State of the City ---2021

Good afternoon. Thanks for attending the first ever, virtual State of the City address. I’d like to thank Tracy Coker, again, from Dewberry for her introduction, the Chamber of Commerce for hosting the address, and to Dewberry and Humana for sponsoring the event.

This year marks the 16th year that I’ve had the opportunity to represent the City in the State of the City in this address. In case you hadn’t heard, it will also be my last as I made the difficult decision not to seek re-election to a fifth term this year.

There are many things I could reminisce about over these past 16 years, but don’t worry………I’m not going to take you on a trip down memory lane today. But I would ask you to allow me one recollection from a State of the City speech in the past. In particular I’m going to go back and revisit 2007.

On January 30th of that year, President George W. Bush visited Peoria. I had the extraordinary opportunity to greet President Bush at the bottom of the stairs of Air Force One and ride in the Presidential limousine with then Congressman Ray Lahood and the President on his way to visit local small business owners at Louie’s Sterling Family Restaurant. We miss your restaurant, Louie. It was most definitely the ride of a lifetime which I’ll never forget. The State of the City address was the next day and I was still flying high from the President’s visit. Some of you may recall that I opened my speech relaying a story from the previous evening at my home, after I’d met with the President. Reliving the events with my wife, Mimi, I asked her, “Mimi, in your wildest dreams could you ever imagine that I would’ve had the chance to meet the President at the steps of Air Force One and then actually ride in his limo and have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to visit for 20 minutes or so?” I also conveyed that Mimi’s response was, “Jim, I’m sorry to tell you….but you’re not in my wildest dreams!”

Fast forward to 2020, and I ask you all—in your wildest dreams, did you ever think that you’d actually live through a pandemic that would change the world as we knew it? Did you ever envision a day that you’d wear a mask everywhere you went in public? Most businesses would be closed and churches, too? I never contemplated that it would happen in my lifetime. Well, those days are gone forever.

So today I’m going to review how we got from last year to right now and what’s next.

The 2020 budget was balanced. The Civic Center was setting all-time attendance records for concerts, conventions, and theater events. Restaurants were reaping the benefits. Our Museum, which inspires lifelong learning for all, connecting art, history, science, and achievement was also setting attendance records, thanks to CEO John Morris and his team. Our budget was balanced AND we were putting over a million dollars into reserves. But by the middle of March, our hallmark event welcoming spring, the State’s biggest and best St. Patrick’s Day parade was cancelled. The IHSA State Basketball Tournament was cancelled. And soon almost every other business, school, and church would be shuttered.

In April, budget projections indicated a revenue deficit of $54.5 million dollars. Devastating. By August, that revenue shortfall was revised to $27.6 million which, while not as devastating, was still extremely difficult and painful. We were facing huge shortfalls in nearly every category, especially hotel, restaurant, and amusement taxes, property taxes, and corporate income taxes. This is how municipalities pay our bills. Although we did see somewhat of a recovery, our 2021 revenues are still expected to be about 12% lower than our original ’20-21 budget estimates. We were able to re-calibrate our ’20-’21 budgets through
a combination of capital reductions, restructuring debt, and making difficult operating reductions through furloughs, layoffs, and early retirements.

Many extremely difficult decisions were made, and I applaud the City Manager and his team for bringing the City Council many options to address the pandemic budget. I also commend the City Council for coming together to address this dreadful situation.

So, as I speak to you today, compared to where we were a few short months ago, there is somewhat of a light at the end of the tunnel. We’re all looking forward to the day when mass vaccinations lead to herd immunity and bringing Covid-19 under control.

You may recall, last year’s address emphasized a large number of enterprises in our area utilizing innovative concepts to develop their business. Yes, innovation is the dominant buzzword in the world when it comes to entrepreneurs and job development. Last year I highlighted Jump Simulation, Enduvo, Natural Fiber Welding, and NTS. I don’t have time to go into them all in this year’s shortened, virtual format, but take a look at this slide with a list of local entrepreneurs utilizing innovative concepts in their business platform right here in Peoria.

