

2024 State of the City Address

“Peoria – The Best is Yet to Come”

Cindy, thank you for that kind introduction and many thanks to Hanson Professional Services for signing on, again this year, as the title sponsor for today’s event. A tremendous thanks also to Advanced Medical Transport for your sponsorship and ongoing support to our community.

Good evening, everyone. Thank you so much for attending today’s State of the City event. Many thanks to the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce for hosting this affair in another **spectacular** Peoria location. We may be close to the city boundary, but we are still sitting or standing in the **city** of Peoria.

I want to commend Joshua Gunn on his remarkable job leading the Chamber over the past few years and a huge congratulations to Jessica Linder Gallo, the new President and CEO who is highly qualified, fired up, and ready to take charge and move the organization forward. I wish them both the best of success in their new roles.

Haven on the Farm opened last October as a charming new wedding and event venue on a historic 10-acre farm. The business is a lifetime dream of its owner, Ashley Wurzer, who grew up on a farm in Peoria, went to college to become a nurse anesthetist – and worked for 17 years at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. One day, she walked out of the operating room, on her break, and decided to buy a little piece of the pie in her hometown – and she did just that – purchasing a few acres at a time which resulted in this beautiful space. Welcome home Ashley – we wish you continued success!

This is just one of many phenomenal Peoria stories!

I want to thank and acknowledge my colleagues on the Peoria City Council who have joined us today. Please stand and remain standing as I call your name. (Council Members: Denise Jackson, Dr. Bernice Gordon-Young, Tim Riggenbach, Andre Allen, Denis Cyr, John Kelly, Dr. Kiran Velpula, Zach Oyler, Mike Vespa). Thank you all for your **dedicated** leadership in service to Peoria.

Thank you to all the other public elected officials, from numerous bodies of government, and to all of our business and non-profit leaders who partner with the city to make our community strong. We truly appreciate the collaboration.

Many thanks to our City Manager, Patrick Urich, who is responsible for ensuring the work gets done – implementing the policies and assuming overall responsibility for 685 city employees. Manager Urich has a great leadership team and he and his staff work hard **every** day to keep our city running smoothly.

Lastly, I’d like to thank all of the volunteers who serve on our many City Commissions as they play a crucial role in the joint governance of the city.

The Haven on the Farm story – Ashley’s story – highlights the theme of my presentation today – **Peoria: The Best is Yet to Come!**

While I do believe that miracles happen – that sometimes we get lucky – that the stars may align for certain things, I am also of the opinion that great things don’t happen without a plan.

In fact, great things have been planned for Peoria’s future moving forward. Over this past year, we created a new 5-Year Peoria Strategic Plan **in collaboration with key stakeholders** (our residents, businesses, employers, education institutions, labor groups, social service and community partners, city staff, and city council). Many of you were there and will remember that we rolled up our sleeves and identified Six Strategic Priorities that will guide our investments, our resources, and our actions to ensure the growth and vitality that we need moving forward through year 2029.

These six priorities include:

Quality of Life, Community Safety, Downtown Development, Business Growth and Prosperity, Public Infrastructure Resiliency, and Embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Before I share our plans and progress in these areas, let me provide you with an overview of the city’s **Finances**:

Over this past year, we have maintained a conservative approach to budgeting.

This past October, we approved a record-setting two-year budget for 2024-2025.

With no increases in the property tax rate and no debt issuance.... let me say that again – With no increases in the property tax rate and no debt issuance, our budget of \$324 million for 2024 and \$287 million for 2025 reflects **significant investments** in public infrastructure and economic development initiatives – I’ll share more on that in a bit.

City revenues grew by more than \$36 million or 13% from 2021 to 2023. The primary drivers for this growth were increased Hotel, Restaurant, and Amusement taxes, personal property replacement taxes, online sales taxes, ARPA funding, and external grants. Grants received from our state and federal partners totaled \$42.7 million in 2024 and \$16.1 million (so far) for 2025. We thank them for this tremendous help. I call this leveraging OPM – other peoples’ money.

We decreased the city’s debt by \$860k and, as I mentioned earlier, will have no new bond issues.

American Rescue Program Act (ARPA) funds have been a tremendous help. This year, the city will spend the remaining \$10M in ARPA funds on infrastructure, neighborhoods, economic development, and violence reduction.

The city’s workforce increased by 13 additional staff this past year with nine of these assisting with stormwater maintenance.

Despite our ongoing challenges with unfunded pension mandates, the city of Peoria is in a strong financial position. We’ve been able to breathe a bit more, invest a bit more, and pay down debt.

