State of the City of Kokomo
Mayor Greg Goodnight
February 22, 2016

Council President Hayes, members of the Kokomo Common Council, elected officials, distinguished guests and citizens of Kokomo, welcome. I would especially like to take a moment to thank my wife Kelli. Kelli is under the weather and is unable to be with us tonight, but I could not be up here as your mayor without the support and encouragement from her and my other family members.

I also want to thank the people of Kokomo for putting your faith in our administration, and for allowing me the privilege of serving a third term as mayor of our great city. Thank you, also, for re-electing every single one of our City Council members who chose to run again. Council members, your victories were not a surprise. As I have often said, I believe Kokomo has the best city council in the Midwest. Your re-election serves as confirmation of your hard work and dedication to the people of our city. I offer my congratulations to both the returning and newly-elected members of our council.

A lot of things have changed during my eight years serving as your mayor. For one thing, as you may have noticed, I’ve started wearing reading glasses. Now, I’ve gotten some guff for my choice of eyeglasses, but I chose these frames for a very important reason: they only cost me nine dollars. I call that fiscal responsibility. Kelli may have a different name for it.

But whatever you choose to call it, I think that instinct has served us all well in this office. And like the past few years, I would like to begin this address by talking a little about our city’s financial situation. I am happy to say that our city’s finances remain strong. In 2015 our city once again underspent its budget by 8 percent, or 5.1 million dollars. We also remained one of the few Indiana cities that is maintaining a strong and healthy cash reserve. A recent report by the Indiana Fiscal Policy Institute examined the Overall Fiscal Health of 18 of Indiana’s largest cities. The Fiscal Policy Institute is a conservative-leaning, non-profit think tank aimed at increasing government efficiency
and accountability. Their comprehensive report looked at population growth, employment growth, personal income, assessed valuation and a number of other factors. They found that, over the last seven years, Kokomo fared better than expected, outperforming almost all of our peer cities.

Even beyond the fiscal picture, 2015 was a great year for Kokomo. A year we should all be proud of.

Our Kokomo Jackrabbits had a stellar first season, and Ballpark Digest named Municipal Stadium the top summer collegiate ballpark in the United States. In fact, our first season was so successful that the City of Lafayette decided to bring a Prospect League team to their City and will begin play this May. Welcome aboard, Lafayette. We look forward to a spirited rivalry between the Jackrabbits and your Lafayette Aviators.

We are also looking forward to the inaugural season for Kokomo Mantis FC, our new PDL Soccer team that will also play at Municipal Stadium. This is an exciting new addition to the entertainment scene in Kokomo and a great way to watch “up-and-coming” soccer stars. The Mantis FC’s first match is on May 20th against the St. Louis Lions.

Besides the upcoming Purdue University, Manchester College, and University of Evansville baseball games, that will be held at Municipal stadium, we are looking forward to the first high school baseball game on March 24th between Kokomo and Northwestern.

Across the street from this building, the new Delmar E. Demaree Family YMCA is set to open one week from today. This sixteen million dollar, community led and inspired project will be a source of pride and healthy activities for decades and decades to come.

In 2015 our City also partnered with local contractors and with our state government to take down more than 140 abandoned, dilapidated and unsafe structures from our neighborhoods. The work itself has just begun, and will continue through most of 2016.
This program, using 3 million dollars from the state’s Hardest Hit Fund, will raise other property values, help clean up our neighborhoods and have a positive impact on our city’s crime rate.

In fact, Kokomo’s crime rate has already dropped 31 percent since 2008. This is directly attributed to our aggressive quality of life initiatives, the cooperation of our residents, and the work and leadership of the Kokomo Police Department.

Meanwhile, our average unemployment rate for 2015 was 4.7 percent – the lowest it has been since 1999. And Kokomo accomplished this with our largest labor force in decades.

More importantly, there is no single reason for this job growth. It did not come from one new factory, or one large expansion alone. It came from dozens of local businesses expanding their workforces, making investments both large and small. It came from outside companies, like Saran Industries, which reopened a shuttered facility in September, while making a three million dollar investment on Kokomo’s east side. It came from new community-based startups, from Kokomo women and men with an entrepreneurial spirit and the determination to succeed. It all adds up to a more diverse economy with a stable foundation.

In 2015, we also launched a new curbside recycling program which – unlike some cities – does not require a user fee of any sort. We recycled more than 360 tons of waste in December and January, and are on track to keep up that pace in February. That is a great start. But to maintain this program, we need to keep using it – and grow it. The program’s success absolutely depends upon each and every one of you. Recycling is good for our city, it is good for our environment, and the landfill cost savings are good for your wallet.

We should be proud not just of our accomplishments, but of what they represent. They represent our continued progress towards building a city that is progressive, inclusive and sustainable.
What does sustainability mean for Kokomo? Put simply, it means that we are not spending our limited resources on quick fixes, but instead, we are always looking at the long-term impact of our decisions. We evaluate how the changes we make today will carry on into the future. It ensures that we are creating a community that will endure and improve. Think back on our 2015 accomplishments and you’ll see that every one of them, from removing blight, to building new community amenities, to lowering our crime rate, to promoting economic stability, to making recycling easier and more convenient for residents -- is geared towards creating a more sustainable community.