Many of you know that we’re a part of the Illinois Innovation Network. The network is designed to use innovation, research, and education to turn Illinois around and improve our state’s economy. Improving our economy is going to be no small task. I mention it every year and Mayors across the state are stressing the importance of pension reform by our state legislature. If not addressed, it will bankrupt Illinois. It’s not “if”, but “when” and “when” is coming at us like a rocket. Please tell your state reps and senators to address this situation in the spring session.

On January 4th of this year the Distillery Labs first Executive Director, Paul Leamon, took the wheel. Distillery Labs is a member of the Illinois Innovation Network and will be the hub of our area’s entrepreneurial environment. We’re excited and proud to have Paul here. Distillery Labs is located in the former ICC Thomas Building in the heart of our Innovation District in downtown Peoria.

One of the partner organizations making up Distillery Labs is OSF HealthCare. What an impact they’re having on healthcare in Illinois and Michigan, but especially in central Illinois and downtown Peoria, in particular! Just about a month ago, the former Caterpillar LD building officially opened as OSF OnCall. Eventually about 400 mission partners will work at that location and bring much needed energy and vitality to our downtown. It’s essentially a hospital without walls. This technology intensive space will be the new hub for electronically based care programs for OSF HealthCare facilities throughout Illinois and Michigan.

Ground will be broken soon on the new OSF Comprehensive Cancer Center on the main campus at OSF St. Francis Medical Center. You may have noticed some of the demolition work already taking place on the site of the former Allied Agencies building off of Armstrong Avenue. One of the hallmarks of the Comprehensive Cancer Center will be proton-beam therapy. This will be just the 2nd center in Illinois and the newest of only 32 in all of North America. It will be state-of-the-art and deliver treatment with extreme precision and speed. The timeline for construction of the $250 million dollar center will depend on philanthropic fundraising efforts, with a goal of providing the first treatments as soon as 2023.

Perhaps the most anticipated event downtown will be the opening of OSF’s new Ministry Headquarters, in the historic Block & Kuhl building. Even during the pandemic, construction continued safely, and more
history is now being brought back to life. Hundreds of good paying construction jobs have benefited our local economy with this major project. If construction stays on schedule, the opening could be a great Christmas present for us this year. OSF Mission Partners will move into their new home gradually and, when fully occupied, upwards of 800 people will work there. Add that to the 400 at OnCall I mentioned earlier, a lot of activity in Distillery Labs, and businesses yet to be announced that will provide products and services to all those folks.......... you’re going to realize that our downtown and warehouse district will bring much desired vitality back to the area. Thank you, OSF.

And right across the interstate, in 2020 at UnityPoint Health, it was “All hands on deck for COVID”. As we started a new year, UnityPoint partnered with the Peoria City/County Health Department to administer COVID vaccines and has already vaccinated thousands of patients in a few short weeks. At UnityPlace, mental health and addiction experts have been critical as they help with the mental and emotional strain from the pandemic, including providing access to care using telehealth. UnityPoint recognizes that 2020 further exposed racial inequity in our community and has continued its efforts to make an impact through health equity programs, educating staff about unconscious bias, and community partnerships. Despite the pandemic, UnityPoint has invested in multi-million-dollar new cancer radiation therapy equipment, added more specialists in vascular and cancer surgery, and is expanding educational programs at Methodist College.

I know that both UnityPoint and OSF send a huge thank you to the community of Peoria for their unwavering support of healthcare workers this year. We’d like to thank the doctors, nurses, and staff for their long hours, expert care, and deep compassion for patients. We’re extremely blessed to have such exceptional healthcare for a community our size. And it’s expanding and advancing!

As critical as some may be about our community, we must do a better job at educating critics about our strengths and differentiating ourselves positively because of what we have to offer. And we have several unique organizations that really set our community apart. When they’re augmented with other groups, their impacts are exponential.

One of those unique assets is the National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research. Most of us know it as the “Ag Lab” on University near the Interstate. Our lab is one of four labs set up by the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938. The Northern Lab developed one of the first industrialized production techniques for penicillin in Peoria. The lab employs more than 200 scientists and support staff and contributes to the economic vitality of the city via a $32 million federal investment in science and technology.