Our goal with the **Quality-of-Life** priority is to facilitate a system, among Peoria's various sectors (education, the arts, recreation, and healthcare), to support the availability of rich, diverse and fulfilling programs and amenities for Peoria residents and visitors.

Our Community Development Department has been working tirelessly on many fronts, to make Peoria better. Some examples are:

The city Land Bank is effectively dealing with blighted and abandoned properties. In 2023, 164 dilapidated or unsafe residential properties were demolished. Another 155 new parcels were acquired from the county with 16 transferred to responsible new owners and several others will be rehabilitated and renovated. Where we can save a home, we will.

Over this past year, the city:

- Replaced 40 roofs for income-eligible residents.
- Assisted 275 residents with utility bill payments.
- Provided 27 home downpayment assistance grants to encourage home ownership.
- And partnered with Peoria Park District to renovate Logan and Morton Square Park.

We partnered with Peoria Public Schools for the Peoria Role Model Program, generously sponsored by PNC Bank. 100 professional role models are mentoring over 100 inner-city students with guidance, support, and exposure to many careers and life-changing opportunities.

Last year, I announced the Pivotal and Peoria Opportunities Churchview Gardens project – it will break ground this year, providing 47 units of affordable housing on Peoria's southside. The City provided \$1.2 million in HOME funds and vacant lots for this very exciting \$18M project.

The site of the demolished McKinley school will be used by Habitat for Humanity to build at least 12-15 new owner-occupied homes. This will be **transformative** for that area.

The Peoria Civic Center continues to thrive – attendance is up over 20% and we've invested in renovations such as new scoreboards, sound systems, a new roof, carpet, and other necessities. Groups are noticing these improvements and convention bookings are up.

Poverty and Homelessness is a problem faced by all cities, and we are no exception. But we are working aggressively with our phenomenal housing partners at the Home for all Continuum of Care and their partners to provide shelter and permanent housing to Peoria's unhoused population.

Over this next year, we plan to increase Peoria's labor force by 3% annually, reduce the number of persons experiencing homelessness by 10%, and work with our partners to improve the overall health and wellness of Peoria residents.

What you can expect to see in the days ahead are people enjoying a higher quality of life in Peoria. This translates to happier people. Peoria has always been my Happy Place.

Our goal with the **Downtown Development** priority is to attract commercial and residential development of all types, including mixed-use, to create a safe, thriving, and entertaining downtown area. We are fully committed to revitalizing Peoria's downtown as a great place to live, work, and play.

The time to do this is now and the demand for residential housing downtown and the Warehouse District remains strong. Developers are responding with numerous new projects including:

- Chic Flats and Apartments, luxury housing under construction at 1001 SW Adams
- 812 Development, 812 SW Washington Street
- Oculus, downtown housing project at 800 Washington Street
- Adams and Oak Federal Warehouse project
- And Center Plaza (next to Zion Coffee)

With these 5 projects, Peoria will gain 512 additional residential units, 57,500 additional square feet of commercial footage with an investment of \$129.5 M into our downtown. Homes, apartments, and commercial real estate. This is the future of downtown Peoria with more to come.

Additionally, the Salvation Army will replace its men's shelter with a brand-new building on the site of the Peoria Labor Temple on Jefferson Street.

The increase in residents living in downtown Peoria will attract more, and more sustainable, retail establishments including grocery and pharmacy stores.

Our Riverfront has always been a focal point of the city, and we have exciting, award-winning plans to redevelop this jewel, particularly the space between the Murray Baker and Bob Michel bridges. This space will include a kayak launch, dog park, interactive water features, sports courts, an expanded riverfront market and so much more.

Allow me to tick off a few other major downtown investment projects that are planned:

\$16M – to convert Adams and Jefferson Streets to two-way traffic, encouraging drivers to slow down and see the city versus rushing in and out of it.

\$10M for sidewalk reconstruction.

And \$52M for Main Street reconstruction from Water Street to Farmington Road.

And it's not just governmental bodies spending money downtown. Private investors like Kert Huber invested \$5.5M in renovating the beautiful Commerce Building – now called 416 Main. And the phenomenal OSF Headquarter redevelopment represented a \$150M investment.

To paraphrase the movie Field of Dreams - If you rebuild it – they will come.

Another goal is to increase the residential population of downtown, increase the hotel occupancy, and increase the number of downtown events. We have SMART goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound. Trust me, it's going to happen.

Our goal with the **Community Safety** priority is to invest in holistic crime reduction programs and collaborative initiatives that address root cause issues so that everyone feels safe in Peoria.

