

Mayor's State of the City Address

May 20, 2021

Hello everyone. Today I would like to speak with you about the state of your city. OUR city. And what we have been able to do – together – over the past 2 years since I became your mayor.

You may recall...during my campaign...I said Harrisonville was moving in the wrong direction. I said we needed new leadership. We needed to manage things with an eye toward the future.

I talked about my love for Harrisonville. Our proud history. And the great potential we have to grow economically, to bring more jobs and prosperity to our community. To improve the quality of life for our citizens. All while keeping Harrisonville an affordable place to live. In short, to restore pride and confidence our city.

So today I want to recap what we have done so far, and then talk about where I see us headed in the next few years. At the end, I hope you will share some of my optimism about the future of Harrisonville.

It would be naïve to look at our city through rose-colored glasses. Like any community, we face many challenges.

But frankly, we are no longer focused on what we can't do, or why such-and-such won't work. I grew tired of those who insisted on living in the past, failing to plan for the future and afraid to invest for the future. To me, that was not a winning strategy but rather a recipe for decline.

Your city government has undertaken a dramatic attitude shift. Today, we look forward, and we like what we see:

- After languishing for years, single-family housing permits are up. In the last 8 months, we have issued more permits than we did in the last 5 years combined.
- Sales tax collections are up, and we maintained good revenues even through the pandemic.
- New businesses are coming to town. ALDI is under construction and due to open next month. Culver's is coming. Other businesses that we cannot yet name, are contacting us about opening here and existing businesses like DLS Tire and Santa Fe Glass have plans to expand.
- The revitalization of the Harrisonville Square continues with the addition of businesses and loft apartments.
- Our school district is expanding the Cass Career Center and updating several other buildings.
- Our public library, headquartered here in Harrisonville, is expanding services and hours.
- Exciting improvements are coming to the Harrisonville Aquatic Center and the Harrisonville Community Center.
- Problems that have been neglected for years are finally being addressed.
- The flooding problem in the south part of the city, for example.
- The dangerous condition of the dams at our city lakes.
- Our water, sewer, and wastewater system.

These things – and many others -- are happening in spite of the pandemic, which tells us we are seeing an economic recovery in Harrisonville.

Sales tax receipts are up as people rehab and update their homes.

The real estate market is hot. Glen Eagle subdivision sold recently, and construction of new homes there will begin soon. New homes are also being built in our older neighborhoods.

I never want to minimize the effect of the pandemic. I know many businesses and families lost a lot during COVID-19. Looking to the future now, with cases trending downward and people being vaccinated, I believe now is the time for Harrisonville to “get ready to be ready.”

That means “setting the table,” so to speak, so we can take advantage of opportunities in what I believe is shaping up to be a new era of growth for our city.

But let’s step back for a minute and talk about the foundation we have laid.

To refocus our city and “set the table” for the future, we had to start with the people running it. Both elected leaders and appointed leaders.

I could not be more pleased with the talented people who have stepped up to serve our city. That begins with the Board of Aldermen. Several are here today, and I’d like you to meet them:

Ward 1 – Michael Zaring and David Doerhoff

Ward 2 – Judy Reece and Marcia Milner

Ward 3 – Sandy Franklin and Bill Mills

Ward 4 – Matt Turner and Gary Davidson

I believe President Harry S. Truman had it right when he said, “Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

I am convinced these eight men and women are just the right people with the right wisdom and experience to help me move Harrisonville forward.

In terms of city staff – the people who run our day-to-day operations – I can say that the management of your city is in good hands.

That begins with our City Administrator, Brad Ratliff, who shares my optimism about the future of Harrisonville.

Brad has brought a level of professional management that we very much needed, and which now permeates every department. I’d like you to meet him.

For citizens, this translates into a city government that is more responsive to the needs of our community.

Today we have a great team of department heads and employees who understand that all of us in city government are here to serve, and that by working as a team, we can move Harrisonville forward. I’d like you to meet some of them.

Administrative Services – Director Jeremy Smith

Police – Chief John Hofer

Fire/EMS – Chief Eric Myler

Public Works – Director Carl Brooks

Electric – Director Andy Pollard

City Clerk – Daniel Barnett

Parks and Rec – Director Grant Purkey

Community and Economic Development – Director Jim Clarke
Building Official – Chris Arthur

Speaking of teamwork, the city is not an island.

We are one part of a larger community – our businesses, our schools, our churches, this Chamber, our civic and service clubs, and the many other organizations that make Harrisonville a great place to live, work and play.

To strengthen the fabric of our community, we have re-established dialogue and cooperation with key leaders and organizations. We now meet regularly with our major community partners to share information and explore ways to work together.

And when we all work together, it's a beautiful thing!

Outside of Harrisonville, we have likewise re-established working relationships with economic development groups to help identify and attract business and industry to Harrisonville. We are seeing more business prospect leads coming in and we are following up on them timely and aggressively.

In a similar vein, one of my first steps as mayor was to form an Advisory Council of respected community leaders to act as a sounding board, and to offer candid advice on major issues.

