

**2007 State of the City Address –**

**Mayor Jonathan Weinzapfel**

**Thank you, David, for that very kind introduction. You know, I really look forward to this speech each year. That's because in my job as Mayor, it's easy sometimes to get caught up in the day to day. Preparing for this speech gives me a chance to pause, not only look back at what we've accomplished together as a community, but also to look ahead to where we're going. And let me tell you, what I see ahead looks pretty good.**

**You may remember, in my very first State of the City address three years ago, I ended with a quote from Walt Disney – you might imagine, we're pretty big Disney fans in our house...Disney said, "If you can dream it, you can do it."**

**If you can dream it, you can do it.**

**Well, here in the City of Evansville we have dreamed big, haven't we? But more importantly, we've not only dreamed big, we've done it...**

**We've turned old abandoned buildings like JC Penney, Permanent Federal and deJong's into loft homes and created brand new downtown neighborhoods.**

**We've made part of our history come alive for school children and visitors who tour the LST.**

**We've preserved an amazing art deco building downtown...the halls of that building now echo with the delight of children who visit the Koch Family Children's Museum of Evansville.**

**The Evansville African-American Museum is closing in on their fund-raising goals and promises to be a major cultural asset celebrating Evansville's African-American heritage.**

**And we've turned our downtown into an Entertainment destination... Think of it, you can now enjoy a drink in a place called "Le Merigot Hotel and Blush Ultralounge and Tapas Bar" – without flying to New York.**

**Sounds impressive, doesn't it? Well, that list only covers what's happening in our Downtown. Exciting things like that are going on all around our city and that's why I stand before you today to say:**

**THE STATE OF OUR CITY IS STRONG, AND GETTING STRONGER.**

**But don't just take it from me. Take it from the people who know cities. You'll recall in 2004, the National Civic League named us an All-America City. The year after that, we were named one of the Top 100 Communities for Young People by American's Promise. And, last year the Indiana Chamber of Commerce named us their "Community of the Year."**

**In the time since we won that award, we haven't stopped working.**

**We're promoting stronger communications between the police and our growing Latino populations with the Evansville Police Department's new Outreach Program.**

**We're raising awareness and promoting a dialogue about diversity in our community. With the help of area businesses, colleges and universities, the city is bringing in General Colin Powell to kick off a new "Celebration of Diversity Distinguished Lecture Series".**

**We're working on the second annual Healthier Evansville Week building on our community's commitment to a healthier lifestyle. We saw some of that momentum for good health build this past year, when the City Council passed the Smoke-Free Evansville Ordinance.**

**And, we're continuing to bring our City government into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with new information and communication technologies that eliminate duplication and**

improve services, making us more effective and more efficient, while saving taxpayer dollars.

As I said, all the recognition and awards are nice, but they don't keep your roads clear or your sidewalks paved. Truth is, though, we've been doing a pretty good job with that too.

Since 2004, the City Engineer's Office has constructed more than 7 miles of sidewalks and more than 350 curb ramps to help people with disabilities.

The Department of Urban Forestry planted more than 850 trees in our city. And, this same small department recently started the city's very own Tree Nursery, which will allow us to grow many of the trees we need for public planting and save taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars.

And not long ago, the Mesker Park Zoo and Botanical Garden was struggling. Today, the zoo is bringing in more money and more members than anytime in its 78-year history.

You'll find this commitment to improve and innovate throughout my administration. And, I would like to take a moment for the department heads from city government to stand and to be recognized for their hard work and dedication to this City, and accept my sincere appreciation.

In my three years as Mayor, I've never been as proud of these folks, and, quite honestly, the rest of our community, as I was on November 6<sup>th</sup>. I don't have to tell you what happened that night, you remember. We were tested. That tornado taught us all that we have courage, compassion, dedication and strength. These are the qualities that we'll use as we look toward the future, and find solutions to the challenges our City is facing.

The first challenge involves our pools. Just last year, we had to close both Tepe Park and Howell pools for safety reasons. And, the other seven city pools are in poor shape.

So last spring we created an Aquatics Task Force made up of pool managers, neighborhood and youth organizations, students, parents, school administrators, and health and parks department staff. We asked them to study who uses the pools and how often. We also asked them to talk to the public. They will come up with the City's first Master Plan for our pools, one that meets the long-term needs of the community -- with a funding plan that makes sense for taxpayers. The task force is considering replacing failing neighborhood pools and the construction of a new indoor facility. The prospect of a brand new competitive swimming pool is exciting. But, we need community partnerships with the EVSC and the private sector to help fund the construction and operating costs.

Another question facing our community is a simple one really. Is Roberts Stadium good enough to meet our needs? If not, the question is do we spend money to renovate the existing facility or do we build a new one? Seems pretty simple. But, of course, it's not simple at all. It's very complicated and very intelligent people have completely different ideas -- and very strong feelings -- about what should be done.

