2014 State of the City Address

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you all for coming. We’ll start with a few acknowledgements and then quickly get into this year’s address.

First, please join me in thanking the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce for the opportunity to present this year’s State of the City address, and the title sponsor, Dewberry Architects. Also a huge thank you to Mary Ardapple, the Interim President of the Chamber. Every business person in town knows Mary and how dedicated she is to be an advocate for the business community. Thanks for all your hard work Mary.

As I look around the room, it doesn’t take long to see many of our community leaders and others who are truly committed to the future of Peoria and our entire region – a future characterized by sustainable economic growth, educational success and competitiveness, and local government stability and integrity.

Time doesn’t permit me to recognize everyone, but please allow me a few moments to mention at least a few individuals for their efforts in consistently seeking improvement, safety and vibrancy in our shared urban environment. Please hold your applause until the end and we’ll thank everyone at once. First,..............

- My fellow council members. I’m proud to serve with this hard-working group. Also our City Clerk, City Treasurer, Township Supervisor and Assessor.
- Next, City Manager Patrick Urich and his staff.
- County Board Chairman Tom O’Neil, other members of the Peoria County Board and Administrator Lori Luther.
- District 150 School Board President Rick Cloyd, other board members and Supt. Grenita Lathan.
- Dunlap 323 School Board President Amy Fairfield Doering and other board members, and Supt. Jay Marino
- Special thanks to area Mayors who are with us today. This group tries to meet often and share thoughts to make our region stronger. Mayors Barra, Mingus, Dillon, Allen and Manier.
- Also please recognize Dr. Amir Al-Khafaji, the head of our Sustainability effort which you’ll be hearing more about later.

Finally, all other local and state elected officials as well as school teachers and administrators who are with us today. We appreciate your service and your hard work for our region. Please give them all a round of applause.

2013 was another significant year for us. After a lot of hard work by the Peoria Young Professionals Organization, Peoria was named an All-American City for the 4th time. Only six cities in the United States have won the award more times than Peoria. I’d like to thank the Young Professionals and their leader, Dr. Tim Cundiff, for a job well done. We saw the new Marriott Pere Marquette open, our first ever Marathon in Peoria, and new roads & streetscapes coming into the Warehouse District to make way for new business. It’s exciting to see restaurants like Sugar joining Jim’s downtown, Adams Street Café, Haddad’s and other reliable dining establishments. That list will continue to grow, and remember.................most of these are independent and locally-owned restaurants. Think of these and all the fine places we have to dine that are unique to Peoria........ the Lariat, Fish House, Rizzi’s, Donnelly’s,
Avanti’s, Kellehers, Two Chez, Edge, Los Jimadores, Salt, Rhythm Kitchen, Cracked Pepper, Hoffbrau, Alexander Street Steakhouse, and the list goes on. This is a good time to remind everyone to make an effort to support our locally-owned businesses.

We’re looking forward to more new businesses in Peoria this year as well. The Courtyard Marriott will be open for business this spring, and the newly-remodeled Sheraton Four Points will follow. Look for exciting news on Main & Madison as we work to secure new development that will include a refurbished Madison Theater. More great news is the homecoming of Running Central to Peoria. This summer, Adam and Marie White, the entrepreneurs behind Running Central and RC Race Management will be moving their operations to 311 SW Water Street to give it a new home in downtown Peoria. I cannot tell you how exciting this is for our riverfront. Not only are the Whites investing nearly one and a half million dollars to renovate warehouse space, but they are building a one-of-a-kind retail experience as well. Their 9,000 square foot showroom will be unlike anything else in Illinois, and we expect them to bring thousands of guests ……and, more importantly, shoppers, diners and museum visitors........into our downtown each year. Running Central’s new location is the next important step in the rebirth of our downtown.

While we’re discussing downtown, in early 2014 we will be launching the Downtown Development Corporation. This entity will be charged with driving development in downtown and the Warehouse District. Throughout the country, public-private partnerships such as this are helping advance their communities’ urban cores. In fact, Peoria is likely the largest community in America that doesn’t have an organization whose sole mission is to champion downtown. That ends this year. DDCs can be powerful tools for change and progress. They coordinate efforts, attract investment and match developers with opportunity. The CEO Council and the City of Peoria have been working on this concept since the middle of 2013. Fundraising is underway and the board is beginning to take shape. There is nothing more important to the economic future of this region than the vibrancy of Peoria's downtown and I expect great things from this organization.

