

## Mayor Jean Stothert – State of the City address – Feb. 28, 2020

It is a special honor to present the annual State of the City address.

Preparing for this day makes us look inward, evaluate our goals, and consider the next steps to make our city even better in the future.

We weigh the confidence and optimism of our citizens and, we evaluate the many ways our city grows and prospers outside the services city government provides.

This comprehensive review leads me to report that our city is confident, growing, focused, and engaged.

Omaha is financially strong.

Development is at a pace never seen before.

Our citizens consistently work together to improve their neighborhoods and our city.

Our private sector and our public institutions are generally healthy, expanding, and successful.

All of this is happening primarily because of one important word – investment.

The investments I refer to are public, taxpayer investments.

They are also the investments made by local businesses to grow and hire more employees, and by our non-profit partners, schools and health care facilities that teach, train, and care for others.

They are also investments of time, volunteers who help others in countless ways.

For these reasons and more, Omaha is a thriving city with an exciting future.

We can clearly demonstrate that investments in critical public objectives do pay off.

One of the best examples of this is public safety.

In the last seven years, we have devoted substantial resources to support our police and fire departments.

In 2013, Chief Schmaderer and I made a commitment to a fully staffed, equipped, and trained police department.

We have now reached our staffing goal of 902 Omaha Police officers, a record number and an increase of 100 new officer positions.

We have improved recruiting and training, adjusted staff responsibilities, and purchased new equipment to help officers do their jobs better, more safely, and with more accountability.

So, has this investment paid off?

I believe the answer is clearly “yes”.

Omaha is as safe today as it has been in many, many years.

Our clearance rate, or the success rate at which we solve violent crimes, is nearly double other cities our size.

Over the last 4 years, our homicide rate has fallen to a 30-year low,

Citizen complaints against police officers are down.

Incidents of force are down, making Omaha a regional leader with a low number of officer-involved incidents with a firearm,

Police response times are improved, in part to the West Precinct we opened in September.

And, this fall we will break ground on a new fire station near 34<sup>th</sup> and Q in South Omaha.

This will be the first new station in 20 years, replacing the 100-year old Station 31 at 25<sup>th</sup> and L.

We are pleased with our progress on public safety, but we are not content.

The citizens of Omaha believe public safety is our primary responsibility. It’s our top priority, too.

All of us continue to address it with a healthy sense of urgency.

It is also urgent that we act to improve and maintain the condition of our roads. Everyone knows what I’m talking about here.

The safety and efficiency of our roads is a top priority for me and for our taxpayers.

Improved transportation also meets my commitment to improve the taxpayer experience.

My job is to identify and study issues that need to be resolved and to present reasonable solutions to those issues.

Earlier this month, I proposed and the City Council approved a \$200 million bond issue that will appear on the May 12th primary ballot.

If approved by the voters, we will fund the city's first road maintenance and rehabilitation program.

Since I have been mayor, we have resurfaced more than 750 lane miles of roads, that's the distance between Omaha and Waco, Texas.

But it's not good enough, we must do more.

For over fifty years, previous administrations and city councils have not funded a road resurfacing program worthy of the modern and first-class city we have become.

We cannot afford to wait any longer.

Spending millions of dollars every year to patch potholes will set us back even further.

Last July, we started a series of public meetings and presented "A Road Map to Better Streets".

We studied our road infrastructure, what is needed to make long-term, sustainable improvements, and options to pay for it.

After analysis, public meetings, and listening to our taxpayers, I am convinced this is the right move for Omaha.

I don't take lightly the decision we have placed before the voters, especially after implementing two property tax rate reductions since I have been mayor.

Keeping taxes as low as possible is important to me.

So is providing quality services the taxpayers expect and deserve.

We anticipate the approved ballot measures will result in a levy increase of approximately \$26 a year for the owner of a house valued at \$100,000.

An aggressive pavement maintenance program, where the public will see immediate and significant improvement, is best funded by property taxes.

The new work will address only our existing roads, the ones we all drive on today.

With this level of funding we will double the amount spent each year on road resurfacing.

