



INDEPENDENCE

★ MISSOURI ★

A GREAT AMERICAN STORY

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Mayor Eileen Weir's 2019 State of the City Speech

Harry Truman became President of the United State of America on April 12, 1945, taking the oath of office before a stunned and mourning nation with his wife, Bess Wallace Truman, by his side looking equally shocked that her husband would take the helm of an office about which he knew practically nothing. The year 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of that historic moment in our country's history and in the lives of two ordinary people from Independence.

Every speech given in Independence or about Independence could - and should - reflect on the Trumans. Harry Truman is a central character in our city, and at no greater time than now.

Over the course of the coming months, we will see completion of the Truman Library renovations and the grand reopening. Most of us will never again witness a major renovation of the presidential library in our lifetimes. We will cut the ribbon on the new 24 Highway bridge that spans Bess Truman Parkway and unveil the enhancements made to the bridge underpass.

What could be more fitting than a human-scaled pedestrian path leading visitors to the Truman Library? Truman himself began walking for exercise when he was a U.S. Senator and maintained a disciplined routine of brisk walks well into his advanced age. Rebuilding the bridge and underpass give us a blank canvas to share the story of Independence through historical murals depicting the pioneer trails and Harry Truman, as well as a handsome welcome sign announcing our name Independence, Missouri.

Phase one of the Truman Connect Trail will begin this year, extending the bike/walk path from the Truman Library, through the historic Square, to the National Frontiers Trail Museum, and Truman Depot. Future phases are planned to connect to the Englewood Arts District, and ultimately, to the Truman Sports Complex.

Other exciting developments expected for 2020 are a new National Parks Service Visitors Center on Truman Road, relocating the Truman Home ticket office from Fire

Station #. We will prepare for Harry Truman's return to Washington when President Truman's statue is installed in the United States Capitol. We owe a debt of gratitude to the bi-partisan leadership of Sen. Roy Blunt and Congressman Emanuel Cleaver for championing both the Visitors Center and the Truman Statue project. Our thanks also to Governor Mike Parson and Sen. John Rizzo for the tremendous support from the State of Missouri in the renovation of the Truman Library and the authorization to install the Truman statue in the U.S. Capitol.

It is a special time to think about the impact of Truman on our world and nation, and on our city. Independence formed Harry Truman -- from his boyhood to his death. His character and personality are part of who we are, and continues to be reflected in our community's attitude.

Courage

"There is some risk involved in action, there always is. But there is far more risk in failure to act."

Truman was courageous in word and in action. He believed in making big plans. Four years ago, our community made a big plan to transform our city through innovation, engagement, and sustainable services. The product of this mission is "Independence for All", a five-year outlook on the most pressing issues facing our city. Together with input from citizens and businesses, 74 specific strategies were developed to improve Independence in the areas of customer service, financial sustainability, economic growth, and the quality of our community.

Support and encouragement from the community has given your city council the courage to face some of our greatest challenges, many of which had been deferred for decades.

We addressed quality housing. Independence was the first city in the region to adopt a rental ready program, allowing for interior inspections of residential rental property to ensure basic life safety. This was a highly controversial issue balancing property owners' and renters' rights with the demand for safe, quality housing. Other cities in our region including Grandview and Kansas City followed our lead and have also adopted rental inspection programs.

We are transforming operations at Independence Power & Light. In response to customer demand for lower rates, the city council has methodically evaluated and modified how business is done at Independence Power & Light. We have developed a broader power base with more wind and solar energy, ceased coal production, and are on track to cease all production at the Blue Valley plant. The council is evaluating long-term replacement of energy and capacity with an eye towards achieving the cleanest, most reliable, and most cost-competitive power in the region.

We got more efficient. Every city department has undergone a thorough review in the past four years to become more efficient and improve service delivery. Our city government looks significantly different from a few years ago in an effort to use financial and personnel resources effectively.

We invested in technology for improved customer service and delivery. The council determined that continuing to postpone implementation of technology was not in the best interest of our community, even though the transitions included significant risk and disruption. Updating our technology came with problems and expense, frustration for our citizens, staff and councilmembers, but ultimately we have become better equipped to manage the business of the city, communicate with citizens, and collect data that leads to better decision making.

We launched the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force to advise city staff on how to better engage citizens who are under-represented in our public workforce and on our city boards and commissions. The members of the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force exemplified courageous leadership in initiating complex and sometimes uncomfortable discussions on Independence's history, current attitudes and practices, and future goals.

