

At the beginning of each year, an evaluation of the state of our city is delivered from this chair. It is my honor to deliver such an address tonight and to report to the Common Council and the citizens of our city on the progress we continue to make to improve our living environment in La Crosse. As we look to our 2023 goals, we can also reflect on the extraordinary progress our city has made in the past year towards continually fulfilling an overall mission to provide the highest possible level of equitable services to all who live in La Crosse.

The examples of innovation and collaboration in our work are extensive and reflect the work of our dynamic and dedicated staff who continually excel at serving our community in ways that frequently go unheralded.

Among the priorities that I have identified as essential to helping our community thrive is the development of housing. And this is all housing. Single family homes. Condos. Townhomes. Apartments in a complex. Apartments on the third floors of our downtown. Market rate housing. Affordable housing. All of it. Our community, like many others, has traditionally erected roadblocks to housing development instead of clearing hurdles to ensure the community has homes within which people want to live. No longer. Now, we are innovatively and collaboratively working with developers to help neighborhoods prosper, to advance towards goals of increasing the number of homes available as well as improving the quality of those homes overall.

In the last year, we have witnessed the opening of the first phase of the Fifth Ward Residences development. This is a development on a former industrial site. Cleaned up, out of the floodplain, and welcoming new tenants. During a tour of the first 72-unit building at Fifth Ward right after the grand opening in November, I met a man from Kentucky. He had moved to La Crosse for a highly skilled job at one of our city's largest employers. He was thrilled to find a place to live right in the city and loved the location at Fifth Ward Residences. He was glad to be here. And I was certainly glad to welcome him. The first phase of 144 apartments and 14 townhomes is just the start for this development. Projects like this require collaboration. It takes plenty of that to build new living spaces in a former dilapidated, industrial, brownfield site that was in the floodplain.

I am pleased to report that we are making great progress on other floodplain issues. Thanks to our Floodplain manager, Sarah Rafajko, we have addressed dozens of lingering FEMA violations from years past. Sarah is also part of the team that helped remove 142 structures from the floodplain in the Ebner Coulee area within the last year. An incredible success. Sarah relayed a story about helping a homeowner with the refinancing of his property in that area. This homeowner no longer has to bear the cost of flood insurance because of the efforts of city staff. Sarah, incidentally, is helping the man provide documentation to his lender so that the floodplain insurance mandate is removed. Our efforts to remove homes and businesses from floodplain areas will continue. Additionally, I have recruited biologists and engineers at the conservation group, Ducks Unlimited to help us design a floodwater storage project for the city's north side. We are very early in this process but this innovative and collaborative partnership may help immensely in La Crosse's ongoing floodplain challenges.

In 2022, work began on the necessary infrastructure to bring roads and utilities to the River Point district north of Riverside Park. Another former industrial site that was in the floodplain. This year, we expect to start residential building projects there. Soon, there will be hundreds and hundreds of new homes at River Point District. Along with commercial space. And outdoor park spaces. And public access to the waterfront. It takes innovation and collaboration to get all of this done. Innovation to even get this project started under Mayor Pat Zielke more than thirty years ago. And now a collaborative approach to ensure that we can identify developers who meet La Crosse's desires for this extraordinary site. Part of that approach is a change in the very development agreement process itself.

This evening, council members are faced with a decision on whether to modernize and improve the methods with which the city facilitates financial incentives to encourage building housing in La Crosse. These are long-sought improvements to the economic development climate in our city. Reformatting our economic development ordinance and adopting a realistic tax incremental finance—or, TIF—policy will have significant and positive impacts on the building environment here.

Whether it's Fifth Ward Residences, River Point or the Copper Rocks development planned for the site of the old Kmart—incidentally, we expect a groundbreaking there this summer—and all of the other smaller yet significant housing and commercial developments in this city, the theme of developing these through an innovative and collaborative approach runs throughout. Truly, this is our pathway to success.

While we cheer the development of new housing in La Crosse, let's also note the significant investments in city infrastructure. Part of that investment is in the form of transportation infrastructure. For everyone. Sure, blocks of rehabilitated streets. But also, miles of new bike lanes. Three miles of pedestrian lighting upgrades installed in the last year. Tens of thousands of square feet of sidewalk replaced to improve accessibility *while* our engineering department is engaged in a city wide accessibility facilities assessment. The orange barrels and barricades mean we are investing in infrastructure for the future of our city. For all of our citizens. No matter how they travel.

For those who have traveled on the recently rebuilt La Crosse Street, it should come as little surprise that the city's first new fire station in over 50 years is nearing completion on the corner of La Crosse and Oakland. We expect the new station 2 to be operational by spring. Work on the new fire station 4 will begin shortly. Both are tremendous public safety infrastructure investments for our community and the men and women who dedicate their careers to saving lives. This past year, I spent part of a training day with firefighters, gaining a better understanding of the grueling training work that is an ongoing part of their preparedness. A tremendous experience for me. Maybe not so much for firefighter/paramedic C.J. Stordahl who I pretty much dropped a ladder on during the "Vent, Enter, Search" exercise. Also, I can tell you from personal experience, you're not really in shape until you're in La Crosse firefighter shape.