But sometimes long-term sustainability requires a short-term sacrifice. And it is not always easy to prioritize new investments, in our city or in other cities, across the state. Indiana’s property tax caps will continue to constrict city, county, and school budgets, with the State offering little help for communities to make up the difference. In all likelihood, the State Government will continue to shift, adjust and eliminate local communities’ revenue streams. On top of that, we continue to face unfunded mandates from both the state and federal level.

Some communities have faced these problems by shrinking away from necessary improvements, by de-emphasizing sustainable investment and by risking their city’s long-term future.

As Ball State economics professor Michael Hicks recently wrote, “a half-century of bad investment has left many cities and towns in such a sorry state that they can not attract nor retain young families with options, much less offer them quality schools, decent neighborhoods and safe streets.” Kokomo must avoid that mistake.

All things considered, this is a relatively decent time for our community, financially. But unfortunately, that will probably not last forever. At some point, we will face another national recession of some magnitude. It may be next year, or three years, or ten years from now. But it eventually will come. And the choices we make today -- our commitment to building a sustainable community,– will determine how well we weather the next recession, and even the one after that.
So, how are we, as a community, making sustainable investments and how are we preparing for any type of economic downturn? Well, for one thing, we’re focusing on infrastructure, with investments that are targeted, strategic as well as sustainable.

Kokomo’s share of asphalt dollars is not going up much, but the cost of installing and maintaining asphalt roads will continue to rise. Re-designed streets result in less road to maintain, less road to plow in the winter, less lane miles to stripe, and fewer potholes to fill.

Many of these re-design efforts will be focused on Kokomo’s older industrial corridors. In some cases, it has been decades since these neighborhoods shifted away from heavy industrial use, and yet we still continue to treat their infrastructure exactly the same as we did in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

For example, we are working to right-size our roads and streets, throughout our city. In many cases we will be taking lanes down from 14 to 10 feet, while sometimes adding medians, bike lanes and pedestrian crosswalks. This technique is known as a road diet, and it has been proven to lower speeds, reduce accidents and make the roads safer and friendlier for bicyclists, pedestrians, and automobiles. We have designed some streets in way that makes it easy for drivers to treat them as race tracks. Most of you in this room know what happens if you drive the speed limit on Dixon Road or East Hoffer Street: you will be passed like you are standing still. Road diets can help calm traffic without hindering mobility.

The purpose of some roads has changed, and their appearance, and design, should change along with it. These types of changes will also result in tax payer savings.

In fact, every time we narrow a driving lane from 14 feet to 10 feet, we save taxpayers over 28% on the resurfacing and upkeep costs.
At the same time, we will also continue to remove unnecessary stoplights where we can, and replace them with two-way or four-way stops. We have already done this at 24 intersections. By doing so, we are saving our city 216,000 dollars per year, in routine maintenance, emergency overtime costs, and electricity. We are achieving those savings while making our streets safer by calming the flow of traffic, increasing driver attentiveness and making our intersections more pedestrian friendly.

And let’s be honest: it’s probably not a bad idea to take a fresh look at our city’s driving and commuting patterns -- at least every thirty or forty years or so.

As Winston Churchill once said, “we shape our buildings, and then they shape us.” I believe the same is true of our roads, our streetscapes, and our city. We design their shape, and they shape us.

We will also continue to work on flood mitigation, dredging portions of the Wildcat Creek to increase its ability to handle heavy rainfall. So far, the Municipal Stadium project is the most visible component of our comprehensive and sustainable flood mitigation strategy, but it is only one part of the overall plan. We have also increased capacity at key points, both at the corner of Washington Street and Park Avenue, and at the old Delco park. This process will take time, but will result in an improved floodplain for the City of Kokomo. It will provide stability for property owners in or near the floodplain, and a safer community for all of us. Continuing to reduce the impact of flooding will be expensive, but I want to remind you: floods are even more expensive. Reducing property damage and keeping our city safe is one of the greatest ways we can increase sustainability, and keep our community moving forward well into the future.

But that’s not the only way that investing in infrastructure can increase sustainability. By improving the design of our city, we also make ourselves more appealing to both our current resident residents and our future residents. This is literal curb appeal.

I know some of our realtor friends may be in the audience tonight. None of this will be new to them. Realtors have been preaching the gospel of curb appeal for years and even
decades now, and it is past time we all started listening. Realtors know what people look for in a new home, a new neighborhood or a new city. It is part of their job to sell our community to new residents, and to educate people that Kokomo is the place to make their home. And a growing, vibrant, diverse population base, is absolutely vital to the long-term sustainability of our community.

But to attract new residents, we must have streets, curbs, sidewalks and paths that look modern and well-maintained. It shows that we invest in our community and it shows that we take pride in our community.

Private businesses understand this, too. In 2015, companies as diverse as Kokomo Auto World, NIPSCO Utilities and the Markland Mall invested in curb appeal. Consider that when the Markland Mall underwent a massive new renovation this year, they did not just improve the interior of their building. They also overhauled the exterior, including all four mall entrances, with new landscaping, paint, and signage. This resulted in a change that you can see, from just driving by.