As a result, the committee has revised a long-standing memorandum of understanding with the Community of Concerned Citizens and developed a new Boards and Commissions application that seeks to increase participation from under-represented populations. Updates to personnel policies and procedures, training sessions, and expanded engagement with citizen groups will be implemented in 2020 as part of the on-going focus to fulfill the goals of "Independence for All."

Integrity

"There are always a lot of people so afraid of rocking the boat that they stop rowing. We can never get ahead that way."

Perhaps Truman's most endearing and enduring traits are his integrity, his desire to do what was right despite what others may think, and his straightforward approach to the most complicated matters. He had strong principles.

Independence, like every city, faces complex challenges and choices. We are a large city in a major metropolitan area which gives us ample access to available resources to gather information and make informed decisions. But studies are no substitute for simply doing what is right.

For the first time in history, Independence Power & Light customers were given a rate decrease. It was the right thing to do. We live in a region that is growing and gaining national attention, and we knew that our electric rate was an obstacle to our ability to participate in growth. The 6% rate reduction for every IPL customer is a step forward in making our city more competitive to attract and retain residents and employers.

Granting the rate decrease for all customers has an adverse impact on the finances at IPL and the general fund. There is no question that this decision by the council causes us to tighten our belts across all city departments, but it was the right thing to do for our community.

In 2019 the City assumed operation of the Regional Animal Shelter with the commitment to maintain it as a no-kill shelter. This wasn't something that was planned, but when the previous operator was no longer able to sustain operations, someone needed to step up. Our community has been clear that it demands high-quality animal services, so the city

found a way to do what was right. In August, voters approved Proposition P which created a dedicated funding source to support the animal shelter. Thank you to the voters for protecting the vulnerable pets in our city.

The Independence Police Department created two new units to focus on nuisance crime and gun violence. The city council approved funding for five new officers in 2018 to create the Street Crimes Unit and in its first year the results have been staggering.

In 2019, the council supported creation of the Gun Squad with no additional IPD funding, and updated our Safe Streets legislation. These two actions combined have given our officers the tools to initiate more than 200 illegal weapons cases in the past six months.

The Street Crimes Unit and Gun Squad are right for Independence. The city didn't spend years in planning and development. We didn't wait for funding to become available. Our police department saw an urgent need in our community, and found creative solutions using existing resources. We needed to do it, and we found a way.

Voters' support of Proposition P will allow the city to continue to expand police services in strategic and meaningful ways. Half of the revenues generated by the local use tax is dedicated to hiring new police officers in our city. Again, thank you to the voters for standing by our officers and providing the resources they need.

The city council demonstrated unprecedented leadership in economic development policy this year. With the help of our Economic Development Council, the city developed an economic development policy that was unanimously supported by the city council. The policy provides developers seeking incentives with clear guidelines and expectations. Independence is the only city in the region to develop and fully endorse a comprehensive economic development policy. It ensures that Independence is consistent in our processes and that developers understand our community's vision, goals and objectives.

Additionally, the council created the Economic Development and Incentives Commission. The commission, consisting of representatives from the citizens, school districts, library districts, and county reviews any incentive that would impact any taxing jurisdiction. Missouri state statute requires every city to have a TIF Commission, but no commission was in place to review other incentives such as Chapter 100, 353 tax abatement, and Community Improvement Districts, which have become more prevalent in Independence than TIF.

The economic development policy and commission are additional, and some may argue, unnecessary steps in the development process. Your city council agreed, however, that establishing these policies and processes gave the taxpayers additional insight and influence over issuance of economic incentives. In developing these tools, the council asserted its belief that the citizens are entitled to more information about potential developments and more opportunities for public input.

Humility

"When you get to be President, there are all those things, the honors, the twenty-one gun salutes, all those things. You have to remember it isn't for you. It's for the Presidency."

Although Truman is widely regarded as one of the most influential presidents in history, we remember him as someone who never forgot where he was from or got too big for his britches. One of my favorite depictions of Truman's famous modesty is the video of his return to Independence where he declares himself a regular citizen.

Independence has a lot to brag about, and sometimes we don't brag enough. Just this year we received a Kansas City Business Journal Capstone Award for the Independence Uptown Market, earned 3rd place in the Berkley Springs International Water Tasting competition, and won our 16th Digital Cities Award. The Independence Uptown Market was also recognized as "Project of the Year" by the Design Build Institute of America Mid-America Region, making it the second straight year that Independence has won Project of the Year from the DBIA which covers four states.

Despite our achievements, Independence has a way of staying humble. Our community is hard-working and welcoming of anyone who is willing to pitch in with a new idea or a helping hand. As we move into the next decade, the city council will be developing new strategic goals and will once again call on all citizens across our city to bring forward their dreams for Independence.

