

Mayor Eileen Weir 2017 State of the City

Friday, February 16, 2018

Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum

Community, family, progress. Listen to the citizens of Independence and these are the words you will hear time and time again. Ours is a city steeped in history, family ties run deep, in many cases are generations long, but from our very beginning we have been people committed to progress, fearlessly. Thank you to Charlie Shields, David Bower, Steve McDowell, Cheryl Melton, Donna Pitman, and Michael McClelland for sharing your stories about what makes Independence a special place.

One hundred and seventy five years ago this area, including the very spot where we are gathering this morning, was teeming with tradesmen selling their wares and families preparing for a life altering journey as they embarked on the Great Migration of the Oregon Trail. Just six years later in 1849, the City of Independence was officially chartered. From the early pioneers to our citizens of today we have embraced grand aspirations and the values of community, family, and progress.

Today is a celebration of the successes of the past year and a chance to share the goals the citizens of Independence have set for their elected leadership in 2018. These achievements are only possible through the dedication of many, many people who share a singular vision to make our region and our cities the very best they can be. Please join me in recognizing these elected leaders:

Mayor Pro Tem Chris Whiting

Councilmember at large Karen DeLuccie

First District Councilman John Perkins

Second district Councilman Curt Dougherty

Third district Councilman Scott Roberson

Fourth district Councilman Tom VanCamp

Jackson County Executive Frank White

State Representative Rory Rowland

State Representative Bill Kidd

State Representative Ira Anders

Mayor of Grandview, Leonard Jones

Mayor of Raytown, Mike McDonough

Mayor of Blue Springs, Carson Ross and his wife Eloise

Mayor of Lee's Summit, Randy Rhodes

Mayor of Pleasant Valley, David Slater

Please also welcome my husband, the first gentleman of Independence, Tom Weir.

Independence is an exciting place to be in 2018. Just over one year ago the City Council approved *Independence for All*, a strategic plan to serve as the community's roadmap for the next five years. *Independence for All* sets challenging, measurable goals to move our city towards our vision of quality neighborhoods, 21st century jobs, a growing economy, a safe, family-friendly community and cultural diversity that will make Independence a nationally recognized city that celebrates its unique history and sense of place. Our mission is to transform our community through engagement, innovation, and sustainable services.

Independence for All contains 74 specific tactics surrounding four strategic goals, and after year one of the five-year plan, we are right on track, completing more than twenty percent of tactics in the first year.

Our citizens, business owners, and visitors expect and deserve a safe, attractive, well-maintained city, so many of our first efforts focused on the built environment. We piloted the Corridor Code Enforcement program along 24 highway, right outside these doors, to bring citizens, businesses and city resources together to systematically address property maintenance and zoning violations. 170 property maintenance and zoning cases were found, but only 32 tickets were issued because businesses and citizens voluntarily stepped up to solve the problems. The Corridor Code Enforcement program has now expanded to 40 Highway with similar results and we will soon identify the next major commercial corridor for future phases.

In June, we saw the amazingly successful Citywide Trash Cleanup "Clean Team" spearheaded by the Chamber of Commerce. More than 400 volunteers, many of them students from our local schools, gave of their time to help remove litter along 40 Highway, 24 Highway and 291, collecting hundreds of bags of trash. The Chamber of Commerce is once again leading this effort for 2018, partnering with the Independence and Fort Osage school districts to expand the "Clean Team" volunteers and community impact.

The City Council increased the dangerous building budget in 2017 to increase proactive cases and shorten the timeline to remove dangerous properties that threaten the safety and value of neighborhoods. We anticipate dedicating more funding to fighting blight in 2018 because our citizens have placed a high priority on holding negligent property owners responsible who disregard our high standards and disrespect our community.

In August, Independence voters renewed the Streets Sales Tax with more than 82 percent voter approval. We know street maintenance is important to our citizens and this continued commitment to our roads will ensure the more than 700 miles of city roads will receive the maintenance they need. This effort was only successful because of the community commitment that supported it. The Independence Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Council were invaluable partners, helping share important information with voters.

