

## **2017 State of the City Address**

Council President Hayes, members of the Kokomo Common Council, elected officials, distinguished guests, my family, friends, and citizens of Kokomo, welcome. I would especially like to welcome my wife Kelli.

I want to take a moment to thank the people of Kokomo for your continued support, and for allowing me to serve as mayor of the only city I have called home.

I also want to thank the Kokomo Common Council, for yet another year of dedicated service and bipartisan cooperation. You have heard me say it before and I will keep saying it -- Kokomo has the best city council in the entire state. In a time when it seems too many elected officials can't work together, you serve as a model of how government should operate -- placing community first and leaving politics on the side.

I want begin by taking a short look back.

2016 will be remembered as a year when a great deal changed for Americans, Hoosiers, and residents of Kokomo. Our country faced a bizarre election. We now have a President who had never before held public office. This may create some challenges and the outcomes, right now, are uncertain. But rest assured we are prepared to meet them head on.

Without a doubt, last year was a reminder of our city's ability, to face any challenge.

For us in Kokomo, 2016 will forever be tied to Wednesday, August 24th. We all witnessed the destruction from tornadoes, and the devastating impact they had on our neighborhoods, homes, and parks. It was a day that we will never forget.

This was the second major tornado in just 32 months, and it brings home the real threat of climate change.

Earlier this year my colleague, South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg said, “Climate change isn’t about polar bears for me.”

I could not agree more. Tornado season now seems to be January to December with no reprieve. Climate change for us is about the dozens of families who lost their homes -- some for the second time in less than 3 years. It is about the 100 year flood that now seems to happen every 10.

Last week most of us enjoyed the 60 plus degree weather. But the fact is there were dozens of areas in the Midwest that had tornado watches in February for the first time.

We must take climate change seriously not because of the impact in faraway places, but because of the destruction, instability, and the overall expense it is already causing here in Kokomo.

Thankfully no lives were lost and no life-threatening injuries were reported in last summer’s storms.

In the following days, we witnessed the true humanity of our community and we discovered that in times of need, we can count on our friends, family, and neighbors both locally and around the state.

Communities like Westfield, Tipton, Carmel, Wabash, Peru, and many more, offered assistance in the form of personnel, equipment, and a lot of hard work. They set aside projects in their own cities to help clean and rebuild our community. For that we will always be grateful.

Beyond individual and business losses, our own Highland Park was hit hard by the tornadoes and endured the full power and destruction of the storm.

But once again our community stepped up. The Rebuild Highland Park fund was established and to this date has reached nearly \$90,000 in donations from civic minded partners. Please join me in thanking: Solidarity Community Credit Union, Alcoa of Lafayette, NIPSCO, American Legion Post 6 Baseball, real estate Developers Flaherty and Collins, The Center Township Trustee, and, Howard County Government.

Because of their generosity, this spring we will plant nearly one hundred new trees. We will replace the destroyed ADA-compliant playground equipment and make it part of the main playground area.

Despite the costs related to the tornadoes, the city ended 2016 in excellent financial shape and continues to be among the best in the state. For the 9th year in a row, Kokomo finished under budget, and we have the lowest debt per capita of Indiana's 35 largest cities.

This has been accomplished while making improvements to our trails; upgrading our streets and sidewalks; attracting new businesses, helping current businesses grow; and investing in our public transit -- which is still the largest "free-to-the-rider" system in the entire state.

In 2016 we removed nearly one hundred blighted, abandoned, and unsafe properties in neighborhoods throughout our city. And we have continued our aggressive code enforcement to keep Kokomo clean and attractive.

2016 was the first full year of free, curbside recycling. We kept nearly 2,500 tons of material out of landfills.

We were proud to partner with Bona Vista to provide housing for disabled adults at Meridian Park. Construction will begin this year.

We also furthered our partnership with Indiana University Kokomo's athletic program, as it continues to expand.

Municipal Stadium will be the home of IUK's new baseball program, and Foster Park to the new IUK Women's tennis team.

A highlight of 2016 was the ribbon-cutting, of the 16 million dollar Delmar E. Demaree Family YMCA. In less than one year, membership has more than doubled and well over 300,000 member trips were recorded. Just last week they signed up the 14,000th member.

As Black History Month draws to a close, I want to once again thank the people and community organizations who last year made our Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Monument a reality.