So we decided to seek expert advice. Last month we selected an independent consulting firm with experience in this sort of thing to give us the information we need to make the best decision for our community. If we can reasonably refurbish the stadium for 5 – 10 million dollars and have a first class facility that meets our current and future needs, then that may be the way to go. If it's going to take 35 million dollars or more to renovate Roberts Stadium, it may be best to build something new. And, as I've said before, this isn't a question for me to answer. It's a question for the people of Evansville.

**We also are calling on you, the people of Evansville, to come up with answers to another one of our major challenges. You saw what happened during last September's storms. Some people lost everything. I think we would all agree, every person who lives in this city has the right to live in a safe, clean and dry home.**

**Even before the water receded last fall, we took steps to help ensure that. We bought a second vacuum truck to keep storm drains clear of debris and we bought more pumps and hoses. And, we also called on all of you...our citizens...to help. Some of you have signed up to be neighborhood volunteers in charge of placing barricades on your street when the water rises. Others are on stand-by ready to fill and move sandbags where they're needed.**

**These are all short-term fixes...but we are also looking long-term. We're updating the City's 10-year-old Storm Water Master Plan. We created a bi-partisan Storm Water Task Force to look at that plan. It's made up of experts who understand the engineering and construction, people who understand the financing and budgets, and perhaps most importantly, the Task Force includes people who live in the areas that flood. That's what I feel my administration has been all about...opening up government to the people. I'm convinced that this approach, listening to the people who have the most at stake, is the best way to solve this flooding problem. It's a natural extension of our Traveling City Halls. We expect to receive the Task Forces' recommendations -- hopefully by the first of summer—and we will act.**

**Just like we can't predict when flooding rains will fall, we also can't predict some of the budget challenges we're facing. Here's an example, like all Americans, the City of Evansville had to pay more for gas this year. It's hard to budget for stuff like that. And, it's hard to budget for increasing health care costs. But even with those uncertainties, we've balanced the budget for the past 3 years. We've made some tough decisions in order to that. By reducing rank in the police and fire departments, eliminating positions outside of public safety, and redesigning the city healthcare plan, we've saved taxpayers millions of dollars without sacrificing the quality of city services.**

**Of course, the fiscal health of the City is based on a diverse economy. The challenge is to expand the city's tax base by partnering with businesses to keep existing jobs and create new ones**

**In that area, we've spent the last three years putting in place the foundation to spur economic growth and create the sort of jobs that will help keep our bright young people here in our community.**

**That work has paid off.**

**American General has started a 35 million dollar expansion of their downtown headquarters. In all, the estimated economic impact of this project over the next 2 years is more than 400 million dollars. The City worked closely with American General for nearly 2 years to make this project happen.**

**When Shoe Carnival was looking for a place to locate their new \$40 million corporate headquarters and distribution center, they did not put on their walking shoes. I applaud Shoe Carnival, as well as our County Commissioners and County Council members, for working together to keep one of our leading corporations here at home.**

**The globalization of our economy means that we need to take a collaborative, regional approach to attracting new businesses and investment to our area. In September we held the first meeting of the Economic Development Coalition of Southwest Indiana. Working together with business leaders, elected officials and educators, this public/private partnership brings together the resources of Vanderburgh, Posey, Gibson and Warrick Counties. We've just hired an executive director and we're off and running.**

**To complement our regional economic development efforts we've combined our city county economic development efforts into one agency--the Growth Alliance for Greater Evansville or GAGE. GAGE will serve as the focal point for downtown development, help existing businesses expand, and provide support for start-up**

**businesses. I would like to thank County Commission President Cheryl Musgrave and County Council Vice President Lloyd Winnecke, as well as other community and business leaders, for their hard work in creating this important economic development alliance.**

**Of course, any discussion on economic development must include I-69 – it’s critically important to our community. I applaud Governor Daniels for his aggressive pursuit of this project, and I call on the Indiana General Assembly to approve funding to begin construction on I-69 in this year’s budget.**

**I sincerely hope that I-69 is part of our future. And when I look at what else is in our future, what our other goals are, I think of education.**

**Education is not technically a “mayor’s” responsibility. But I’ve always made it one of mine. In part, because when we offer children in our community a great education, they help make us a great city.**

**During my first year in office I asked some of the city’s smartest, most dynamic people to join the Evansville Education Roundtable. We set two goals...that every child should finish high school and more should go onto higher education.**

**To boost graduation rates we’ve partnered with the Minority Student Achievement Coalition on a new campaign called “I Stayed. How About You?” We hope it will send a powerful message to our young people that they can overcome any obstacle that might prevent them from earning a high school diploma.**

**For most of us here, we knew the steps it took to get into college...we knew about taking the entrance exams, going on the visits, and filling out financial aid forms. But, if you are the first kid in your family to go to college, how do you know how to do all that? Just yesterday, the Education Roundtable endorsed a recommendation to develop a College Access Center in Vanderburgh County. Our College Access Center will provide assistance to low-income families and students...essentially**

walking them through the college planning process. We hope to move quickly on establishing the center.