Right now, renovations are well underway in the police department at city hall. Another key investment in public safety and in those who serve on the frontlines every day. Demolition on this project began at the end of November and the first phase is already expected to be completed by next month. After a brief construction tour yesterday, I can testify that the progress is nothing short of remarkable. Also, this project has basically required our staff to pull every proverbial rabbit out of the construction management hat in order to completely renovate two floors of the PD in stages while not allowing any interruption in police services.

Part of the infrastructure investment in the River Point District mentioned before is stormwater infrastructure. That's just a portion of the extensive stormwater improvements underway in the city. We realize the need to adapt to the changes in weather which are routinely bringing historical flooding events to our streets and neighborhoods. One of the most significant stormwater improvements has come in the form of major lift station upgrades, largely funded through millions of dollars from the federal Economic Development Administration. All of the upgrades are scheduled to be completed this spring and are just one part of a comprehensive process to increase overall stormwater capacity. Increasing that capacity is just one of the ways our city is working to address sustainability and resiliency in La Crosse.

When the first of our city's electric bus fleet came online in 2022, the event was heralded locally and on a national level with a visit by EPA Administrator Michael Regan. Administrator Regan noted how the collaborative efforts between the city and Xcel energy to get the buses on the street was a model for other communities across the United States to follow. And that was before I described how upgrades at our waste water treatment plant will eventually allow us to charge electric buses and all other future electric vehicles through a system powered by the gas from the wastewater treatment process. We are moving that process forward and I expect to officially start bringing our waste-to-power dreams to reality this year. Meanwhile, we continue updating all other city facilities with an eye to achieving our carbon neutral goals by 2050.

It is great to have goals. But you also need to have a plan to achieve those goals. That is why tonight the city council can approve a new Climate Action Plan. This plan has been nearly a year in the works and includes 41 strategies and 281 action steps to help La Crosse achieve carbon neutrality. One of the strategies I've already mentioned; improving our community's resilience in dealing with floodwaters. Another of the strategies is to "improve...biking in La Crosse." One of the ways we will be able to reach that goal is through improvements to the Wagon Wheel bike trail that connects La Crosse to La Crescent. This very evening, the council will have an opportunity to accept a \$4 million state grant to help offset costs towards a dedicated bridge over the Mississippi River West Channel to make that Wagon Wheel connection a reality. Our city's planning staff deserve tremendous accolades for this grant award. Just one of the steps towards achieving our broader climate action goals.

As we work through a climate action plan, we are also developing an updated comprehensive plan that will serve as the city's guide for decision-making on multiple levels for the next decade. The ongoing, intensive, comprehensive plan process will fully incorporate other planning documents like the Climate Action Plan, the Imagine 2040 Downtown plan, and others. We

expect to have a completed comprehensive planning document in place by mid-year. The first update of its kind in more than 20 years.

Many of our local businesses had plans that were completely derailed during the pandemic. Many have found a way back. Some of those by taking advantage of Governor Tony Evers' Main Street Bounce back program. This program has provided \$10 thousand grants to offset business start-up and operating costs. I joined the governor today as he visited some recipients of these grants. One stop included The Collective, a collaborative effort with many partners in our community—including the city—that fosters development of a business by lowering some of the start-up barriers. Hearing the stories of entrepreneurs at The Collective—like Azure, a single mom of three young boys who is following her dream and creative passion and making a go of it, using this incubator space to help her odds of success: Simply inspirational.

Certainly, it is the business owners themselves that deserve the credit for having the entrepreneurial drive to give themselves a shot. Taking the risks that all small businesses do. Following their dreams. Making a difference in the community. I applaud their efforts and recognize their immense contributions to improving the quality of life in our community. I am thrilled to witness new businesses continuing to find start-up and expansion potential in La Crosse.

Many businesses in our community have succeeded thanks in part to La Crosse's bustling tourism economy. In the past year, we have witnessed some of the best numbers ever for hotel stays and tourism traffic in La Crosse. Our economy gets an enormous boost from tourism and the work that we are doing to improve our community only helps to encourage new visitors. Among those improvements; the soon-to-be-completed levee expansion at Riverside Park. This extension will help La Crosse host two dozen big riverboat stops this year. Each docking means hundreds of visitors coming into our city and region. Each docking is also a representation of the work our city staff have invested in developing collaborative relationships with the three cruise lines operating on the Mississippi River.

Another boost to the tourism economy has been the newly renovated La Crosse Center. After a full year now in operation, the renovated center has helped to generate additional business activity for our entire region. La Crosse County government has recognized the economic impact of the center by committing \$225,000 of sales tax revenue annually towards repairs and maintenance to the facility. I thank the county board of supervisors for the willingness to work with us to help maintain the significant regional economic engine of the La Crosse Center.

