." What kind of an uproar? Well, hot summer nights for us at the City meant throngs of retirees protesting outside City Hall, a hearse that read "retiree health insurance", and a sign depicting me throwing an elderly woman over a cliff, wheelchair and all. A peaceful solution seemed uncertain. City staff, led by Assistant City Manager Adam Norris, sat down with retirees, led by Bob, to look at the needs and options. The two sides talked, acknowledging the need for savings and the desire to maintain good health coverage. We worked it out. Retirees unanimously approved a plan to save the City \$3.5 million a year, and the City Council unanimously approved it too. Thank you, Bob, for showing all of us what meaningful dialogue can produce.

And we have hope today because of people like Monte Short, for example. Monte and a dedicated group of activists are working to revitalize the Englewood Arts District and the surrounding neighborhood. Any given day, stop by the front table at Vivilore and you will find Monte and other committed volunteers hosting a lunch or dinner meeting. This table has become a veritable force of experts in housing, development, planning, and finances who help advise how this key area can be reestablished as an economic engine. But the group does more than feast and wax theoretical. They have canvassed block after block to create a housing inventory to better understand the needs of the area and determine which resources will best attract new investment. The group has established a Community Improvement District to create a dedicated funding source for improvements in the Arts District. Finally, the group has acquired the former Comprehensive Mental Health Services Building on Winner Road with the intent to create artist work and display space. Thank you, Monte, for showing us what a little bit of elbow grease and tenacity can produce.

The hope these citizens provide represents the very foundation upon which our success will continue to be built. A recent editorial in The Philadelphia Inquirer suggested the following: *“It is a dark time in America. We must find a way to bring in the light. In a time of hate, divisiveness and vulnerability for many Americans, turning the tide requires a commitment from as many individuals as possible to push back against these dark forces in their daily actions—and to share a sense of responsibility for one another...The personal responsibility that will outshine the darkness of these bleak days is the one that President John F. Kennedy was referring to in his inaugural address when he implored Americans to ask not what their country can do for them, but what they can do for their country.”*

In each of the examples I highlighted today, citizens embraced this personal responsibility. They identified a problem, and they had hope for a better outcome. But here is the key: they acted upon that hope to create a bridge between the present state of affairs and the hope they saw for a better tomorrow. In local government, we build bridges. We create connections. Inspired by the bridges our citizens are building, we will be building bridges throughout the City over the next year.

First, there are the literal bridges we build and maintain. In the year ahead, you can expect to see your city addressing a number of infrastructure issues, particularly with bridges. There is the bridge replacement in the area at 24 highway and Bess Truman Parkway. Estimated to be completed this summer, this project will increase the visibility and access to the renovated Truman Library with an improved bridge and walking trail. It’s part of a larger focus on improving the 24 Highway corridor including a complete streets program and the Truman Connected trail, with a total investment of more than \$16 million. Additionally, we are taking a major step toward addressing a \$27.5 million backlog of deferred maintenance in our streets, curbs, sidewalks and, yes, our bridges. This past December, the City Council approved an \$18 million bond program to tackle this backlog, including funding to address the maintenance, major repairs, or complete replacement of over 50 bridges in the city.

Second, we will build bridges in 2020 to close the digital equity divide. A community that wants to participate in the 21st century economy needs access to a 21st century telecommunications infrastructure. Businesses need this service to grow and thrive and children need it to keep up with their educational responsibilities. In 2020, reliable high-speed internet should no longer be a luxury. It should be a right. That means fiber optics, providing virtually unlimited bandwidth and unmatched reliability, regardless of your income or your zip code. But, fiber networks are expensive. Therefore, it appears unlikely that incumbent providers will build fiber-to-the-home at an affordable price anytime in the foreseeable future. The economics are simply not favorable for these companies to invest the hundreds of millions of dollars needed in a single community.

Broadband can play an essential role in this community's future growth and success, but questions remain. To provide the City with the information and tools it needs to improve broadband, I am calling on the Chamber of Commerce’s Broadband Committee to launch a community fiber Feasibility Study.