The strong Independence values of community and family were never more evident than in the overwhelming support the people of this city showed for Officer Tom Wagstaff and the men and women of the Independence Police Department. On March 29th Officer Wagstaff was gravely injured in the line of duty. The hours and days that followed were some of the darkest in our city's memory. Officer Wagstaff's injury was severe, and the final outcome was uncertain. The Intensive Care Unit at Centerpoint Medical Center became the gathering place for family, friends, IPD officers, and citizens who provided round-the-clock support, providing food, comfort, and prayers. Day after day food, cards and letters, prayers and well-wishes flooded into police headquarters, City Hall, and the FOP Lodge.

Miraculously, Officer Wagstaff began to recover, and as his healing progressed, the support did not waiver. Dozens of fundraisers were held, WagStrong signs appeared in shop windows and yards, and citizens regularly reached out to share their well wishes.

Eventually Officer Wagstaff was stable enough to continue his recovery and rehabilitation out of state, and on December 8th and 9th we celebrated his triumphant return. The streets were lined with blue ribbons, signs and cheers. Hundreds of people took time from their work day, students were dismissed from their classrooms to join together on a cold day to welcome our hero home. Witnessing Officer Wagstaff thank the citizens and receive recognition for his bravery is one of those events we will never, ever forget.

Community, family, progress – all of these examples echo who we are as Independence, what is important to us, and where we are going. *Independence for All* is more than a list of tasks to complete, it embeds the values that define how we treat our resources, how we provide services, how we solve problems, how decisions are made, and how we treat one another. Preserving our community is not only about protecting our historic character and quality of life, but maintaining our values of responsibility, quality, reliability, collaboration, empathy, trust, credibility, innovation, and vision.

I often say *Independence for All* is not the Council's plan; it's not City Hall's plan; it's the community's plan. All we did was write it down. The community plan requires the community's help to become the prosperous, world-class city we are proud to call home. There are countless ways in which business, organizations, and individuals can, and do, participate, and it is exciting to see the many ways in which those outside of City Hall are embracing the community vision.

I already spoke about the "Clean Team" effort that the Chamber of Commerce initiated last year and will lead again this year. The Chamber of Commerce also took a leadership role in encouraging the City Council to proceed with planning and construction of a new Farmer's

Market and event space in the heart of our historic square. Bolstered by support from the EDC, Independence Rotary Club, and Truman Heartland Community Foundation, the farmer's market went from concept to council approval in less than 365 days. That's amazing.

We will break ground on the Independence Uptown Market February 27th and anticipate opening for business this summer. We chose the name Uptown Market as a nod to our traditional identity of being "uptown" from "downtown" Kansas City.

The Farmer's Market project accomplishes many of the community goals, including increased access to healthy foods and wellness programming, especially for low and moderate income families and seniors and increased economic activity in and around the square. It opens the opportunity for more community events to build connections between our residents and with our visitors, and provides an enhanced facility for the annual Santa Cali Gon festival and other special events.

Every great city has a vibrant downtown. In the past year, we have visited Bentonville, Arkansas, St. Petersburg, Florida, and St. Charles, Missouri and have learned how these cities have attracted new populations of residents and guests by investing in the downtown business district. Western Independence has multiple commercial districts like the Square, Noland Road, Englewood, Fairmount, Maywood, 23rd Street and 24 Highway and our broaden view of our downtown includes strategic planning to connect and unify these districts while maintaining their individual identity. As we have seen in our travels around the region and around the country, downtown redevelopment is often the stimulus for neighborhood revitalization and civic pride.

Tomorrow night will be a huge celebration. The Independence Rotary Club Mardi Gras fundraiser will take place at Arrowhead Stadium and the club will announce the total amount of private funding that has been raised to support the Farmer's Market.

I am pleased today to announce the newest by product of *Independence for All*. Mr. Alec Cook, General Manager of Continental Siding and Supply, has established the "Continental Siding Supply College Scholarship Fund" for Independence area high school students. Mr. Cook and his wife, Alison, are graduates of Truman High School, and were inspired to set up the scholarship fund as a way to honor their alma mater and show support for the education and workforce development objectives of *Independence for All*. Thank you to Mr. and Mrs. Cook and Continental Siding and Supply for being a great Independence-based business and for your generosity. Mr. and Mrs. Cook are not able to be here today, but I'd like to personally recognize Mr. Stan Adkins, Business Development Manager, who is here today representing Continental Siding and Supply.

