
Good evening. Tonight, we take a few minutes to reflect on the State of the City. Where do we stand in Beloit today, where have we come in the past year, and where are we going? Some years, there's not all that much to say. But tonight, we've come through a year that included both successes and tragedies, and we look ahead to a year that will bring major changes to Beloit.

It's impossible to talk about the state of the city without mentioning the tragic violence that struck Beloit over the past year. My heart goes out to everyone who lost a loved one or was otherwise impacted by violent crime in the past year. And we all share the concern of those who are worried about their safety and the perception of safety in Beloit. There is much work left to be done to make our community the place we dream it can be. But I wanted to highlight some of the efforts that people across Beloit have undertaken to bring our city together and make our neighborhoods safer.

Our police department has launched new efforts to combat violent crime. Neighborhood watch groups have come together or renewed their efforts. Resident volunteers have taken to the streets to look out for the safety of children. Churches and non-profits have stepped up to lead conversations and build community. New options for youth programming have been explored to keep teens off the street at night. And we are evaluating our police department to ensure that everything possible is being done to maintain strong morale and make the best use of limited resources. In the coming year, I hope that we will begin to see results from these efforts. But I also know that change is not easy and does not come overnight. I hope the entire community will continue to prioritize proactive efforts to reach out to our young people and make sure they have hope for their future.

In the past year, we've had a community conversation on truancy. Last summer, that conversation led to the city council significantly reducing the fines for truancy, habitual truancy, and daytime curfew violations. The goal was to keep the focus on getting kids in school, not to have kids rack up large amounts of fines that could one day lead to jail time.

Just last week, the conversation continued in a joint meeting with the Beloit School Board. School district officials talked about all of the interventions that take place to help get kids in school before truancy citations are issued. The School Board and the City Council agreed to move forward with a task force, to include other stakeholders and community members, to continue to look at how to best address truancy in Beloit and build on the progress we've made in the past year.

No conversation about the state of the city would be complete without a comment on the budget. The 2015 budget is as tight or tighter than the several budgets before it. If the initial proposed state budget for the next two years is a preview of the final state budget that will be adopted in June, Beloit's 2016 budget will be even tighter. City staff and the city council have worked hard to manage these tight budgets while minimizing the impact to services that residents count on. For at least another two years, it looks like that challenge will continue. This will mean more tough decisions in the future, but the city's responsible use of fund balance and maintenance of an excellent bond rating puts Beloit in the best possible position to weather these continued financial challenges.

Despite the challenges we've faced, Beloit continues to move forward in attracting businesses and encouraging job creation. New stores and restaurants have opened, and are in the works, in the downtown and the Milwaukee Road business corridor. The Ironworks renovations continue to progress, and will continue to attract new businesses. In the past year, NorthStar medical radio-isotopes broke ground on a facility that could create 165 new jobs. Just this December, we announced that Pratt Industries will be building a new cardboard manufacturing facility in Beloit this spring and creating 140 jobs. While we still have work to do in economic development and making sure all Beloit residents have access to a family-supporting career, business growth is up and unemployment is down in Beloit.

Other leaders in our community continue to do great work to make Beloit a quality place to live. The School District of Beloit is completing work on the new Fran Fruzen Intermediate School, the final chapter in the renovations and new construction approved in the referendum. Visit Beloit held a very successful "Come & Knock on Our Doors" public art event last summer, along with many other promotions to bring visitors to Beloit.

The Downtown Beloit Association launched the 1st Annual Oktoberfest and continues to put on one of the best farmers markets in Wisconsin. The city's partnership with the Leadership Development Academy and the Rock Trail Coalition led to the installation of a bridge in Big Hill Park that will be part of extending an off-road bike path to Janesville. And the Beloit International Film Festival just celebrated its 10th Anniversary with ten days of amazing films, thanks to the hard work of volunteers that make it possible. These are just some of the wonderful things that have happened in Beloit over the past year.

The past year has seen a number of new faces at the city, and a number of departures. In the past year, we said goodbye to two city councilors with 21 years of combined service, Jim Van De Bogart and Kevin Leavy. But our council has grown to reflect more of Beloit's diversity with the additions of Ana Kelly, ^{the first Latina,} and Regina Hendrix, the first African American woman to serve on Beloit's City Council. In two months, my term on the City Council will end as well, and no matter how the April election turns out, this city council will be majority female for the first time in history.

In addition to changes on the city council, we've seen changes in the surrounding community. We have a new Rock County Administrator, Josh Smith. School District of Beloit Superintendent Steve McNeal has retired. And South Beloit lost Mayor Michael Duffy far too soon. The biggest change for the City of Beloit, of course, is the upcoming retirement of our City Manager, Larry Arft, after 12 years of service.

The biggest decision any City Council has to make is the hiring of a City Manager. Larry will retire in June and we are in the middle of a search process that we hope will lead to the selection of a new manager in April. I have great confidence in the consultant we are working with, and we have had 27 applicants for the position, so I am confident we will be able to interview multiple quality candidates and select someone who will be a great fit for Beloit. Just as the broader community was involved in identifying the traits we need in our next manager, the community will have an opportunity to meet finalists and provide feedback when we get to that stage of the process. I am confident we will select a manager with the skills and leadership qualities needed to lead us in this next chapter of Beloit's story.

Despite the challenges of the past year, and the uncertainty ahead that comes with any leadership transition, the state of our city is strong. Beloit is strong because of the resilience, dedication, and optimism of our residents. Beloit is strong because of the businesses, non-profit organizations, and institutions that make their home here and give back to this community. And Beloit is strong because of the hardworking city staff who have taken on the challenge of providing quality services with limited resources. Thank you to everyone listening tonight, here at City Hall and across the Beloit Community, for everything you do to make Beloit the strong, resilient city we are today, and keep forging ahead together in the next year and beyond.