Third, we will continue to build bridges to all corners of our community to ensure a better quality of life for each of our residents. Much has been done in this area that deserves to be celebrated. From improving the safety of our neighborhoods with the Police Department’s Street Crimes Unit to establishing a new property tax abatement program in Southwest Independence to incentive home repairs and even to the multi-million-dollar renovation of the Independence Events Center, we are making generational changes to the landscape of our community. There are two areas in particular,

however, where our focus is needed more than ever. Unfortunately, both of these areas suffered setbacks this past year as a result of necessary budget reductions.

The first quality of life issue we must bridge is transit. To balance the budget last year, service reductions were made to our IndeBus system. For many, this may have been hardly noticed. We are privileged to have access to our own personal vehicles and freely commute to our jobs or to carry out our errands. Others in our community are not so fortunate. Each morning, I walk the dog and see many of the same faces. I used to regularly see one of our fellow residents on his way to catch the intra-city transit system to downtown Kansas City. Since the cuts went into effect in January, I haven't seen him. Maybe he moved, but I fear something worse. I fear his life has gotten remarkably harder. I fear he must now leave earlier and walk farther to access public transit if he is to get to his job on time. I don't have to tell a room full of business people how important workforce development is to a strong community. But, it will take our collective effort to make public transit a priority in order to ensure each citizen has reliable and convenient access to transit if we are to make meaningful progress in bridging this gap.

The second quality of life issue we must bridge is housing. The nation is in the grip of an affordable housing crisis, where a severe shortage of homes for working-class and low-income families is pushing up home prices and rents across the country. For Independence, the problem is different. While we have plenty of affordable housing, the quality of our housing stock suffers. In a recent City Council Study Session, Christina Leakey from the Truman Heritage Habitat for Humanity shared that her organization has shifted its focus toward basic but necessary repairs to homes to keep people in stable housing. In fact, they've had to stop adding to their wait list that at one point reached 175 families.

The solutions to this housing crisis will be localized and must involve input from our citizens about what they are willing to support. Last year, the budget I submitted to the City Council included funding for a housing study. This study would not only help inform our understanding of the national housing crisis at the local level, but would also identify strategies to help target new housing construction and preservation of quality affordable housing. Unfortunately, the aforementioned budget woes meant this initiative was stripped of funding. As we look to secure funding for this study, I look forward to the work of the Chamber's Quality Housing and Safe Neighborhoods Committee, to identify recommendations to begin addressing this critical issue.

Before leaving this issue of quality housing and transit, I would be remiss if I did not once more mention the residents of the 64053 zip code. Last year, I shared data with you that indicated the wide disparity between our city's most affluent zip code and the least affluent. If you recall, one of the more disturbing disparities between these two zip codes came in life expectancy, where people in the 64053 lived, on average, ten years less than their fellow citizens in the 64057 zip code. I fear we haven't done enough to close that gap in the last year. As evidence, our City staff have recently been working on a housing issue at a residence on Hardy Avenue in the 64053 zip code. This property has been declared unsafe to occupy, meaning the family has been displaced from their home. During a ride along with our Independence Police Department, I visited the family's new home: it's under the bridge at East 9<sup>th</sup> Street and Ash Avenue. There are many functional uses for a bridge; a home should not be one of them.

It would be easy to neglect this issue, and in fact, that was suggested to me by one individual. "I've lived here my entire life", this person told me. "That area has always been a pit. It always will be a pit. If you want to do something meaningful, put a fence up around it." Friends, we don't build fences. We build bridges. Let us all commit to working on that bridge with renewed energy and vigor. As President

Lyndon Johnson said, “If our efforts continue, and if our will is strong, and if our hearts are right, and if courage remains our constant companion, then, I am confident we shall overcome.” This year we have an immediate opportunity to shape our community’s access to federal funding and support for issues like housing through the 2020 Census. I hope all of you will help us in this important effort to ensure our community is accurately reflected in the data they gather.