I admit that the high rates of youth violence and crime have been the most frustrating part of my job as mayor. But we are **not** throwing in the towel. The city, the schools, and our state and community partners continue to devote more resources and attention to this issue, and we all remain committed to progress.

We are providing our youth with more exposure to positive experiences, therefore reducing their idle time. Through the Mayor's Youth Internship Program, we have employed 100 14 & 15 year-olds over the last three summers, giving them their first job experience and teaching them basic work skills and real work job expectations. We also employed 25 school-age youth ages 16-19 to work in the city's Public Works Department assisting with infrastructure improvements, beautification and clean-up projects throughout the city.

We are stepping up our law enforcement efforts with tools like Targeted Patrols and the special downtown task force. – a designated group of ten officers that patrol downtown, on foot and in vehicles Friday and Saturday nights.

We are adding police drones, updating policing cameras and radios, and employing technology like License Plate Readers to keep our streets safe.

Police Chief Echevarria and his team are actively developing relationships and partnerships with our community. Their new Transparency Dashboard called Know More, No More, allows the community to understand where police resources are being deployed and to track issues in their own neighborhoods.

And progress is being made. Compared to this same time last year in Peoria, Shooting Incidents are down 14%, Shooting Victims are down 23%, Shooting Murders are down 20% and Total Murders are down 44%. These are the facts ladies and gentlemen.

I'm also very proud of our Fire Department and the innovations they are establishing under Chief Shawn Sollberger. The Department was selected for the Vision 20/20 Onsite Community Risk Reduction project. This award provides training, coaching and technical assistance to develop a comprehensive risk reduction plan for the city. It will help our fire department, which responds to over 20,000 incidents a year, to be more proactive and engaged with the community.

We also have plans and funding to demolish and rebuild Fire Station 16 on Northmoor Road.

Over the next year, we plan to reduce violent crime and make people feel safer in Peoria.

Our goal with the **Infrastructure** priority is to improve streets, sidewalks, rail, lighting and broadband to increase safety and accessibility across all neighborhoods and areas of the city.

The overall investment to the community for 2024 and 2025 is \$101.4 million and \$70.5 million through the Capital Improvement Plan, respectively. Seventy-eight percent of this capital spend will go to projects that directly impact people's lives – roads, sewers, sidewalks, traffic improvements, and lighting. The other 22.2% is directed at items to make city staff more efficient: Equipment, Facilities, and Vehicles.

Projects include:

- Glen Avenue Reconstruction
- Pioneer Parkway and University Intersection
- MacArthur Highway
- Wisconsin Avenue
- And lots of Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) Work

I can't give you an update on the State of the City without mentioning **Passenger Rail**. The Peoria – Chicago Passenger rail application was accepted, with federal funding, into the Federal Railroad Administration's Corridor Identification and Development Program – a 3-step process to develop a Service Delivery Plan, Final Design and Environmental Review before entering the pipeline for the project's implementation and construction. This has been a broad-based, bi-partisan, multi-community effort that will bring frequent, affordable, and reliable passenger rail service back to Peoria – **We are on Track!**

Our goal with the **Business Growth and Prosperity** priority is to diversify Peoria's economic portfolio and to improve processes that make our city an exceptional place to live, work, do business and invest.

TIF Districts are one of our most effective tools to revitalize neglected and / or under-optimized areas of the city. We recently established three new TIF Districts:

- Distillery TIF – From the Bio-Urja plant south will allow new businesses to occupy long vacant industrial spaces.
- Galena Road Industrial Park TIF – This \$40M business park will help keep Natural Fiber Welding and other industries in the city.
- Medina Plains TIF – will anchor more development in the northern area of the city.

The OSF Healthcare Cancer Institute – a \$237 M investment - is now open and already saving lives with cutting edge proton beam therapy, advanced radiology, surgical oncology services, and diagnostic services for both hospitalized patients and outpatients. It's estimated that the 180,000 square foot, state of the art facility will bring the Peoria area \$1 billion dollars in economic impact over the next decade. Dr. James McGee led the development of the innovative design of the Radiation Oncology facility for the OSF Cancer Institute. He is its Founding Director and Clinical Leader.

Bob Sehring is the CEO of OSF Healthcare and led the establishment and construction of the new cancer institute. Under Bob's leadership, OSF HealthCare has grown from an 11 to a 15 hospital system and restructured to an integrated regional delivery system. Please stand, Mr. Sehring and Dr. McGee, and receive the Mayor's Leadership Award for Healthcare Excellence and Economic Development.