The world-class science conducted at our Lab is being used to improve crop production, food safety, environmental sustainability, and economic development nationwide. The lab continues to add energy to the private sector by translating NCAUR technologies into biobased manufacturing of value-added products from crops and agricultural byproducts. In addition, the AgLab is growing. Over the last year, the lab brought in funding for new research programs, including one focused on improving the production and quality of malting barley. The lab added nearly 20 employees in the last year and is planning to add at least 20 more employees over the next year. In addition, the lab is branching out by pursuing the addition of new research projects to improve pollinator health, the production and utilization of industrial hemp and sorghum, and the development of cereal crops that are resilient to changing climate conditions. The lab has strong support from a nationwide network of farmers, food processors, and a wide variety of biotech and other industrial partners, and is contributing to new initiatives to bring biobased manufacturing to Peoria and the region.
Per USDA Information Service - Each dollar invested in ag research results in $17 of economic impact. So, do the math. $32 million times $17 dollars means our Ag Lab has a half a billion-dollar impact on our economy.

There are unique partnership opportunities between the University of Illinois, our College of Medicine, JumpSim, OSF, NCAUR, Bradley, UnityPoint, ICC, and people leading Bio-Tech innovation like Peoria’s own Jake Becraft. Jake is the grandson of former city council member, Warren Reynolds, nephew of Peoria’s Owen and Carole Ackerman, and a proud son of Central Illinois.

I hope some of you may have seen the recent op-ed that Jake had in local news outlets. It was entitled, “Peoria’s Next Innovation: Biotechnology”. Jake and others have started a campaign to bring Biomanufacturing to Peoria. Jake grew up here in central Illinois. He was finishing his PhD at MIT several years ago when he co-founded Strand Therapeutics. His biotech company develops messenger RNA gene therapies. These are the same therapies being developed by Moderna, Pfizer, and others to attack COVID. Jakes thought is “where better to launch a biomanufacturing plan to research the scalability of pandemic countermeasures than the original home of life-saving biomanufacturing in Peoria, Illinois?” Jake has officially launched the Peoria Bio-Made initiative to bring biomanufacturing here. We are working with Jake and our state and federal leaders to make the case for boosting Biotechnology in Peoria. There is no reason why Peoria can’t become a world leader in biomanufacturing.

Look at this quote from Jake Becraft and give it some thought: “The Greatest Generation was defined by their victory over the Nazis and fascism, and how they took humanity to space and the moon. Ours will be defined by our mastery of biology. We have a generational imperative to invest now in defending our species against the threat of future health pandemics. We have the science, technology, and the infrastructure. What we don’t have is time to waste before the next global emergency. Let’s build this.” And I say, “Let’s build it here in Peoria”. 

As I draw towards the close, I want to be sure and reinforce the importance of education for our next generation of leaders……our kids. We all know that they’re being drastically and negatively impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions. The challenges all students have faced this past year is like no other – Peoria Promise students notwithstanding. Peoria Promise currently have over 350 students at Illinois Central College who are on track to completion in the spring. Primarily low income, over 48% of our students are first in family to attend college. 74% are Black and Brown students. Our active enrollment remains at an all-time high. The program, in its 13th year, has raised over $5.8M and provided support to over 3900 students. 92% of our students complete their studies, with 60% transferring to complete their degrees. Recent surveys show our students are returning, with 90% now working in the region, becoming active, successful citizens in our community. THIS is the goal of Peoria Promise. It was a grueling year to raise investment dollars for our kids and your investment in our kids, through Peoria Promise, would be greatly appreciated.

To that point, all of our local not-for-profits have had a difficult past year and their needs are at an all-time high. We all know that the Peoria area is extremely generous. Please continue to support our vital not-for-profits and also our local businesses. Some won’t make it through this crisis, but many more will if we continue to focus on buying local. PLEASE CONTINUE TO SPEND YOUR DOLLARS LOCALLY!

I’d also like to thank Nick Yates and “Build Peoria” for their continued efforts to make a positive impact in our community. They’re working on their next project and want to hear from you. Let them know what
your ideas are. Please continue to support this great group of young leaders focused on making profound things happen positively in our community.