Fourth, we owe it to ourselves and to our future generations to continue building the never-ending bridge laid out in our federal Constitution, toward “a more perfect union.” In the words of United States Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, “Every generation has an obligation to pass on to the next, not only a fully functioning government responsive to the needs of the people, but the tools to understand and improve it.” In order to keep building this bridge and pass on the tools of a responsive government, our community must have a modern-day City Charter. While many cities across the nation have a charter that calls for a mandatory review on a regular basis, ours does not. As a result, our charter has become antiquated at best. There are some portions of our charter that, as a result of court rulings, have been declared unconstitutional, while other aspects of our charter limit our ability to adapt to the needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century community. It is imperative to our continued progress that this foundational governing document be reviewed and modernized, and I am asking for the civic community’s support to make this a priority and press for a City Charter Review Commission.

Finally, let us continue building bridges that connect every corner of our city, our region, and even our nation to one of our greatest and most unique assets: the historic Independence Square. It has been said that perhaps no other town square has played such an integral role in shaping American history. Perhaps best of all, not much has changed. Said Truman’s nephew, David Wallace: “*Whenever I return to this town, I am always struck by how little has changed from the days when Harry S Truman used to stroll its maple-shaded sidewalks. The City’s old center, with its gingerbread Victorian homes and traditional town square, seems as if it’s been preserved in amber. It’s a place where the 33<sup>rd</sup> President’s presence is still very much alive.*” While the feel of the City’s old center has been preserved in amber, the public infrastructure certainly has not. Crumbling curbs and sidewalks, aging water and sewer lines, and a dearth of vegetation limit the appeal of our Square when compared to downtown settings such as Lee’s Summit. That is why the Downtown Redevelopment Coordinating Committee made a Square Beautification project a priority in their October 2018 report, and that is why the Independence on a Roll Committee has continued to press this project forward. As a result of this alignment, City staff are now in the throes of project design and bid preparation, and pending City Council approval, a \$3 million square revitalization project is anticipated to begin in the Spring of 2021, with final completion later that year.

The Independence Square is an iconic part of our city, and a revitalization is growing stronger with each passing day. To sustain this momentum, we must continue opening the doors to as many people as possible and keep our city’s heartbeat strong. After all, the mission statement of *Independence for All* challenges us, in part, to “transform our community through engagement.” Transformational engagement must include building bridges not just within our community, but to connect with the farthest reaches possible.

This past fall, I participated in the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce Leadership Exchange Trip. This was an excellent opportunity to build new bridges. One of the many personal connections I made was with Mr. Danny Beckley, Executive Director of the Kansas City Symphony. It may seem strange that I

would make a powerful and immediate connection with someone from the Symphony. After all, I'm from Trenton, Missouri, where we have two kinds of music: country and western. But the arts build a powerful bridge of their own.

Danny and I continued our conversation when we returned home, and the more we spoke, the more we realized we both had powerful tools that, if combined, could create a transformational bridge: he with the symphony; I with the Square. Like the citizens I highlighted earlier, we didn't wait or seek permission. We didn't let the cynicism and skepticism of the present era deter our enthusiasm. We simply worked toward our mutual goals. As a result, I am pleased to publicly announce for the first time that on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021 the Kansas City Symphony will host an event we call "Symphony on the Square", as we invite people from far and wide to hear world-class music in a historic and beautiful setting.

2019 was a year filled with its fair share of challenges, but it was also a year of tremendous accomplishment for this City. Our Mayor and City Council continue to chart a course toward an Independence for All, and our City staff works earnestly to deliver world-class municipal services to our community. But ultimately, hope for a better tomorrow comes not from within City Hall, but from the people we serve. And though the challenges we face are vastly different than those faced by Lincoln, the answer to any dilemma we face is remarkably the same: it is the duty that comes with citizenship. "I appeal to you to constantly bear in mind," Lincoln said, "that with you, not with the politicians, not with the President, not with office-seekers is the question, 'Shall the Union and shall the liberties of this country be preserved to the last generation?'"

I look forward to working with each of you in the year ahead to build our bridges, to connect every part of our community, and to ensure an even better Independence for All. Thank you.