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It is my honor to again this year provide an evaluation of the state of the city of La Crosse to members of the Common Council and the citizens of this community. This annual review provides a picture for current conditions of the city and services provided by city government along with future plans and ambitions.

In the last year, the efforts undertaken in La Crosse to consistently improve have yielded immensely satisfying results while we continually look to the future and challenge ourselves to serve our citizens in new and innovative ways. As usual, this effort requires the hard work of extremely proficient and dedicated staff and an openness and even a desire to collaborate. And collaborate we have. Among the most significant ways have come with a historically unique partnership with La Crosse County government.

Last year at this time I spoke about the challenges our community faces with homelessness. As you are all very much aware, those challenges remain. A path forward now seems much clearer. City and county government are engaging in a historic collaborative effort to guide our community's response to homelessness. There is wide recognition that we require this type of response for the health and wellbeing of all who call La Crosse home and implementation is currently underway.

This effort that would not have occurred without the willingness of leaders to work together and understand that we must at times compromise and make choices for the collective good. This work also would have been impossible without the dedication of multiple city staff members including the unflinching and indomitable Brian Sampson, our city's Homeless Services Coordinator. Both city and county staff understand the necessity to develop long term strategies to comprehensively address a systemic and decades-old crisis that only got worse during the pandemic. We fully expect the next changes in this crisis will be for the better.

Among other significant changes that continue to show signs of promise are adjustments to the city's economic development policies. Our work to improve the economic development environment in La Crosse will continue to help us take significant steps forward in addressing a critical housing shortage. That effort got a big boost at the beginning of 2023 when we streamlined the city's economic development policies and narrowed the pathway that developers follow to be successful with their projects in our city.

A great community thrives because of the people who live there. Accordingly, we must have places for people to call home. Developing housing options will continue to be a critical priority for our city this year and in years to come. We are witnessing how changes are bearing fruit. After a recent committee meeting, I listened to a new developer to La Crosse express appreciation to our Economic Development Manager, Julie Emslie for how streamlined, and easy-to-navigate our approval processes are. Imagine hearing that from a developer even five years ago.

One of our most important works involving development continues to be the River Point district just north of Riverside Park. This vast Redevelopment Authority project is quickly progressing through phases of construction. It has gone from what mostly looked like a giant sand pile at this time last year to initial stages of construction on the first of many mixed-use buildings. One of the most rewarding moments of this past year for me was signing the plat map for River Point. After decades of work, we not only had a concept and drawings and a project plan but an actual neighborhood. Shortly after the plat was filed, the Redevelopment Authority closed on its first land sale on the property. That is the site of the development you can see rapidly progressing there now. This year, we expect at least three more major building projects to begin construction. This progress has not happened accidentally but through intense planning and proficient execution. Among the most significant and daily contributions have been from the project manager, Jason Gilman. Jason's work has been simply transformative. But this has required team effort, We could not have possibly made it this far without work from many others. That includes our engineering department under the leadership of Engineering and Public Works director, Matt Gallager.

The modernization of our economic development processes can be found in the city's recently adopted Comprehensive Plan. Since 2002, when the city last adopted a comprehensive plan, much of our city has changed. Not only has the number of people who live in multi-unit housing increased dramatically, but our ideas about land use and how that impacts how we travel, how we work, how we enjoy recreation and even impacts on climate change have altered. 21 years later, we have finally adopted a new Comprehensive Plan which will help tremendously as we navigate a path forward pursuing our most auspicious and significant development goals in the city. This work was an immense lift by our planning department, especially Planning Manager, Tim Acklin. As Council member Trost said on the night of the adoption of the plan in October, "The plan is a vision. But it will be implemented... We cannot change the past...but we can make La Crosse a better place going forward." And indeed, we shall.