Their input has been invaluable in helping us steer Harrisonville in the right direction.

To set a course for the future, you have to know what you're trying to achieve and which direction to take.

So early in my administration, the Board of Aldermen and I sat down with department heads to talk about the future.

Out of that discussion came three goals and an action plan.

This provided a strategic framework for our deliberations, decisions, and actions.

1. At the top of the list was economic development and growth.
2. Second, improving the appearance of our city.
3. And third, allocating funds for maintaining our infrastructure, including streets, sidewalks, and stormwater system.

Pretty basic stuff, but important stuff that we felt had been neglected for far too long.

Since that planning meeting, we have taken action, fine-tuned or put in motion important initiatives on all three of these goals. I would like to highlight a few of them:

In terms of our first goal -- growth and economic development -- I want everyone to know that Harrisonville is once again Open for Business!

That is why we re-established the position of economic development director and rehired Jim Clarke. Jim is here with us today and you met him earlier.

That is why we are once again active in organizations that can help steer businesses and jobs to Harrisonville. I serve as Chairman of the

Cass County Corporation for Economic Development this year. The CCCED is committed to growing Cass County.

That is why we have revived our city boards and commissions dealing with economic development.

And that is why we initiated outreach to builders, developers, bankers, real estate agents and others who play critical roles in the development of our community.

Underpinning our economic development goal is a critical need to update the city's Comprehensive Plan – something that hasn't been done since 2002.

After soliciting bids from firms all across the country, I am pleased to share that we have engaged the planning team of GouldEvans to update our Comprehensive Plan also called a City-wide Master Plan.

Work on that has already begun.

Think of this as a road map for the future – a way for us to depict in detail our vision for the Harrisonville of tomorrow.

This will be a very collaborative undertaking, and I am encouraging all citizens and businesses to participate.

Getting ready to be ready also requires that we have shovel-ready sites for prospective new businesses and industries.

Not only do we need the streets and utilities to be in place, but we need a means to pay for them.

The prime area for industrial growth is the western and southwestern part of the city around Love's, Church & Dwight, Universal Forest Products, Advanced Drainage Systems, Sapp Brothers, and the Walmart Distribution Center.

We missed an opportunity a few years ago to help fund the infrastructure needs in this area by failing to create a Community Improvement District with a one-penny sales tax on non-gasoline purchases at Love's Travel Center. It was puzzling to me at the time because Love's favored the idea and most of the tax burden would have fallen on the traveling public, not Harrisonville residents. We are revisiting that funding opportunity once again.

Meanwhile, we have developed a plan to extend the city sewer system farther south, which has prompted businesses like Sapp Brothers and the Slumber Inn to request annexation into the city limits and also creates opportunity for growth in that area of the City.

When you look at other cities and wonder why they are attracting major retail, warehouse logistics and other industrial prospects, you find that forward-thinking infrastructure planning is a key reason.

Get ready, Harrisonville, because more of those opportunities are coming our way!

When you combine good planning with all of the other assets Harrisonville has to offer – like rail access, an airport, an interstate highway, great schools, a library, a local hospital, a Square that is actually a SQUARE, and so much more – we become a very competitive and attractive city.

Speaking of our airport, which itself is the result of forward-thinking cooperation between city leaders and private citizens a generation ago,

I am pleased to share that we have secured a \$4.5m FAA grant for runway and other improvements to our airport. Having an airport is an economic asset that many other cities cannot offer.

Our second goal – improving the appearance of our city – is another key part of the “setting the table” for what’s to come.

This goal recognizes the fact that first impressions of Harrisonville really do matter. Many decisions to locate a family or a business here are based on those initial perceptions of our City.

Whether it is abandoned buildings, unkempt property, trash along the curbs, or violations of zoning regulations, we recognize that the City needs to do its part to facilitate a more attractive community, even though the ultimate responsibility lies with each property owner.

The problem of vacant and abandoned buildings is something we are keenly focused on because of the crime and vagrancy that those type of buildings invite.

One benchmark of our progress in meeting this goal is the number of nuisance code violations, which nearly tripled in 2020 from the year before.

I think you will see progress in the near future on such buildings as the old Bizarre Bazaar building on North Commercial Street and the old Harrisonville City Hospital building on West Pearl Street.

Other major structures that need attention are the old city water/power plant on North Independence and the long-vacant and deteriorating hospital building on Mechanic Street.

We are also using new technology. Our recently introduced See Click Fix! mobile app makes it easy for citizens to report problems directly to city staff. And our Nixle system allows staff to immediately notify residents via text message during emergencies. Daniel Barnett, City Clerk and PIO handles this technology and is here with us today and you met him earlier.

Residential housing is another focus of the city. Today, about 45% of the housing in Harrisonville is rental property.

So, we have reached out to landlords and property managers and have begun a dialogue to establish certain minimal standards for the appearance of their properties and for the safety of their tenants.