The Louisville Slugger project is going to be a home run for Peoria. This project has been in the formulation stage for a couple of years and local businessman Mark Petersen’s team has done a great job of designing a world-class sports complex. When finished, the Louisville Slugger Sport Complex will provide one of the best sports experience for kids in the country! Its goal is to ensure that participants, their coaches and their parents will leave the facility talking more about the tremendous experience they had than they do about how many games were won or lost. The Louisville slugger sports complex will be unique in the Midwest with its size, all-weather versatility, experienced management staff, proximity to hospitality venues and consumer convenience amenities, and partnerships with some of the industry’s top companies and organizations. The complex will be the catalyst for millions of dollars per year in economic impact for the community. During the peak summer months the complex will fill 25% of all the hotel rooms in the Peoria area for nearly one hundred consecutive nights! We’re excited to Welcome Louisville Slugger to Peoria! PLAY BALL!

A tremendous amount of hard work has been invested to attract business development to Peoria, and that hard work is paying dividends. We’re working hard to identify opportunities to expand our current businesses and find new business, and not to simply duplicate existing retail. Think about CSE in the Warehouse District. If you aren’t familiar with them, you should be. Check out their website. (CSESoftware.com). This exciting and innovative company specializes in custom software development. You have to see the serious gaming and simulation they’ve developed to believe it.
As we’ve mentioned before, sometimes it is more difficult to develop and re-develop in an older city with existing buildings and infrastructure than to develop in a green or brownfield. Many times that leads to a bad rap that Peoria is a “difficult” place to do business. The Council and I along with the Manager and his staff are constantly working on ways to streamline our processes to minimize some of the red-tape where possible. Since our City Manager came on board nearly 3 years ago (wow, time flies!) I’ve been talking to him about this sometimes negative perception issue for development. To some people it would seem that our default answer when a new proposal comes along is “NO”. Not only is that not the case, but we’re going to emphasize that in our attitude going forward. You may notice a few people wearing the universal slash button with the word “no” in the middle. This morning I gave the Manager a big bag of those buttons to distribute around City Hall. The message is that when it comes to helping grow business, our first words won’t be “No, you can’t do it”. Don’t mistake that for everything you ask for will be yes. But we’re working towards an attitude that we want to help you accomplish your goals. Let’s see what we can do to help you get there. Let’s work together to make this project happen to benefit your project, the existing business and residents and the area and the city as a whole. I believe this simple reminder to look for positive solutions will enhance the development process going forward.

I’m proud to tell you that the City Council recently approved the first-ever two year budget. A continued slow economic recovery and stale EAV’s have inspired us to plan for more than just the year ahead. My thanks to the City Manager and his staff for helping us craft the two-year budget. The City Manager continued to change the organizational culture at City Hall to focus on responsiveness and efficiency. The responses to the spring floods and the November tornado by our city staff were outstanding examples of quality public service. Our new Public Works Director Mike Rogers came to us from San Antonio, bringing a fresh, young and vibrant perspective as well as a focus on customer service.

Last year I provided a list of accomplishments achieved by our Sustainability Commission, chaired by Dr. Amir Al-Khafaji. Called Peoria Sustainability 2.0, the Commission focuses on economic development, social equity and sustainability initiatives for the future. The strategic plan is to achieve regional and state-wide sustainability. Let me mention just a few of the things our Sustainability group led by Dr. Al-Khafaji achieved last year:

- Probably near the top of the list was the due diligence done by the commission to give the Council important information to make a decision on the Water Company purchase option.
- The Commission held the third annual executive summit that was attended by 42 of the most prominent national leaders in infrastructure. The attendees included then-Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Illinois Secretary of Transportation Ann Schneider, Chicago Commissioner of Aviation Rosie Andolino and Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno. The discussion focused on pension reform and sustainable funding for infrastructure.
- The Commission held the 4th annual Christmas toy giveaway in conjunction with the PHA. The event was held at the Gateway Building and was attended by over 250 children and family members.
- Members of the commission and a group of Bradley students worked together to clean up the floodplain of the Illinois River in the greater Peoria area to help our environment.
- Bradley student Moses White-Miller was going to drop out of BU because of financing issues. The commission provided financial support and guidance and the city offered him a part time paid internship. This allowed Moses to graduate in December with a degree in Civil Engineering.
He is the first in his family to earn a college degree. This is not just about touching one life but helping a family and community gain an engineer that could have been a dropout.

- The Commission assembled a state-wide Disadvantaged Business Enterprise focus group to help with capacity building and participation of women and minority-owned businesses. The group met in Chicago to launch several new initiatives.

- The Commission met with a diverse group of investors in Michigan interested in potential investment opportunities in the Warehouse District and other areas of Peoria. Members of the group will be visiting in the next month or two.

- The Commission is working with an International environmental design firm to open a new minority-owned office in Peoria and,

- The Sustainability Commission now has a presence at City Hall and a website linked to the City’s website.