Our education and training partners are critical to developing the workforce that our employers need. The collaboration between area businesses and Peoria Public Schools, Illinois Central College, the University of Illinois College of Medicine, and Bradley University has been remarkable. Like Peoria, Bradley University is resilient. Just ranked the 6th best value college in Illinois, we stand with Bradley as it scales up to meet the challenges of today's society. High quality apprenticeship training provided by our labor unions is also helping to address workforce shortages amongst the skilled trades.

The opening of the new, 40,000 square foot Distillery Labs facility is approaching! Located at the former ICC Thomas Building downtown, Distillery Labs is dedicated to creating a vibrant and inclusive catalyst for growing core industries like manufacturing and agriculture, in addition to brand-new ventures and innovative startups.

I'm also very excited about the Choose Greater Peoria initiative being led by the Gilmore Foundation, Greater Peoria EDC, and area business, government, and education leaders to attract talent to Peoria. They are marketing our excellent career opportunities, affordable housing, short commute times, plentiful green space and our friendly, diverse population. This initiative is starting to show some positive results. Congratulations to all involved with that endeavor.

Businesses are central to a city's growth and prosperity. We plan to establish a registry to track businesses operating in the city and implement a tool to track the satisfaction rate of these businesses.

Over the next few years, we will:

- Develop shovel-ready projects to attract business and investment.
- Support programs and create opportunities and resources for new entrepreneurs.
- Help grow existing businesses.
- We will increase the percentage of city spending awarded to women and minority owned businesses.

Our goal with the **Embrace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** priority is to invest in equity and address disparities by working with our community partners to make Peoria a city where everyone feels heard, included, and accepted.

The Joint City/County Commission on Racial Justice and Equity continues its important work. In their 2022 Annual report, they documented major racial inequities. Their 2023 Annual Report, reflects strategies that are emerging to help close inequity gaps. For example, working with the city, the Commission developed and implemented a transportation pilot program to help recent graduates from ICC's Workforce Equity Initiative to be able to commute back and forth to their new jobs.

Our first Equity in Procurement Expo took place in March. We invited over 80 minority owned businesses to the Civic Center to network with other businesses, increase their knowledge of governmental procurement processes, and interact with approximately 25 agencies and city departments. The city has built a database of over 100 women and minority owned businesses.

The city recently granted \$75,000 to Central Illinois Friends for an LGBTQ+ Clinic and community center to cater to the needs of our growing LGBTQ+ community. As other states become more hostile to the LGBTQ+ community, Peoria has become a welcoming haven.

And concerning workforce diversity, the Peoria police department now has two full-time recruitment officers – and the results are promising. They hired 41 new officers in 2023 – of which, 32% were Female; and 48% Minorities.

Their Police Cadet Program serves as a feeder to diverse hiring as demonstrated by Police Cadet Taya Bates. Taya is a 20-year-old Richwoods graduate born and raised in Peoria. At Richwoods, she participated on the girls' basketball and track teams and in the Junior R.O.T.C. program. She also attended the Woodruff Career & Technical Center, where she studied Criminal Justice under the instruction and guidance of former Assistant Police Chief Dr. Lisa Snow. Considering a career as a police officer was always a thought in the back of her mind but the career field of law enforcement wasn't well embraced in her community. That did not dissuade Taya.

Her experience with Dr. Snow had a profound impact on her life and provided her with an entirely new perspective on policing. Dr. Snow informed Taya about the Peoria Police Cadet Program, and in June 2022, Taya began her role as a Peoria Police Cadet and enrolled at ICC in its police science program.

In the summer of 2023, Taya dedicated her time to participate in over 30 community events and was recognized as the 2023 Civilian Employee of the Year. She also works in my office as the Summer Youth Internship Coordinator, assisting nearly 100 students with paid summer jobs and career exposures. When she turns 21 next year, Taya plans to apply to become a full-fledged Peoria Police Officer. Taya, please stand, take a bow, and receive the Mayor's Leadership Award for Exemplary Role Modeling.

The Peoria Fire Department is also working hard to increase its racial and ethnic diversity and has had outstanding success with its new Firefighter Apprenticeship Program.

We are proud that Peoria was recently ranked the best place to live in Illinois by U.S. News and World Report because of our affordable housing and good quality of life. That recognition inspires us to work even harder to improve our city.

Listen, I could go on all night about all the good things happening in the city of Peoria and each of you could name more things. After hearing some of these highlights and our strategic plans for the future, I hope you'll agree that **for** Peoria, **the best is yet to come.**

Thank you to the Chamber staff, particularly Ms. Shenneca Williams, for pulling this event together and thanks, again, to all of you for coming today. And now, I would like to welcome Andre Allen.