

La Crosse “State of City” – 2020

Good evening.

It is my honor to deliver another state of the city address – this being my eighth such edition. Based on what we all experienced in 2020 – I am sure most of us want to look forward rather than back.

However, even with the struggles we all faced – including a global health pandemic, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, social unrest and calls for racial justice and even an attempted insurrection at the U.S. Capitol – our organization and our community showed its resilience, its compassion and strength all throughout last year.

On a personal note, these past two terms serving as La Crosse’s mayor have been an unbelievable experience for me and my family and I want to thank the people of La Crosse for entrusting me with the stewardship of this beautiful, vibrant and caring community these past eight years.

As an organization, we have accomplished so much together and our future is incredibly bright – even with these on-going challenges.

And I ask for your indulgence as I review some key accomplishments from the past two terms. During these last eight years, we:

- Added ten neighborhood resource officers to create a community policing program that is a model for the state. Our crime rate is down and our citizens feel safer than they did five years ago based on a 2020 community development survey of neighborhood residents.
- Expanded and enhanced our code enforcement program and added two technicians to focus on quality of life and nuisance issues.
- Reached agreement with Tri-State Ambulance to allow for our firefighter paramedics to provide for advanced life support services.
- Completed numerous park refurbishments including Poage, Powell, Leuth, Springbrook, Cameron, Burns, Highland, Copeland and Badger Hickey.
- Created a new special neighborhood capital improvement fund program and completed citizen-driven capital projects.
- Re-confirmed our commitment to our branch libraries and started a new pop-up library van program.

- Created a new transportation vision which focuses on improving existing corridors and travel for pedestrians, bicycles and transit and once and for all asked the State DOT to remove the north-south corridor from their list of major projects.
- Established a new transit circulator, advanced vehicle locator technology, contact-less payments and new buses – including electric buses, all without raising fares.
- Created a floodplain management program to include re-mapping, relief funds and removing more homes and structures from out of the floodplain.
- Implemented a new garbage and recycling cart system which helped to clean-up our neighborhoods.
- Repaired and repaved more miles of streets and utilities – 42 plus miles during my time as mayor, nearly doubling the miles repaired from the previous eight years.
- Helped build and renovate more units of single-family affordable housing than ever before and provided lots to the La Crosse Promise program and to private housing developers in our core neighborhoods.
- Helped build more units of multi-family housing (Camp 20, The HUB) – including affordable housing (2219 Lofts, Roosevelt School, Garden Terrace).
- Helped create and fund the Coulee Collaborative to End Homelessness and became the first community in Wisconsin to end veteran’s homelessness.
- Grew our tax base by over \$680 million (a 22.2% increase) and better linked our incentive programs to increasing our tax base and jobs.
- Helped businesses large and small including Trane Company, Dura-Tech, City Brewery, the Charmant Hotel and Kwik Trip to name a few.
- Added programs including a downtown façade improvement and northside façade renovation program, and a women and minority owned business incentive program.
- Developed enhanced customer service tools including the 789-CITY phone number, MyLAX phone app, Q Alert on-line reporting and a staffed customer service desk in City Hall.
- Hosted numerous “Coffees with Kabat,” listening sessions with the human rights commission, virtual town halls and various surveys through our community development program.
- Implemented numerous technology and software program upgrades to eliminate paper systems, to maximize efficiencies and to reduce the cost of government.

- Working on fixes to the financial management system including a reset of our MUNIS software, cash handling system, chart of accounts and duplicative reporting and tracking systems.
- Revamped and expanded our wellness program to include a voluntary pilot with Riverside Corporate Wellness.
- Updated the capital budget ordinance, the process and document to increase transparency and clarity.
- Enhanced the operating budget report to increase transparency and clarity.
- Created the human rights commission, added education and advocacy to their responsibilities and held listening sessions on a variety of topics.
- Established a racial equity team to assess City programs and develop improvements.
- Changed Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day, with an event to celebrate our native heritage.
- Returned the Hiawatha statue back to the artist's family.
- Created the disability committee to educate and advocate for a more inclusive, welcoming and equitable La Crosse and improved accessibility.
- Partnered with our neighboring communities to create the La Crosse County Convention and Visitors Bureau.
- Reached agreement in principle with the Town of Shelby on a cooperative boundary agreement that includes extension of utilities in exchange for a City growth area, revenue sharing and acknowledgement that Shelby residents benefit from City services.
- Reached agreement with the Town of Medary on a fire and emergency medical services agreement.
- Completed renovation of our La Crosse Regional Airport terminal and have developed long-range plans for more air service and development in and around the airport.
- Completed a sanitary sewer facility's plan to address phosphorus regulations, bio-solid disposal and other critical updates with construction to start this year.
- Implemented our strategic plan and clean energy goals through many projects and initiatives, reducing our consumption of fossil fuels and carbon footprint by more than 30%.
- Partnered with Johnson Controls, Inc. to install LED lighting, new HVAC investments and renewable solar energy.
- Increased our efforts to restore and enhance our natural resources including our bluffslands and the La Crosse River marsh.