Some larger developments are helping to spark rejuvenation in La Crosse. In October, Hy-Vee opened its doors at the Valley View Mall. Pretty substantial. Not because it's a grocery store. But because Hy-Vee invested significantly in restoring a closed big box retailer to create a different kind of anchor store for the mall and bring new life to that aging facility. I would expect to hear about more developments at the mall in the near future.

Gundersen Health System has finished with first phases of its extensive renovation of historic buildings on 3<sup>rd</sup> street downtown. The former home of Wettstein's. This project has been a stunning metamorphosis of that connected space and something that has to be witnessed in person to understand its expansive scope.

And the construction of a new, \$200 million hospital on the Mayo campus in the middle of the city. This is a project that—among many other things—holds the promise of being transformative for all of the neighborhoods surrounding the Mayo complex. I was proud to collaborate with Mayo leadership in helping to ensure this incredibly important project moved forward on schedule.

We should all be proud of the utilization of our new diversity, equity and inclusion fund established for 2022. We have used this fund—first of its kind in La Crosse—to support the Juneteenth celebration, Indigenous Peoples' Day activities, and contribute to the building fund of Hope Restores, the first African American community support center in our city. In addition, the fund has helped our internal equity team gather data from the community with the help of a survey released late last year. We will continue to use this fund to help support DEI efforts in La Crosse.

How mental health issues are treated within our systems of care are among inequities that have long needed attention in La Crosse. One of the most innovative developments to address mental health—here or anywhere else— has been the Community Resource Unit of the La Crosse Police Department. The CRU completed its first year in 2022 and this collaborative and co-responder model involving La Crosse police and La Crosse County mental health working together continues to have enormous impact. Joel Miller was the first officer in CRU and can tell you about lives touched because of this program. Like the time he prevented a likely tragedy by rescuing a distressed individual from railroad tracks with a freight train bearing down on him. Thanks to grants awarded late last year, the CRU program will continue to be funded for at least the next three years. CRU is an extraordinary benefit to our city and a model for other police agencies to follow.

We have yet to crack the code on solving our community's challenges with homelessness. We know that housing is key. Engaging with community partners is essential. Collaborating with county and state government is absolutely necessary. Our staff—especially the city's new Homeless Services Coordinator, Brian Sampson—has worked constantly at all of these. With some success. We have served dozens of families at or near homelessness. Many individuals as well. We're nowhere close to the finish line but we see progress. Our emergency responders—certainly our Police Neighborhood Resource Officers—work with our unsheltered population every day on the streets, continually providing help. Walking downtown today, I was stopped by a man unloading a box truck who told me, "Thank you for being an advocate for the homeless. I really appreciate it." Certainly not everyone agrees. And we have made our share of missteps and mistakes on this issue. But we will keep at it. It is simply what is right and just.

In case you've missed it, Cheddar, the police department's new therapy dog—just a few months old—has already gained an enormous social media following. The goal for the therapy dog program is to help young people especially deal with trauma in their lives. Another innovation from our police department. The department has also rewritten the book on use of force. La Crosse police have focused intently on decreasing use of force through a systemic process that involves intense evaluation, training, and a philosophy of de-escalation as a means towards conflict resolution and mitigation of harm. As one member of our police command staff told me, "this is how policing should be done." Absolutely agree. And I could not possibly be more proud of serving this community alongside those dedicated and devoted individuals within the La Crosse Police Department.

Recently, the Common Council approved changes to alternate side parking rules that rely more on declaration of snow emergencies. Our IT department has adapted by starting a text alert system to which about 2,000 people in our community have already subscribed along with hundreds more that have signed up to get email updates. Among the efforts the city's IT department has used in the past year to ensure community connectivity. The 311 La Crosse phone app also launched in the last year and work will continue to collaborate with the school district and others to connect all public facilities in the city to a fiber network.

Connecting through fiber networks is key. Connecting as a community is also tremendously important. As I review some of the more audacious goals we have set for ourselves—adding 15 hundred new homes in 10 years, removing all properties from the floodplain, becoming carbon neutral by 2050, and, yes, ending homelessness—I realize we cannot possibly hope to accomplish all of this without working together as a community and without developing new processes and through innovation and collaboration. Charles Darwin said, "It is the long history of humankind...that those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." I intend for us to prevail.

One of the many obstacles we have to overcome in order to ensure we can achieve our goals is the ongoing lack of commitment from some in the state legislature to adequately fund local government. I will continue to work in concert with my peers throughout Wisconsin to ensure our representatives in Madison understand the challenges we face in funding essential services. I would hope, as a community, we can continue to urge our representatives to value the extraordinary work our local government does in delivering a vast array of services in ways that are cooperative, collaborative, innovative and reach that highest possible level of equitable distribution for our entire community.

It continues to be the highest honor of my life to serve this community alongside this city council and on our tremendous city staff. Thank you for the opportunity to address you all tonight.