So, what's in store for 2018 and beyond?

When I took office four years ago, one of my biggest goals was updating the City's Comprehensive Plan. Amendments to the plan have been made as Independence has continued to grow and develop, but our most recent Comp Plan dates back to July, 1993. The City Council agreed that we could no longer use an outdated pitch for our community. As we

speak with businesses and developers, it is vital that our Comp Plan reflects the vision, and, yes, values, of our city. We needed a better tool to communicate how we want our city to look and function and how we hope to get there.

Developing a Comprehensive Plan is a long and arduous process. We spent a year working internally to update the technical aspect of the plan, and then embarked on the public engagement to get input from the citizens. We called this “Imagine Independence 2040” and were blown away by the public’s interest and enthusiasm. We had rooms packed full of citizens giving their time to help us shape the future of our community. This effort was award winning. In October our City and consultant, Sheila Shockey, accepted the award from the American Planning Association – Missouri Chapter for outstanding public outreach. And while an award looks great on a shelf, I am most excited about the ideas these conversations sparked and the momentum that continues to grow in our community.

While 2040 may seem far away, the planning for success must start now. Years ago, our community had the foresight to build the Little Blue Parkway, providing us with a growth opportunity few cities anywhere in the Midwest can match. This corridor is a valuable tool as we seek new business and industrial partners in our area.

Our strategic partnerships, shared vision, and coordinated efforts have had a positive impact on our local economy. Employment rate is at record levels, median income is moving towards our goal of \$50,000 by the year 2020, and capital investment is high. Our existing businesses are investing in facilities and hiring more people. We are attracting new investment and interest from businesses looking to expand or relocate. We know the City is building for the future. In 2017, we saw a 152 percent increase in building permit applications over 2016. This is the highest amount we’ve seen since 2005.

But we lack the type of industrial development that is in demand in today’s market. Our existing industrial space is nearly 100% leased. The Little Blue Valley has untold potential, but it is undeveloped which puts Independence at a disadvantage in our region when other nearby cities have an abundance of real estate that meets the current demand.

Attracting industrial users is important for two reasons. First, it brings new jobs to our city. Second, it creates customers for our municipal utilities. More industrial customers for Independence Power & Light will help balance out the inequity that currently exist between our industrial, commercial, and residential ratepayers. Thoughtful development of the Little Blue Valley has been a long-time goal for Independence, and today we are closer than ever to making this a reality.

Independence is known as a strong retail trade center and the retail development has served us well for decades. But as we all know, retail is changing and on-line sales have eclipsed in-store purchases. The shift to on-line sales has a huge impact on local economies and the services cities provide since sales tax is all cities primary source of revenue. In April we, along with nearby cities including Blue Springs, Liberty and Odessa, will be asking voters to decide on a Use

Tax which will apply the same tax rate to out-of-state purchases made on-line to local purchases. This will allow Independence businesses to compete on a level playing field with out-of-state businesses and help recover the lost revenue that voters anticipated when they approved our local sales taxes.

Approval of the Use Tax in April could result in more than \$1 million of increased revenue, based on projections from the Missouri Municipal League. This additional revenue will help us restore services that have suffered from decreased funding including police, fire, parks, street maintenance, storm water, and general fund services like code enforcement and economic development. The issue will appear as Question 1 on the ballot April 3, I encourage you all to learn about this issue and vote in April.

The City Council is focused on business growth and attracting new kinds of employers, but we know it is not enough. Without access to a qualified workforce industries cannot and will not expand or locate in our city and our region, and I am convinced that Independence is leading the region in workforce development. All four of our local school districts have established successful programs to prepare students for college and careers and are engaging employers in designing the right training and education for today's in-demand jobs.