- Added more miles of trails to our network and improved access, signage, and volunteer relationships with non-profits and friends' groups.
- Addressed the Emerald Ash Borer plague by removing Ash trees and replanting trees throughout the City.
- Signed the 100% clean energy pledge to become reliant of renewable energy for 100% of our community's energy needs by the year 2050.
- Created a summer youth employment program modeled after the CCC and partnered with WisCorps to improve our environment and build our young people's job skills.
- Partnered on the Alliance to HEAL to address the opioid crisis, approved a sober living housing project, new Coulee Recovery Center and veteran's transitional housing facility.
- Approved the La Crosse Center enhancements including improved customer service and organizational changes. We all look forward to opening the renovated and expanded facility.
- Developing new La Crosse fire stations including renovations to Station #1 and a new Station #4.
- Partnered to develop new senior center facility and enhanced programming.
- Completed enhancements to Riverside Park and are working on a new public market space.
- Developing recommendations for a new historic and cultural museum.

We accomplished all that and more while LOWERING total spending, the number of employees, the local property tax levy and the mill rate. You all should be proud of this progress and these accomplishments.

We are in an excellent place operationally and financially. We also have a dedicated and committed staff who continue to show their abilities to provide services, to be creative problem solvers and go the extra mile and beyond to meet the needs of our citizens. There are so many examples of these public servants stepping up whenever they are asked and no matter the circumstances.

Please also know – based on our unified incident command structure because of COVID-19 – we are prepared for what may come our way, whether those are weather related emergencies or public health crises, with improved and redundant communication systems, PPE and updated plans and organization.

Since March of this year, the City of La Crosse:

- established our unified incident command system to address the health emergency, allowing us to focus on protecting the public, acquiring PPE, communicating with county health and hospitals, and addressing the financial, organizational, planning and communication challenges that go with a community-wide emergency
- closed city facilities including city hall, Grand River Station, libraries, La Crosse Center, community centers, swimming pools and beaches to slow the spread of COVID-19
- cancelled recreation and education programs
- directed staff to work from home, split shifts and implemented emergency schedules
- held dozens and dozens of meetings virtually
- mandated masks for all employees
- cancelled community events and large gatherings including popular parades and festivals
- provided around \$500,000 in grant funds to more than 80 local businesses saving more than 1,000 local jobs
- provided hundreds of thousands more dollars to day and child care facilities, homeless initiatives, rent assistance and recently approved city dollars for county contact tracing
- changed ordinances to allow curbside service and pick-up for bars, restaurants and shops
- changed ordinances and eliminated fees to encourage outdoor cafes and dining
- waived late fees and penalties for delinquent property taxes
- reduced fees for bars, restaurants and bar tender licenses
- planted four victory gardens to provide local food
- gave away 12,000+ free masks to community members at two drive-thru events
- gave away 3,000+ free masks to universities to distribute to college students
- maintained nearly all levels of city services
- provided transit service at no cost to riders
- facilitated safe, fair and accessible elections
- addressed and continue addressing social justice, large-scale protests and marches and calls for police reform and the end of racism

We all look forward to this year and especially the wide distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine in our community.

Until we are all vaccinated, we continue to follow the health recommendations including staying home, traveling only for essentials, wearing masks, and practicing social distancing and good hygiene.

We know these things work to slow the spread – witnessed by the low numbers of city employees contracting the coronavirus.

Re-gaining and strengthening our people’s trust and faith in government institutions has never been more important than it is right now and we are set up at the local level to provide high quality services, to take care of those who are most vulnerable, to solve problems and maintain La Crosse as a great place to live, work and play.

Thank you for these past eight years and God bless.

-- Mayor Tim Kabat
January 14, 2021