I’d also like to give a shout out again this year to Kim Blickenstaff. This entrepreneur and philanthropic leader has been extraordinarily generous in focusing his time, talents, and treasures here in Central Illinois. I can’t wait for all of you to see what he’s done at the Scottish Rite Cathedral, not to mention Sankoty Lakes in Spring Bay, and what we’ve already seen at the Betty Jayne in the Heights. When you see him around, be sure to tell him “thank you”. Words just can’t express the value he brings to this place that we all call home.

A couple of quick “welcomes” to the community in addition to Paul Leamon. First to Coadjutor Bishop Lou Tylka. Next to Bradley President Stephen Standifird and third, to Joshua Gunn at the Chamber and the CEO Council.

It’s been my pleasure for a number of years now to present the Mayor’s Outstanding Community Service Award. I’m very excited to announce this year’s recipients not only as the Mayor of Peoria but also as a member of the Foundation Philanthropy Team at OSF. Congratulations to the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, the OSF Administrative Leadership, Dr. James McGee, and to Tom Hammerton and his team. This year’s recipients are those responsible for making the dream of a world-class Cancer Center in Peoria, Illinois, a reality. I promise you, that NOTHING will have a bigger impact on our community in the coming decade than the building and completion of the new Comprehensive Cancer Center that I mentioned at the outset of my address. I know the impact it will have on revitalizing and setting our community on a new course for future success. In addition to the vision of the OSF Sisters of St. Francis and the support of their executive leadership to make this happen, a large measure of this project has been made possible through the leadership of Dr. James McGee, Radiation Oncologist at OSF and Tom Hammerton, Foundation President at OSF. Sharing a drive and passion to dramatically minimize the impacts of cancer in central Illinois, we will all benefit immensely by their efforts. I don’t take this statement lightly, and neither should you. The OSF Comprehensive Cancer Center in Peoria will TRANSFORM our community!

Please watch this short video. Congratulations and thank you to Dr. McGee, Tom Hammerton, and OSF for your unwavering commitment to the health and vitality of our community.

I would like to thank the city councils past and present that I’ve served on since 1999, our City Manager Patrick Urich, our city staff, and our citizens for opportunity to serve for 6 years as an at-large council member and for 16 years as your Mayor.

There’s never enough time in this address to thank and acknowledge everyone doing great things. For instance, Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey’s efforts to bring Manufacturing Academy opportunities here is terrific. Please accept my apologies that time was limited to mention you all.

As you know, every year as I close this address, I challenge our community. This year the challenge is to VOTE in our local municipal elections. I don’t know that we’ve ever faced such a challenging future. It’s nice to see many people wanting to serve. Keep in mind how important these positions are. A thorough understanding of the budget, business experience, knowledge of the issues we’re facing, and the ability to work collaboratively to move our city forward are critical, especially for our next Mayor. It’s not a good time for on-the-job-training. Take the time to understand the candidate’s abilities through experience, passion for our community’s success, and vision to take us to the next level. Negative campaigns don’t tell us what you can accomplish. The reason you’re negative is because you likely haven’t accomplished
much. It tells us you’re negative. Leave the negative at the state and federal level. We’re in the greatest city in the Midwest—Peoria, Illinois. How will you, as our next Mayor, take us forward?

Let’s strive to set a record for voter turnout this year. Employers, incentivize and encourage your employees to vote. Everyone watching today, ask at least 10 family members or friends to vote. Tell them to encourage at least 10 people to vote. Let’s have a strong turnout at the general election on April 6. The future of our community has never been more reliant on a strong leader for our community.

This is a **GREAT** community and working together we’ll be even better. Let’s resolve to do that. In closing, I’d like to leave you with a few words from J.J. Watt from the Houston Texans. He won the Walter Payton Award in 2018 and said this, “Whether we realize it or not, we are affecting everyone around us with our every move. The more that we can shine a light on the positivity and the good that there is in this world, the better off we’re going to be. We all have to go through this crazy journey together, so why not help each other out and make it as great of a journey as possible? Take a moment. Ask yourself, ‘How can I make a difference? No matter how big, no matter how small, how can I make a difference?’ And when you have your answer, go out and do it."

God bless you all and thanks again for the opportunity to serve.