We have revisited roadblocks to new single-family construction, including connection fees by temporarily waiving a number of them. We believe this will help spur more housing in Harrisonville and the number of permits issued I mentioned earlier would support this belief.

We recognize that we have a housing shortage and desperately need more rooftops, so we're doing all we can to make that happen.

On the third goal, which has to do with our infrastructure needs, the wheels at City Hall have been turning nonstop.

Frankly, we have allowed ourselves to get behind the curve on some of the basic needs of our community.

We have a backlog of deferred maintenance and projects because of inadequate planning, lack of funding, or because no one was willing to tackle them.

As a result, some needs have become urgent – like the leaking dams at our city lakes.

To tackle some of these needs, we have adopted a 5-year capital improvement plan to fund stormwater, street, water, wastewater, curbing and sidewalk improvements.

Last August, the Board of Aldermen approved an updated water & sewer rate study that includes a complete 10-year plan on infrastructure improvements and the rates to support these improvements.

And for the first time in 10 years, Harrisonville has received federal transportation funds – a \$933,000 grant for the Muddy Creek Tributary project that will commence in 2023.

Earlier, I talked about the importance of good management, good planning, and being competitive.

Thanks to good management, your city has saved nearly \$200,000 by contracting certain city services and negotiating health insurance coverage for employees.

We have secured, and continue to secure, hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to fund major projects. And we have taken a hard look at how competitive we are on utility rates and property tax rates, and how much debt we carry.

As City Administrator Ratliff indicated in his very detailed “State of the City” presentation to the Board of Aldermen, people are surprised to learn just how competitive our rates are, and how solid our city finances are.

I'd like to share a few highlights:

- Harrisonville's outstanding debt is on a path to decline by as much as half over the next 10 years as we retire the debt on the Community Center and refinance other debt at lower rates.
- On property taxes, Harrisonville has one of the lowest rates in our area – 65 cents. In Peculiar, it's \$1.07. In Pleasant Hill, \$1.19. In Raymore, \$1.25. And in Belton, \$2.07.
- A 2020 MARC study showed that in the total property taxes for a single-family living in Harrisonville, we were the lowest (\$4036.) among the 51 cities and a full \$1,193 a year below the average.
- On sales taxes, a single family in Harrisonville spent about \$1,926 , which puts us 9th lowest in the study and well below the average.
- On utility rates, the picture is much the same. The combined utility cost for electric, gas, water, sewer, solid waste, and stormwater management for a single family in Harrisonville is \$4,684. That puts us 11th lowest among the 51 cities in the study.

This data says that your city is very competitive on taxes and utility rates, while not spending an undue amount on servicing debt.

We want it to stay that way, using good planning and conservative fiscal management.

Along with many other cities, Harrisonville recently got hit with an exorbitant spike in the cost of electricity due to the 10-day bout of sub-zero weather in the South.

This will be painful for our citizens, but we have developed a plan to mitigate the impact by spreading the additional charges over several months.

The shock of a \$1.8 million hit to our city budget for one month's electric bill is significant. But unlike some small cities that are completely devastated by these bills, Harrisonville's sound financial condition means we were able to pay our bill while softening the impact on utility customers.

Turning to the future, we see several opportunities to strengthen our financial position and thereby continue on the path toward growth, economic development, and a high quality of life for our citizens.

Working with the Chamber of Commerce and our elected officials, we are exploring the idea of a hotel/motel tax to be used for tourism and community and economic development in Harrisonville.

It's important to note that this revenue would come from the traveling public, not Harrisonville residents.

This tax would first require state legislation and then a vote of the people. Five other cities along with Harrisonville appealed to their state representatives to file similar legislation this session. It passed in the Missouri House, passed out of Senate committee but never made it to the floor for a vote and subsequently died in the final hours of session. Representative Chris Sander has promised to file it again next year.

Harrisonville has one of the finest Fire/EMS staffs around. We all like Chief Myler, but we never want to ride in his ambulance nor see his fire truck pulling up to our home or business.

Fire and ambulance services are never a source of revenue for the City, but a public safety service to our citizens. You may not know that in Harrisonville, the general fund has supported our fire services for years and takes a loss of \$600-850K each year.

This is primarily due to low reimbursement from Medicare/Medicaid. Continuing to have the general fund subsidize emergency services in Harrisonville will ultimately deplete our reserves.

In order to continue to provide Fire/EMS services, the Board of Aldermen agreed at their last meeting to go to the voters in August and request ½ of 1% sales tax to be designated to fund this important public safety service.

Let me close with a thank you.

Friends, as you have heard me say, the state of our City is strong! I am ecstatic about our strategic partnerships, as well as the future outlook for Harrisonville.

While I am proud of the steps your city government has taken the past 2 years to move Harrisonville forward, the truth is that we cannot do it without the support of the larger Harrisonville community...those of you seated in this room.

Your support to date has been nothing short of amazing and I am grateful for it.

The next few years will be both challenging and very exciting. I hope you will continue with those of us in city government as we travel this road to a great future. Thank you. Have a great afternoon!

###