Personally, I believe, it is the most beautiful MLK monument in any city our size. And is also a profound symbol that will highlight for generations to come Dr. King's message of compassion, peace, and racial equality.

There is no doubt Kokomo continues a long and steady resurgence.

Our labor force is growing, and there are now more people working in Kokomo, than before the Great Recession.

Private businesses have noticed and responded with a tremendous show of faith in our city.

For example, just this month Indianapolis-based AP Development announced a \$6.5 million dollar reuse plan for the old YMCA. This project will consist of 46 market rate apartments, and preserve the original building that was constructed in 1910. This continues Kokomo's commitment to saving and restoring our Historic buildings, whenever possible.

In December, Brad Howell Ford announced plans to relocate and expand its dealership in Kokomo. The project will redevelop an underutilized property on the city's east side.

2016 also saw building permits increase seven percent over 2015, resulting in tens of millions of dollars in new construction from private businesses, and individuals.

Last year, during this address, I publicly added my voice, asking the Kokomo Common Council to include LGBT protections to our existing non-discrimination ordinance.

I was proud of our Council when they passed it -- and I was proud to sign it into law.

Now, nearly a year after its signing, the dire warnings from the fear mongers never came true, including the imaginary bathroom boogieman.

To this day, our Human Rights Commission has not received a single LGBT-related complaint.

This is a true reflection of the integrity, compassion, and decency of our local business management, and owners.

So what can we expect in 2017?

In short, we will continue to do the things that make Kokomo a great place to live. Cleaning up Wildcat Creek, improving our parks and trails, addressing long-term flood mitigation, continuing aggressive code enforcement, and improving overall quality of place.

I have said it so often; you're probably tired of hearing it. But our commitment to improving quality of place, as Ball State Economist Michael Hicks said, "Holds the only hope for broad economic growth."

Now, if you ask any college professor, local business owner or private citizen “what is the mayor’s number one job,” the answer will most likely be ensuring the public’s safety.

And since it is such an important part of quality of place, I would agree. In fact, public safety is so important that we must look well beyond how a city normally thinks about this issue. We have made it the mission of our administration to see the complete picture. This has led to some very interesting findings. Chief among them is actual risk versus perceived risk.

Most people’s first thoughts about public safety probably go to police and fire. Some may also think about traffic signals or maybe snow removal.

These are all important pieces to the puzzle.

But the reality is, public safety goes well beyond the number of police officers on our streets, or how many fire trucks are parked at the stations.

Public safety is also about the health and well-being of our citizens.

Recent findings from the conservative *CATO Institute* discovered that American citizens are 70 times more likely to die as a result of diabetes and heart disease, than they are from violent crime. And Americans are 20 times more likely to die in a traffic accident than in a fire.

Let’s examine some more of CATO’s numbers.

In the course of our lifetime, each of us only has a 1 in 46 million chance of dying at the hands of a foreign terrorist. **ONLY** one in 46 million.

But 1 out of every 113 Americans will die in a traffic accident.

Even worse, 1 out of every 53 Americans dies from Diabetes.

And finally heart disease, the number one killer in America -- we all have a 1 in 7 chance.

Unfortunately, for Hoosiers, and especially us here in Howard County, the numbers are much worse.

According to the 2015 America's Health Rankings, Indiana ranks in the bottom 10 states in overall health. And Howard County is in the bottom half among Indiana's 92 Counties.

Again, these are the real risks. Traffic accidents also are the leading cause of death among teens and young adults. So much so, that our young people are three times more likely to die in a traffic accident, than they are from cancer.

Now, most of us, if we could, would move mountains to prevent cancer in children. Yet, when it comes to redesigning streets, to make them safer for our young people, unfortunately through misinformation and misplaced priorities, it is often fought every step of the way.

It is this that gets in the way of actually improving the health, safety, and lives of our citizens.

Now keep in mind, just a few minutes ago, most of us agreed, my number one job is to protect the public's safety. The evidence is clear -- the best way to do this is to focus on building a healthy community. This is what we are obligated to do.

I understand that government is not here to fix everyone's problems. And I personally believe that "individual responsibility" is not only extremely important, it is required. But every single day elected leaders across America are making decisions that impact people's safety.

So why not make the right ones?

Decisions that take into account the larger picture.

Decisions that can make healthy lifestyle choices the obvious and natural thing to do.

