

State of the City: 2015

Mayor Kabat's State of the City Address 2015

La Crosse January 8, 2015

Following is the text of Mayor Tim Kabat's State of the City address, as prepared for delivery:

Good evening. I want to talk about the state of our city as we embark on a new year. The state of our city is strong, lively, and forward-looking.

We know that we live in one of the most beautiful places anywhere. Our city has a strong economy, high-quality education, safe neighborhoods, parks, libraries, arts, and a vibrant nightlife. We also have an unmatched community spirit dedicated to service and compassion. Our goal is to be a place where everyone feels accepted and welcome.

This past year, La Crosse was recognized by *Outdoor Magazine* as one of the greatest places to live in America. We were also named a Wisconsin Main Street community, because we have one of the best downtowns anywhere.

2014 was a very good year for city hall and the list of accomplishments are many. It is impossible to name all of these in the time available, so here are some highlights:

We made significant progress for improving the safety and conditions in our most challenged neighborhoods including four new neighborhood police officers on the beat, eleven new city homes completed or under construction, new neighborhood groups, new garbage and recycling carts, and increased code enforcement.

In 2015 Pogue Park will get a dramatic facelift including a new playground, water feature, and greater access.

In 2015 we will be investing in our most challenged neighborhoods including over \$1.8 million in new spending in special projects, paint and fix-up, floodplain improvements, housing, and tree planting for Washburn, Powell-Pogue-Hamilton, and the Lower Northside Depot Neighbors.

Another exciting addition in 2015 will be the MTU circulator, which will enhance bus service in the central part of the city and provide 10 minute service during the day without raising fares.

In 2015 we hope to see the reuse of two of La Crosse's historic resources, the former Bakalars Sausage building and Roosevelt School. The plan is to turn these buildings into housing that will add vitality to these neighborhoods.

To improve the condition of the city's rental housing stock, we will introduce a new rental housing improvement program. The details of the program are yet to be finalized, but it should work like the city's housing rehabilitation loan program – which has helped improve over 1,000 of the city's single family homes.

2014 was a good year for La Crosse's economy – with nearly 1,300 more people employed versus 2013. Our average metro-wide unemployment rate is now the lowest it's been since 2008.

This year witnessed the start of two new downtown hotels, expansions to several manufacturing businesses, numerous start-ups, and major investments by our educational institutions including the first brand new school – Northside Elementary – in over twenty years. The happy faces of the Northside students and their families at the September dedication and the pride in their new school is one of my most favorite moments as Mayor.

This past year saw significant strides in improving our openness and transparency as an organization with the implementation of Legistar, a new municipal code, new voting system, and several community surveys.

In 2015 we will continue to push these efforts with a revamped city website, more on-line services, and automation as led by our staff.

Let me take a moment to congratulate and thank our dedicated city employees. We have a tremendous workforce and devoted group of people who come to work every day wanting to make La Crosse a better place. We simply couldn't do any of this without them. They continue to perform with creativity and professionalism. Hats off to them!

I take my hat off to you as well and to the reforms you approved this past year: reducing the size of the council, adding a monthly planning session, and eliminating committees – all with the goal of making city hall a more effective and responsive organization.

2015 will see a continuation of these efforts – with additional improvements to our committees and a serious look at reorganizing our departments to better share resources, better use technology, and ultimately save money.

In fact, due to our strong economy, our fiscal policies, reserve fund, and spending plan – the city's bond rating is the highest in our history.

This year also marks the start of the state's budget process and perhaps our biggest challenge yet. We must be firmly resolved to deal with potential reductions to personal property taxes and shared revenue. Combined, these represent over 20% of the city's \$71 million budget and if significant cuts are made – we will all have to work together to prioritize and solve the funding of our services and programs.

2015 will see the creation of the city's human rights commission – who will be charged with reaching out to our community, raising awareness about the challenges we face, and working in partnership to eliminate discrimination in this city. One of my favorite thoughts about diversity and why it's important is from Charleston's Mayor – Joe Riley. He states "You cannot have a great, successful city unless it's a just city." I totally agree.

To be a just city we also have to work with our neighbors and this year we will reach out to our neighboring communities and look for ways to improve and share services and save money.

A significant regional challenge we face in the coming months is what to do about our transportation network. On tonight's agenda you have the opportunity to approve a visioning process that will chart the course of the city's transportation well into the future – a process that will engage our citizens and look at comprehensive solutions. It must look at all transportation options because cities exist for the

people that live in them, not as a hodge-podge of highways, parking ramps and garages to accommodate only automobiles.

Our responsibility as stewards of this place we love is especially critical to all of the aforementioned programs, services, and successes. Without a clean and healthy environment – we have no future.

With the challenges we face caused by expanded railroads and highways – we must pledge resources in next year's capital budget to protect and improve the La Crosse River marsh and make sure that this resource and all of the benefits it provides including flood storage, clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities is here and healthy for future generations.

The new year looks very promising indeed. Besides the projects and challenges already mentioned, we will see a renewed airport terminal, new emergency radio system, a stunning bluffland trail head, a bike/ped bridge over the BNSF rail yard, on-going beautification of city hall, and many other developments.

We have much to do and it will require all of us working together to get it done. And that's what the people want.

What our citizens want from government isn't self-important words, but tangible results. The people want us working together – solving problems and creating opportunities.

So...here's to a great 2015 and here's to working together!

Thank you!