Another vision we hold close in La Crosse is one of resiliency. The progress is evident. There was a time where a spring flood like the one the city experienced in 2023 might have caused widespread damage to homes and infrastructure. This was the third highest flood event in La Crosse's recorded history. The strategies for addressing flood events have improved. First, coordinated communication processes have improved dramatically since the last similar flood event more than 20 years ago. Crews in all impacted departments now respond without hesitation and in full coordination. Thanks to the four new or renovated stormwater lift stations that went online in the last year, impacts from the flooding were limited. With the lift stations fully operational during that flood in April, the water that would have inundated much of the northern neighborhoods of La Crosse was moved to storage areas that could handle the volume. Mostly eliminating street flooding and vastly shrinking the numbers of homes that had basements affected by high groundwater.

As always, La Crosse benefitted from having additional floodwater storage in the La Crosse River Marsh. The marsh proved critically important in April. That is why—among other reasons--it is essential to maintain the marsh as resilient natural infrastructure to absorb the excess flooding

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events when they do occur. It is our intent to fully protect, maintain, and improve our treasured marsh, not only as critical natural resilience infrastructure but also for its inherent value as a key part of the natural ecology of the Upper Mississippi River. Yesterday, I had the honor of speaking to a group gathered at the Upper Mississippi Wildlife Refuge Center on Brice Prairie. Folks there were celebrating 100 years of the Refuge, the most notable such refuge on Earth. We have the privilege to live within the refuge and should remember to focus on how we preserve it.

Among the local successes that I have had the privilege to share on the national and international stage as a leader for a national group of mayors is the adoption in the last year of the city's Climate Action Plan. This plan, identifying 41 goals and 281 strategies to help our community fulfill a promise of a sustainable future was a result of extraordinary work by staff—especially Environmental Planner Lewis Kuhlman—committee members, volunteers, and others throughout the community. All working for a more sustainable and resilient future. Through 2024 and beyond, this plan will help guide policy-making in multiple areas including transportation, recreation, housing, and in many others.

Human powered transportation options play a significant part in the Climate Action Plan. This plan provides a guide to implement multimodal improvements throughout the city. Improvements like the 2nd street bikeway completed recently. Many in our community welcomed this unique improvement. Much of our community also understands the importance of including such sustainable infrastructure in every transportation development decision we make in the future.

For decades, state government has restricted the ability of municipalities to raise adequate revenue to fund services that our residents need. While diminishing local control over revenues, state lawmakers have also refused to increase the amount of state aid to local governments. That is, until this past year. Thanks to the strong advocacy of leaders all over Wisconsin, the legislature finally relented on calls to accept the responsibility of funding a more equitable share of local services—a responsibility the state adopted in 1911 when Wisconsin became the first state in the nation to adopt a state income tax.

Even with the additional revenue from the state, our city continues to work through a longstanding structural deficit of sorts. We now see a way forward thanks to innovative ideas for funding some of our local services. But hard decisions about services the city provides may still prove necessary. Significant improvements to public safety and maintenance of our extensive park system—among other essential services—do not come without cost. We must fully understand what our community prioritizes. We do that through communication with residents of our city. Let us know: what is important for you? City government serves its citizens while we look to the future of our community. Please tell us what you consider priorities now and in the future.

We do know that public safety is a high priority. I was thrilled this year to welcome members of our community to the opening of La Crosse's first new fire station in 56 years. Station two is a testament to our community's commitment to emergency services and the individuals who provide those services. The new fire station four on the Gillette Street is quickly taking shape and will open next year. These stations are critical pieces of maintaining modern facilities for our team members and improving public safety. So are the updates completed—and under construction—in the police department at city hall.