I’m grateful for the Sustainability Commission, and I believe that the work being done by this group is helping to make Peoria a world-class All-American city. I think we can agree that another thing we need to do to achieve this stature is to continue to place a strong focus on Education. It’s important to note that our school-related problems are not unique to Peoria. Most mid-size urban communities with high concentrations of poverty, low-performing schools, localized crime and high unemployment due to a lack of appropriate job skills are suffering as well. I attended the US Conference of Mayors winter meetings in Washington, DC last week and the number one issue of Mayors across the country was improving and reforming our struggling schools. A couple of years ago I told you that I was working with other Mayors across the state on this issue, and we have now formed a 501(c) organization that you will begin to hear more about in 2014. We will work together on a host of issues of mutual concern, but education reform initiatives will be our main focus.

After many years of pounding the “education” issues on the bully pulpit, I believe the community is really beginning to engage on this subject. With people like Glen Barton, Tom Fliege, John Sahn, along with Councilmembers Spain and Weaver participating in the discussion, we know we HAVE to improve the quality of our graduates. Sam Nelson from the Illinois Student Assistance Commission has brought the State’s “College Changes Everything” program to Peoria and really raising awareness about this important topic. Our community cannot move forward without well-educated, skilled workers for both white collar and blue collar jobs. We HAVE to do more and we have to do it better. In my opinion a community focus on education issues and solutions should be priority NUMBER ONE for everyone. Ask yourself what you, your company, your church or other organizations are doing to move the ball forward?

Every year I remind everyone of the outstanding educational resources we have the privilege of enjoying in the area. Think about the offerings we boast after grade and high school. Our pre-eminent, world class private institution on the hill.....Bradley University. Illinois Central College, University of Illinois Peoria Center, U of I College of Medicine in Peoria, Midstate College, Robert Morris College, Eureka College, St. Francis and Methodist Nursing Schools. It’s an amazing offering for a city our size. In recent strategic planning sessions, the City Council prioritized education in our community.

Don’t forget that one of Peoria’s assets is Dunlap School District 323. For those that don’t realize it, over 70% of Dunlap students have City of Peoria addresses. Although D150’s issues are very intense and we spend a lot of time working together to assist them, we’re also focused on the importance of
maintaining the strong reputation that 323 has built and we are reaching out to their Superintendent and Board to enhance communications between the City and their Board and Administration.

Even though the City Council doesn’t have any governing control over our schools, I am committed to keeping a focus on educational performance in Peoria. We have to do better. The quality of our education system is the number one factor influencing our ability to grow Peoria and we’re not going in the right direction. I hope that everyone will continue to support and “invest” in Peoria Promise. We’re six years old now and have supported over 1300 students in the program. Without Caterpillar, OSF & Methodist, RLI, IAWC, CEFCU and others, this program would not have survived. We still need your help – I encourage you to get involved personally, and to have your company contact Peoria Promise Executive Director Sheri McGill to learn more about how you can help us. I’d like to recognize the hard-working Peoria Promise Board of Directors and their Director and ask those present to please stand up and be recognized.

This is probably a good time to acknowledge a gentleman who has done more to foster communication and community discussion on school–related issues than anyone--my unpaid, over-worked Education Liaison for the past 8+ years, Dr. Bill Collier. Dr. Collier is a lifelong Peorian, administrator and longtime Superintendent for Dunlap 323. I couldn’t count the hundreds of hours he’s spent, but I know there isn’t a person with any association with education around here that doesn’t know and respect the efforts of Dr. Bill Collier.

For these reasons and many more, I’m proud to announce that at this time, I’d like to present this year’s Mayor’s Outstanding Community Service Award to Dr. Bill Collier for his continued hard work to improve the most important assets for our community’s success.............. our kids’ education. Please join me in congratulating Dr. Collier at this time.

You’ll recall that last year we presented Susie Ketterer, Maggie Whalen and Team Simantel that award for their extraordinary efforts on the Don’t Shoot initiative. Don’t Shoot continues to mature and according to statistics, we’re beginning to see some signs of improvement fighting gun crimes in our community. I’m sure you’ve heard about Carl Cannon’s new program that focuses on educating our youngsters to stay away from guns and crime. He has dubbed the effort, “Don’t Start” and it’s the first of its kind in the country. We have come to expect success in any program Carl becomes involved with, and I know the Don’t Start program will have a tremendous positive impact on our community and our young people.

In spite of continued tough times, the Council and I are committed to making Peoria a safer community. Our investment in Shotspotter technology is proof of that. We also allocated sufficient dollars in our operating budget to complement a COPS grant, allowing us to hire at least 16 police officers. Public Safety in our community is a priority and we want to give our outstanding police officers and fire fighters the manpower and tools they need to provide for our safety.