Collaboration is essential, and in November the Independence School District and Independence Chamber of Commerce received the Missouri Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2017 Education Innovator Award for the innovative Career Academies. Independence is one of only 19 districts nationwide selected to implement the Ford Motor Company Next Generation of Learning model to develop meaningful business/education partnerships, ensuring that every student – not just some students – every student graduates with relevant experience in their chosen career pathway.

Excellence in education is the bedrock of economic development, population growth, and workforce development, and in 2017 the voters of the Independence and Fort Osage school districts cemented our commitment to education by approving bond and levy referendums. Today we are seeing one new school under construction and renovations to all three Independence high schools. Fort Osage is constructing a new early child education center and making long-awaited improvements to existing schools. Investment in education is the single best indicator of future success for our city, and I applaud the school districts for contributing so significantly to ensuring our future success.

Building the workforce of tomorrow is a true community effort, and our partnerships are strong. The City has provided Community Development Block Grants to Community Services League for adult job training for nurses and welders, two fields that offer career advancement and are desperately in need of candidates. In the coming weeks, we will launch IndepWorks, a digital portal connecting job-seekers with local employers, schools, and training programs. IndepWorks is a customized job search application that allows workers to select their education and skills level but also search by other requirements such as access to public transportation and child care.

We know that lack of internet access is a barrier to employment, so we are in the final stages of installing free public WiFi on our IndyBus system. As much as 27 percent of our citizens never access the internet and 20 percent don't have internet access at home. In talking with our local school districts we discovered that more than 90 percent of families have a smart phone, so by providing free WiFi on our public transportation system, we can connect riders to local job and training opportunities through their mobile devices.

The City is collaborating with the EDC, Ennovation Center, area employers, school districts, community colleges, social service providers, and employment centers to create a comprehensive workforce development task force. Connecting employers to skilled employees is a national challenge and one Independence is prepared to tackle. I am so confident that through our partnerships we can solve the workforce issues and become a model for other communities in our region and across the country.

Michelangelo is quoted as saying – “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”

We will continue to set lofty goals for Independence and look for ways to make them successful.

Earlier this month, my council colleagues and I approved a resolution to make Independence, Missouri the Greenest City in America. This is a lofty goal but one we are already well on our way toward achieving.

In 2014 the Council set a goal to cease coal-fired energy production by 2016. We pledged to increase the amount of energy provide by IPL through renewable source to 10% by 2018 and 15% 2021. Independence has exceeded these targets. IPL ended production at the Missouri City plant and converted the Blue Valley Plant from coal to natural gas in 2015. In 2017 we reached the goal of having 10% of the energy provided by IPL coming from renewable energy sources, and the City is on pace to reach the 15% renewable target well before 2021.

The Council's commitment to renewable energy and energy efficiency has been demonstrated in a number of ways. The entire City of Independence streetlight system was converted to LED, making us the first city of our size to adopt 100% LED street lighting. We built the award-winning LEED Platinum Independence Utility Center, repurposing the former MCI doctor's building. The Council established a community solar facility which will be the largest in the state after completion of its second phase at the former Rockwood Golf Club. Recently the Council approved three separate Property Assessed Clean Energy Programs (PACE) for the financing of residential and commercial energy efficiency and renewable energy projects, and we subsidize an in-house energy efficiency loan program

Beyond renewable energy and energy efficiency, our list of sustainable policies goes on and on so that we can protect the natural environment and expand our transportation and trails systems. Some of our future commitments include adopting environmentally-friendly building

and construction codes, increase electric and autonomous vehicles in the City fleet, and making more electric vehicle charging stations available.

Community, family, progress... this is who we are but also where we want to go. Growth depends on the community supporting families and providing opportunity for all of our citizens to achieve personal success as we progress together.

We are optimistic about our population growth and seeking opportunities to provide the jobs and environment families are looking for.

We are laying the groundwork to improve our workforce with the in-demand training our regional and potential employers need and improve the median income of our community.

I am honored to serve as Mayor of this city and I am incredibly excited about the future. This year will continue to be one filled with opportunity, growth, planning and action.

I know those citizens, tradesmen and pioneers who took that leap of faith 175 years ago would be proud of the community that developed here, the stories their families have created here, and the progress we continue to share.

Thank you for being here, for working toward that future together.