These collective investments – along with all of our recent quality of life initiatives – are paying off. Last year our community celebrated its fourth consecutive year of population growth. Howard County outpaced 55 of Indiana’s 92 counties, and we did this despite the fact that the IU Kelley School of Business’ Research Center predicted that we would actually lose over 500 residents in this time period.

As you might expect, this growth in population has created a demand for new housing. For years, we have talked about the need for a wide variety of housing types, to suit young workers, growing families, aging retirees and everything in between. We need houses, apartments and condos in both suburban areas, and mixed-use neighborhoods. And now, we are starting to see that happen.

In 2015, our planning commission issued 73 building permits for brand-new single-family homes – the most in more than a decade. That number does not include the multi-family developments springing up all across our community.
On the west side of Kokomo, JCF Real Estate is nearing completion on a new 88-unit duplex housing community that replaces a blighted mobile home park. To the northeast, TWG Development broke ground on its 9.5 million dollar apartment complex, that is also redeveloping three city blocks. On Washington Street, Vermillion Development will break ground this summer on its 20 million dollar investment in a residential care facility on the former South Side Lumber site.

And just south of here, Flaherty & Collins will begin construction this May on the largest investment in downtown’s history – a 32 million dollar mixed use development, built on the site of the 104-year old former NISCO building. This 197 unit, luxury apartment development will transform the neighborhood and streetscape of both South Main and South Union Streets while preserving aspects of the original, historic facade.

And what do all of these projects have in common? They are all driven by private developers, working together in partnership with our city and our state. They are all bringing outside dollars into our community. Every single project is redeveloping a blighted or underserved area, replacing empty buildings and vacant lots with new retail and residential growth. This contributes to our economic, residential and environmental sustainability. Altogether, these projects add up to over 76 million dollars in residential investment.

Before I finish, there is one more thing I would like to speak about tonight. As you all know, last March our General Assembly passed, and Governor Pence signed, the Indiana Religious Freedom Restoration Act with no regard for the unintended consequences. This is a law that both legalized and legitimized discrimination – particularly on the basis of sexual orientation. This was – to put it as simply as possible – a bad law. It sent a terrible, false, and misleading message about the entire state of Indiana, Howard County, and the City of Kokomo. It made people feel that they are not welcome here, and in the process, set back decades of our wonderful “Hoosier Hospitality” reputation.
Discrimination is not our Indiana, and it is not our Kokomo.

This law didn’t just alienate gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. It alienated anyone who wants to live, work and raise a family in an inclusive and welcoming community. It also alienated businesses that want their employees to feel welcomed and – just as importantly – to feel safe. That is why many of our state’s largest businesses like Eli Lilly, Cummins, Angie’s List, Salesforce, and Anthem, spoke out against this misguided law. Even Kevin Brinegar, President of the Indiana Chamber of Commerce, the State’s largest business organization, personally testified against it.

Governor Pence and the General Assembly erased Indiana’s solid reputation with a single, bigoted, mean-spirited pen stroke.

They damaged the reputation of our home state, causing conventions and businesses to go elsewhere. The tourism group, Visit Indy, studied the fallout and found more than sixty million dollars in lost revenue for the greater Indianapolis area alone. That study only included the businesses, conventions, and tourists that considered coming to Indianapolis but decided to spend their money in a different state.

We will never know how many businesses, conventions, or talented entrepreneurs, that won’t even consider coming to Indiana or Kokomo because of this issue.

Now, the General Assembly is only in session for a few more weeks. I may be the last person in Indiana who has hope that Governor Pence and the Republican leadership will change their ways and correct the problem that they created. After all, they promised last spring that they would fix this. Thus far, they have failed.

So if they do not address this before the session ends, Kokomo will. Because here, in Kokomo, like in many other cities, we will not be content to sit back and allow our kindness to be misrepresented. The State’s actions, and subsequent bungled response, means we should join Anderson, Indianapolis, Zionsville, South Bend, Carmel and nearly 20 other cities in taking action.
Some members of our city council have already been public with their support for extending civil rights protections to include sexual orientation and gender identity. That is why I commend this council’s commitment to enacting legislation that would amend our community’s Human Rights municipal code. It is the smart thing to do for our economy, it is the best thing to do for our community, and it’s the right thing to do for our very own neighbors, both current, and future.

And in the end, that is what should really matter the most to all of us. Our families. Our friends. Our businesses. Our service agencies. Our churches. Our parks. We all must work, each and every day, to make sure that our community is welcoming, that our community is sustainable and that our community is strong.

We must also remember that quick fixes may have long term negative impacts. The truth is that sustainability is not just about protecting our progress, it is about maintaining it for future residents.

For as Gordon Sumner reminds us, “we can all sink or all float, because we are all in the same boat.”

We are working hard to improve our city, but we’re not just doing it for ourselves. We’re doing it for our children, and their children. We’re doing it for future residents, many of whom we’ll never even meet. We’re doing it for our community.

Thank you.