Speaking of public safety, I’d like to quickly mention that Fire Chief Kent Tomblin recently appointed as his first assistant Chief a distinguished, experienced long-time fire professional and former Chief in Pekin. Please join me in welcoming our new Assistant Chief Chuck Lauss.

Chief Settingsgaard and Sheriff McCoy continued their efforts to determine the feasibility of merging or consolidating law enforcement in Peoria on a County-wide basis in response to my challenge at the State
of the City two years ago. Research on the subject, particularly through Michigan State University’s Program on Consolidated and Shared Services, has enabled them to identify many of the significant opportunities and challenges that are presented when executing a consolidation. Major issues that have been identified range from concern for local accountability to differences in labor contracts to executive leadership structures.

A meeting was recently held with Dr. Alexander Weiss, a member of Michigan State’s Consolidated and Shared Services Team and the former Director of Northwestern University’s Center for Public Safety. Based upon a recommendation from Dr. Weiss, the Chief and Sheriff will be traveling to Louisville, Kentucky in March to learn from a community whose consolidation efforts have many similarities to our situation in Peoria. Dr. Weiss may be contracted to consult on the Peoria consolidation efforts.

The final topic in the area of public safety will be a few words about our local American Red Cross. Anne Fox is a well-known and respected leader in our community. Her Board Chairman is Caterpillar’s Greg Folley and, with other distinguished area leaders, they have taken our local office to the upper echelons of Red Cross chapters throughout the state. Between the floods this spring and the tornadoes this fall, we really came to know the importance of a world-class Red Cross organization this year. I encourage you to learn more about the Red Cross Ready Rating Program. It’s a free, web-based program designed to help businesses, organizations and schools prepare for emergencies. Members complete a self-paced, online assessment of their current readiness level and receive immediate, customized feedback with tips to improve preparedness and tools to develop a disaster plan designed for their unique circumstances. Visit readyrating.org to get started today. Information is on your table. If you wait until after the disaster to plan.................you’re too late.

There are always so many topics to mention and not enough time to say it all. As I bring this year’s address to a close, there are a few things that I want to reinforce.

First of all, we are an outstanding community. We’re an All-American City. We should all be proud. Very proud. We are blessed with a very diverse business community. Most of those businesses are committed to engaging in areas & initiatives that make us stronger. I can’t mention you all, but I have to mention the foundation of our business community, Caterpillar, Inc. I don’t think there is a person who lives and works in central Illinois that isn't positively impacted by the generosity of Caterpillar every single day of the year. Their leadership is second to none and I would like to publicly acknowledge Chairman/CEO Doug Oberhelman and Team Caterpillar for all they do here and around the world.

Secondly, it goes without saying that it was an extremely difficult November for many of our friends and neighbors due to the devastating tornado that tore through central Illinois. I would like to commend area leaders for their diligent efforts to provide leadership and guide their communities through an extremely difficult time. I have to take a moment to give special mention to Washington Mayor Gary Manier. Mayor Manier was going to be here today but he got an offer he couldn’t refuse. He’ll be attending the President’s State of the Union address tonight as a guest of Senator Mark Kirk. Rarely does the public get to see true courageous mayoral leadership in the face of heart-rending human tragedy and breathtaking physical destruction. But such leadership indeed happened beginning November 17 last year when a monster tornado ... over 1/8 mile wide ... blitzed the City of Washington and ripped apart over 3 ½ miles of urban environment. Over 1,000 homes were destroyed or seriously damaged by winds upwards of 200 miles per hour, causing tons of life-threatening debris to fill the sky.
Washington was seriously wounded, but not broken. Before the last of the debris hit the ground – some as far as 200 miles away – Mayor Gary Manier was on the scene to provide leadership of intensity, tenacity, compassion, perseverance and courage. In times like what Washington residents faced November 17, and to this day, they needed someone to look to for direction, guidance and comfort. They are getting it in super doses from Mayor Manier. The people of Washington are indeed blessed to have someone of Gary Manier’s stature and leadership in the Mayor’s chair at this time in its rich history. This is the finest example of mayoral leadership and courage I have personally had the privilege of witnessing. A strong city of Washington makes our entire community stronger and the same for Pekin, East Peoria and the rest of our neighboring communities. Please remember to support our friends as they work hard to re-build their communities.

In closing, I want to thank everyone for being here today. It’s an honor to serve as your mayor. I am fortunate to say that in delivering this, my ninth State of the City address, I have more optimism, enthusiasm and excitement about what’s happening here than at any other time. We’re addressing areas that need attention and continuing to move forward. The Council and I can’t do it all. We need you. Please leave here today with a resolution to start getting involved, or to increase your involvement. God has blessed us with many assets. We need to be sure we acknowledge them and make our community and the world better off than how we inherited it. I know we will. God bless you all and let’s have a great year in 2014. Good afternoon.