Loyalty

"The Independence that I knew in 1890 has long since disappeared in every particular; the Independence I knew in 1928...has also disappeared; and I suppose the one of the present day will be a thing of the past in another twenty years and that is as it should be."

We all love and relate to Harry Truman's remarks about his town, Independence, the place he considered the center of things. We have never had a better ambassador for community pride than Truman who chose to spend a quiet life on Delaware Street as the most powerful person in the country.

Truman was fiercely loyal to his family, his friendships, and his city. He saw Independence change from a small town to a city of over 100,000. In 1950, Truman wrote these words [on screen] to a friend. He had a fondness for Independence and its history, but he embraced change.

Community pride runs deep in Independence. In 2018, the city council launched a brand development committee to guide our efforts to create an authentic and meaningful story for our city supported by a strong icon and imagery. To no one's surprise, Independence is most identified with the Trumans and the pioneer trails by people inside and outside of our city. Preserving our history is essential to our identity but improving the perception of our city must also take center stage.

Our Brand Steering Committee is developing creative ways to tell the unique story of Independence to new audiences looking for places to visit or locate. In 2020, we will be looking for additional strategic partnerships to spread our brand message inside and outside the city. Everyone can participate in building Independence loyalty by joining a community event, like the annual city-wide litter clean up, sharing your ideas at one of the many upcoming public meetings, or simply by following the example of Harry Truman and boldly sharing your love for Independence.

Since 2015, Independence voters have approved five tax referendums for police, fire, streets, motor vehicle licensing, and local use tax. Voters have also approved bond issues for Independence, Fort Osage and Blue Springs school districts, and levy increases for Fort Osage, Blue Springs and both of the library districts that serve Independence. There is no measure of commitment to the well-being of our city, schools, and libraries more meaningful than voter support for public services. I am grateful to all those who volunteer to help with important campaigns that support essential services in our city and to the voters for their confidence.

Determination

“America was not built on fear. America was built on courage, on imagination and an unbeatable determination to do the job at hand.”

Our future accomplishments depend on maintaining the level of passion, vision, and determination we have come to expect from our citizens and community partners. Together we have accomplished major goals by staying diligent even through setbacks. This sustained focus was demonstrated this year in helping Jackson County achieve ACT Work Ready Designation to measure and close the gap in workforce skills. This could not have happened without the leadership of our EDC Vice President Jodi Krantz who led our local effort. Thanks to Jodi, around 70 of the 210 business partners required to earn this designation are based in Independence.

While 2019 was marked by some heated debates, those difficult times were lessons in how to be better leaders and collaborators. It is important to reflect on success, and we don't do it enough, but there is a lot of work ahead.

The issues of homelessness will require more attention in 2020. We have experienced an increase in identified homeless camps within our city and our school districts have a high number of students who lack stable housing. The average age of a homeless person is seven years old. Any discussion on homeless outreach and enforcement must necessarily include strategies for children and families.

I hope to engage in a broader conversation about early childhood learning in the next year. Focusing on kindergarten readiness is essential to our efforts to build a strong workforce for today's employers and for generations into the future. Our school districts and child care providers are our experts to guide our city in developing policies on early childhood learning that create a community where young children and their caretakers thrive.

Independence is working closely with the Mid America Regional Council to prepare for the 2020 Census. Census data has an enormous impact on such things as education,

housing, health care, and job training for our entire community. We are utilizing multiple resources to spread the word about the Census, particularly to populations that are traditionally undercounted, such as children under the age of five, non-English language speakers, the elderly, citizens with disabilities, and veterans, to name a few. As we approach April, we will need the help of every citizen to achieve a complete count for Independence.

Improving our tourism sites, programs and activities, our city gateways, and infrastructure around our historic sites will continue to need investment. In the coming year, Kansas City will be the site of some major events including the NFL Draft and the National League of Cities City Summit. Coupled with the new Kansas City airport in 2023, Independence must be prepared to draw on the national attention and visitorship that will be generated by these events.

Downtown redevelopment, affordable, quality housing, and attraction of new industries and employers are constants in our city's continued evolution to be a nationally-recognized city that honors its history and character. We must continue to address issues of economic inclusion, cultural diversity, and creating jobs for the 21st century if we are to continue to fulfill our mission and vision.

I am proud to serve alongside the city council members and mayors in our region, many of who were kind enough to join me this evening.

Independence truly is the center of things for most of us. It is an honor to live in this city and to serve as your mayor.