

State of the City: 2016

Mayor Kabat's State of the City Address 2016

La Crosse January 14, 2016

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

Good evening. I am pleased to report – on behalf of the La Crosse Common Council, City department heads and employees, and our citizens – that due to your dedication to service, leadership, and hard work, the city of La Crosse made significant progress in 2015 on a number of fronts.

This past year we revitalized neighborhoods, we rebuilt our housing stock and helped local businesses grow and create jobs, we streamlined city operations, we empowered citizens through the human rights commission, we realized regional cooperation and managed natural resources through sustainability efforts, and we completed special projects such as the refurbished terminal at the La Crosse Regional Airport and new emergency radio system.

I am proud of the positive changes and continued growth in our community. The hard work of our citizens, volunteers and businesses make La Crosse a grand place to live and work, which is why our fair city continued to be recognized nationally this past year – by Nerd Wallet as one of the best small cities in America for economic health, affordability and quality of life, and by the AARP – who identified our very own Washburn neighborhood as one of the best neighborhoods in the entire country for housing and community services.

We accomplished all of this by maintaining our city's services and expanding programs strategically – including new neighborhood resource police officers, increased code enforcement, the new MTU circulator transit route, and building more replacement homes and affordable housing.

We overcame our budget challenges with a financial plan that lowered the mill rate again for our residents and property owners and we continued our pragmatic approach to spending. This financial plan has resulted in a three-year overall decrease in total spending for city operations, the best bond rating in La Crosse's history, and a substantial rainy day fund.

Most prominently, we are working to improve our city's livability with a comprehensive neighborhood revitalization program. For 2016 we are adding two neighborhood police resource officers to the downtown-campus area. These two will bring the total number of community-oriented police officers to six – including the two on the north side and two on the south side.

We will continue working closely with our neighborhood groups to invest in capital improvements. In 2015 the Washburn, Powell-Poage-Hamilton, and Lower Northside-Depot neighborhoods realized new lighting projects, pedestrian safety improvements, and repaved streets.

In 2016 we will work with the Goosetown-Campus and Grandview-Emerson neighborhoods to complete \$750,000 in capital improvement projects. In addition, in 2016 we will complete the much anticipated Poage Park renovation and be well on our way to upgrading Powell Park and Cameron Park.

In 2016 we will work on the long-term health of the libraries – including our branches – and come together on a design for renovating and expanding the La Crosse Center. We will put forward a vision for Rose Street-Copeland Avenue that is consistent with the city's transportation vision.

And we will address several of our floodplain challenges including fixes to individual structures impacted by the floodplain and a new loan system to help property owners overcome the problems associated with the national flood insurance program. We will continue building more new homes in our core neighborhoods and provide more affordable housing and lots for new home construction.

Of special note – our city employees did a remarkable job in 2015 executing our programs. We completed a number of operational improvements and moved more services on-line. For 2016 we will be implementing a new city website with even more on-line services, new software to coordinate code enforcement, and develop a 311 point of contact reporting system for our citizens.

We are forging regional cooperation, such as the new county-wide tourism bureau, and are looking seriously at boundary agreements with our neighbors to improve efficiencies like no time in the past.

We continue steady progress toward our sustainability goals of reducing our fossil fuel consumption, with the highlight being the 22% reduction of our electricity use since 2007. We have also reduced our gasoline consumption by over 12% and paper usage by almost 35% since that time. These efforts have kept over seven million pounds of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere each year and have greatly reduced our organization's carbon footprint.

The results of these actions have helped to encourage hundreds of millions of dollars in investment and the growth in the city's assessed values to the tune of over \$42 million in 2015, which was a 1.55% increase from the year before.

We are witnessing the lowest unemployment rate for our region since before the recession and have about 830 more private sector jobs in La Crosse compared to last year, with gains in the manufacturing, education, health and wholesale trade sectors. Our economy's help wanted list is lengthy and we are hearing from businesses about the shortage of workers to fill available positions.

Our local housing market continued its robust pace, with 11% higher sales compared to last year and the median home price up more than two percent since 2014. With a four month supply, La Crosse County is the second tightest housing market in the state, behind only Dane County.

With all of that good news, we still have so much to do. There are too many homeless people and those living in poverty in La Crosse. There are too many families and children struggling – with approximately 48% of all La Crosse School District students qualifying for free and reduced-priced lunch.

Even though our help wanted list grows, La Crosse's wages continue to lag the rest of the state and nation. We must do more to provide affordable, safe and decent housing throughout our entire region and regional transportation solutions to help get people to work, to school and to their appointments.

We all felt the tragedy of the shootings this past summer and the loss of precious life. We collectively must do better to mentor and show our youngest there are real alternatives to crime and we must show them how to be productive and responsible citizens.

Our young people need opportunities to work, so in 2016 we will partner with our local businesses and non-profits to develop a summer youth employment program that will improve our neighborhoods and provide opportunities for our young people to develop job skills and experience.

The state of La Crosse is incredibly positive and growing and we are blessed to live and work here.

When you take into consideration our city's reinvigorated neighborhoods, our natural resources, clean air and water, outdoor recreation opportunities, and the arts and a vibrant nightlife, La Crosse's livability is reaching unprecedented levels and we approach this New Year with even higher expectations and great momentum.

By all of us working together – we will do great things in 2016.

Thank you.