Protecting Kokomo's citizens from violence and their property from destruction has been, and will always be, a priority of mine. In fact Kokomo's crime rate has dropped more than 28 percent since 2008. This is directly attributed to our aggressive quality of life initiatives, the cooperation of our residents, community policing, and the work and leadership of the Kokomo Police Department.

And, our Kokomo Fire Department continues to meet or exceed every ISO standard.

But we must do more. Designing and building our city, around our health, can literally save lives.

Thankfully, now more and more cities and their leaders across the State and Country are beginning to see how our own built environment is affecting the public health of their citizens. And that health habits are a function of strategic urban design.

In short, your zip code can have far more bearing on your health than your genetics. The Wellness Council of Indiana, a division of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, states that the quality of life of any community is measured, to a large degree, by the health of its people. And that our community's built environment can have more impact on our health and safety than other important factors.

Many of the healthiest and safest places in our country are dense urban cities and neighborhoods with Smart Street design, where walking is natural and convenient.

Smart streets are safer.



After hundreds of studies, the data has shown that narrowing lanes, adding medians, building curb extensions, and planting trees along the street, will together, result in fewer accidents. And, the few accidents that do occur will be much less severe.

Cities and neighborhoods that are designed to be more walkable have seen reduced crime, improved health, and an increase in civic engagement and creativity. A study from Harvard University showed that walking reduced the risk of cardiovascular events by 31 percent.

In the last few years, Kokomo has taken many important steps to improve our health and safety. Pedestrian refuge islands, like those on South Washington Street near IU Kokomo, calm traffic and make the walk safer for students crossing the street every day.

Around downtown, we have built curb extensions to reduce the time a pedestrian spends crossing the street, while also enabling those pedestrians to see oncoming traffic. And, more importantly, it makes pedestrians more visible to drivers.

The next place primed for improvements is Markland Avenue between Washington Street and Apperson Way.

This section of road already has sidewalks, but you see few pedestrians and minimal business investment. It can be difficult to cross the four lanes of fast-moving traffic.

If people do not feel safe, they just won't walk. If people do not enjoy the walk, they will choose to drive instead. We all know the less we walk, the less healthy we will be.

When you really think about it, Kokomo's Street Department, Engineering Department, and Traffic Department are actually Kokomo's Health Departments. Because for us, all public policy is health policy.

Staying physically healthy individually is also, directly related to staying economically healthy collectively.

Along with the quality of the schools, a low crime rate, and the city's amenities, overall health is a vital piece of the Economic Development puzzle.

Health care is consistently among the top five costs for all businesses. In our competitive global economy, it is in every employer's best interest to find cost-saving measures wherever possible. Healthier people, have lower health care costs.

But it is not just those health care costs impacting business decisions. The Wellness Council of Indiana says in today's mobile economy businesses want to create jobs using healthy employees because they are happier, and therefore more productive.

Now, this may shock some of you but before our administration makes any changes, we incorporate meticulous thought, long-term planning, and principled research. The new look of our streets, sidewalks and buildings is the product of a comprehensive design plan. And, making Kokomo a healthier, more prosperous, and safer place for everyone, is always the end goal.

Kokomo has undergone substantial changes this past decade. So, I understand there will continue to be questions. And I am eager to have those conversations.

I just ask that those conversations be based on facts, data, and research and not just personal emotions.

Because we shouldn't argue about change just for the sake of arguing.

Tonight I am asking directly for a better use of mind. I'm asking for a level of trust, not in me but in proven results.

I hope all of you can see what our community has accomplished in recent years, by sharing ideas, embracing change, and taking pride in our city.

One last thing to remember. Those of us who work on the third floor, including myself, live here in Kokomo. That, just like you, we raise our families, drive on the streets, and play in the parks. We ALL care deeply about what happens in this city. And we will continue to do the imperative work to move Kokomo forward. The question for each of us to ask ourselves is will we help. or hinder this progress?

Will we as individuals tear down ideas... or help look for solutions?

Will we base policy on the real risk, or the perceived risk?

As you talk to people all around Indiana, it is evident that Kokomo's reputation continues to get stronger by the day. Becoming a healthier, safer, and a more sustainable city, is up to each and every one of us.

Because, together we can, and will, make Kokomo a place that will stand the test of time.

Thank you for coming, And God bless Kokomo.