While modern infrastructure is essential for emergency response, it is the two hundred or so individuals within both of these departments who matter most. Police Department personnel live on the front lines of response. The department's innovative approaches have helped improve those responses. The recent expansion of the Community Resource Unit—a mental health response collaborative with county government—is a testament to how innovative approaches prove their value. Another is an ongoing commitment to the city's Neighborhood Resource Officer program. In the midst of the current homelessness crisis, our NRO team has been essential at addressing community concerns about homelessness as well as providing constant outreach to individuals who are living in our community without adequate shelter, working to connect these folks with services. Same with our field service officers. Like Officer Teri Roden who had an experience a few months ago with a domestic violence victim. Afraid to return to her living situation in La Crosse. Wanting just to go home to her family but without a way to get there. Officer Roden helped the woman get her things. Bought her a meal. Bought her a ticket home. And then just stayed with her. And made sure she was okay until transportation home arrived. For the woman, life changing. For Teri Roden, just how she rolls every day.

There are many examples of our emergency response personnel stepping outside of their prescribed roles. Molly McCormick, Community Risk Educator in the Fire Department, working with the Homeless Outreach Team, going from tent to tent building relationships. Renee Christensen, Fire Lieutenant, using skills acquired in the Masters of Public Administration program she has just graduated from. Helping craft a challenging 2024 Fire Department budget alongside Chief Schott. Barry McKnight, longtime member of the Library Staff. Part of Barry's role means that he has frequent contact with individuals who face challenges in their lives related to mental health issues and addiction. Barry has used his skills, his wits, and Narcan multiple times to save lives just in the last year.

The City of La Crosse is a service organization. Our success depends on the people who work to fulfill our mission and achieve our goals. Our community is served by extraordinary individuals who are advancing the mission of providing the highest possible level of equitable services to all who live in La Crosse. They are the ones on call 24/7 to ensure water and sewer services remain uninterrupted. They are the ones in our sensational legal department who tirelessly protect our city's interests. They are the parking ramp staff, and the street sweepers, the engineers who design our stormwater system. We will persevere and thrive because of those who help us serve our community and I am absolutely privileged to do so alongside them.

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I know for residents in La Crosse it may be frustrating to pay more for essential services like police and fire protection, as well as snow plowing, and parks maintenance and programs, and all the rest of the critical services the city provides, including the technology that makes it all tick. The reality is that those cost increases exist because of factors beyond the locus of our control. Inflation does not give La Crosse a pass. The labor market forces that push other organizations towards higher wages to retain workers will not bypass City of La Crosse government.

Fortunately, decisions we have made recently recognize the ability to achieve cost savings, better efficiencies, and better service. By creating an animal control division in the police department last year and removing that from the private sector, taxpayers are saving around 200 thousand dollars annually. By adding a locator to the city's engineering staff, the city saves on contracting costs and gains performance and efficiency. Filling a long-vacant assistant attorney position saves on contracted legal services while allowing more expeditious review of development agreements. As we continually face the pressures of increasing costs with minimal additional revenue, we can and will identify efficiencies in operations that can also help improve service delivery to the public. In addition, this year, we will work towards rebalancing costs of multiple city services to ease the burden for residential taxpayers. City staff is currently working on certain operations funding adjustments to help this occur.

Among the changes that could bring the greatest efficiencies to local government is professional administration. The city of La Crosse is among less than a handful of cities left in Wisconsin that operate without a professional city administrator or manager. Our form of government relies on the mayor to execute day-to-day operations as well as provide policy guidance. The increasingly sophisticated and complex processes inherent to modern city government can be tremendously challenging to navigate. Those who sit in this chair in the future may not have the requisite skills to accomplish all of that effectively and efficiently. In the coming months, I plan to bring forward legislation that will allow for adding a professional city administrator to the City of La Crosse. This move will help this city improve efficiency, functionality, and efficacy and ensure those with meaningful municipal management backgrounds are leading daily operations of La Crosse into the future.

We are a strong and resilient community. We are getting stronger and becoming more resilient. We will do that through innovation, determination, and certainly collaboration. The Japanese poet Ryunosuke Akutagawa is often quoted as saying, "Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean."

Through determined efforts, La Crosse will continue to face difficult challenges and identify ways to successfully navigate through. I look forward to continuing this journey together.