For middle school students, we're continuing to push mentoring. Right now, we have 120 student-mentor pairs, and another 120 on a waiting list for "Classroom Connections." We need more mentors. If I can find the time, you can also. Two of our most generous corporate citizens, Old National Bank and Vectren, recently provided a \$75,000 grant to support Classroom Connections, and today, just as I've done in the past, I'm asking you to consider mentoring a young person.

And last year, for the young ones, we helped start the Early Childhood Development Coalition, a collaboration of more than 60 organizations and 160 individuals who are working together to find ways to better prepare our children for success in school.

The future of our city also depends on providing affordable housing for low and middle-income families and that's also one of our goals.

Thirty-five families are already living in the new Jacobsville Apartments on West Florida Street. Construction will begin soon on the second phase of that project, adding another 35 units right next door.

And just two weeks ago, Reverend Adrian Brooks of the Memorial Community Development Corporation announced plans for a neighborhood of 35 additional affordable townhouse units in the Walnut Center.

We're breathing new life back into our near downtown neighborhoods with Front Door Pride, a major revitalization program. Progress has been slower than I had hoped, but we're reversing decades of decline and neglect that have plagued some of our City's oldest, prettiest neighborhoods. To date, the City has acquired 80 parcels of land in the Front Door Pride area. Houses will either be refurbished or lots cleared for new home construction so they can be purchased. And, we're lending a helping hand to struggling homeowners who can request up to \$5,000 in city money

to make repairs and bring their home up to code. Over time, this broad initiative will help bring pride back to hardworking neighborhoods.

As part of Front Door Pride, we've established the Haynie's Corner Arts District to encourage artists and arts organizations to locate in the neighborhoods surrounding the Alhambra Theatre, one of the oldest movie theaters in the state. I recently sent a letter to Congressman Ellsworth requesting 600,000 dollars to renovate the Alhambra so it can serve as a focal point for artistic and cultural activities in the Arts District and further ensure the success of this neighborhood revitalization initiative.

We all want clean air and a healthy environment. It's certainly a goal of this administration. We bought five hybrid buses that have reduced our fuel consumption by 22 percent and reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 90 percent. They cost more than regular buses, but we'll recover those costs within a year and half. And, we've asked Congress to help cover the nearly \$12 million cost to complete additional sections of the Pigeon Creek Greenway and create a more walkable and bikeable city. We're also about to put in the City's first major bike lanes on Oak Hill Road all the way from US 41 to Lynch Road.

But there's much more we can do. That's why I'm announcing here today, that the City of Evansville has joined more than 300 cities from across the nation in signing the U.S. Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement. We'll be releasing details of the agreement soon, but I can say that we're strengthening our commitment to reduce greenhouse gases by increasing energy efficiency, increasing recycling rates, maintaining healthy urban forests, and promoting the use of clean, renewable energy resources. Business leaders like the Chamber of Commerce, Vectren, and others in our community have given this agreement their full support.

We've run through our accomplishments, challenges and goals, now my friends, it's time to dream again and dream big.

**I for one can see us as a totally connected, new millennium city with high-speed, broadband wireless Internet service everywhere. Not just downtown, not just in café's, but throughout the entire city. It can be done and it makes sense for the City to take the lead because we already have much of the infrastructure in place – buildings, streetlights, and traffic signals that would serve as wireless connection points. We could promote our City as one that embraces technology, and use that as a cutting edge economic development tool.**

**I can also see Evansville as a major port for international trade. We've got the most important building block to do that--the Ohio River. Right now, Memphis is the last major river port stop before thousands of containers, mostly from Asia, are loaded onto trucks and rail cars. What would it take to get those barges to unload here, instead? Our River Commercialization Advisory Committee is looking into that. It's working with the Army Corps of Engineers and Congress to put together a plan for a harbor and transportation facility near the CSX Rail Yard. Experts say the U.S. container trade will increase substantially over the next 20 years, and we want to be ready. A state-of-the-art transportation facility would provide tremendous opportunities for new and existing businesses here.**

**In my dreams, we can do it all. But it means finding creative sources of financing, minimizing any impact on property taxes. We must provide for the basics like sewer, water, streets, fire and police, but we also have to provide the amenities that improve our quality of life...like stadiums and pools.**

**And we will.**

**We will because we've already turned many of our dreams into successes. Now, to go from good to great, from great to world class, we must simply build on those successes. Together, we will make that happen because we are confident, we know how to work together, and we share a vision of what our community can be.**