Every lane mile in Omaha can be resurfaced every twenty years, which is the average road lifespan.

And, importantly, the plan will include additional funding for unimproved streets that exist in some of our older Omaha neighborhoods.

As a matter of principle, I believe the public should vote on large and expensive projects and facilities when taxes will change, or new financial risk is assumed.

In the coming weeks, we will schedule another series of town hall meetings to answer your questions and explain how this investment will further connect our city to the potential that is before us.

It's important that voters make this decision. If you say yes, we will start work this summer.

Building great partnerships is the way we get things done in Omaha.

Nearly everything we accomplish benefits from the leadership, financial support, and vision of these valued partners.

In 2020, we will see great collaboration in North and South Omaha to transform once-declining neighborhoods and offer a new, better, quality of life.

We are fortunate to receive not one, but two Choice Neighborhood Grants.

These awards from the Department of Housing and Urban Development are testament to the strength of our partnerships and our record of successful outcomes.

With a \$25million implementation grant, we will continue the revival of the important north 30<sup>th</sup> Street corridor from Cuming to Pinkney.

We will replace the 70-year-old Spencer Street Homes with modern, affordable housing.

Residents will have opportunities for employment, better incomes, access to quality education and health care.

The new neighborhood will be named, "Kennedy Square".

This investment will expand the progress already underway at the successful Highlander development.

Six miles south, a similar project is beginning.

Omaha is one of four cities to receive a Choice Neighborhood Planning and Action Grant to revitalize the Indian Hills Neighborhood, including OHA's Southside Terrace Garden apartments.

We will use our experience and resources to make housing safer, families stronger, and opportunities equal for the diverse population of this neighborhood.

Omaha has the will, the commitment, and the resources to invest these choice grants wisely, and become an example for other communities ready to reinvest in older neighborhoods.

Please help me recognize all of our partners: Omaha Housing Authority Executive Director Joanie Poore and her team,

The OHA Board of Directors,

Kristin Williams representing the Sherwood Foundation,

75 North Executive Director Othello Meadow his team,

Cesar Garcia, Executive Director of the Southside Redevelopment Corporation, and Planning Director Dave Fanslau and his staff.

We are up for this job!

We also now have citizen-led North and South 24<sup>th</sup> street Business Improvement Districts.

BIDs empower citizens to preserve and enhance their communities by developing projects and services that address the needs of that district.

The best ideas and plans come from working together.

Omaha also benefits from exciting and unprecedented private investment.

The Omaha World-Herald recently referred to Omaha as a "boomtown".

Who doesn't love to hear that!

Many developments in progress reflect the significant ways our city benefits from private investment.

The Heartwood Preserve Project in West Omaha, a 500-acre housing, office, retail and entertainment project near Boys Town.

When fully complete, it will include over 2,000 new housing units with a project value of over \$1 billion.

The Millwork Commons project in north downtown is transforming an old industrial area into unique commercial uses.

This \$300 million project is a great example of how both growth and preservation can benefit our city.

Also underway - the Builder's District, the final phase of the Capitol District, new projects in Benson and Blackstone, and the Conagra campus.

When faced with a challenge at this location a few years ago, we did what Nebraskans do best, we created opportunity.

Just this week, we broke ground on the \$500 million-dollar development featuring retail, residential, a hotel, beautiful green space, and a plaza connecting to the Old Market.

This exciting project fits well with the mission of the 1,300 Conagra employees who still live and work in Omaha.

And, very soon, we will make another announcement to expand Omaha's development momentum, so stay tuned!

We always like to see new construction and new headquarters, but the real value of the private investment in our city is the positive effect on small business, jobs, wage growth and attracting and retaining young professionals.

The ripple effect of private investment and a strong local economy benefits everyone. Here are few examples:

- Employment growth is up over three percent compared to one year ago
- The unemployment rate in Omaha remains low at 2.8 percent
- Average hourly wages have risen by over \$1 in Omaha since December 2018
- In 2019, the Omaha area was home to 48 new tech startups
- And, in 2019 the city issued over 20,000 building permits
- The construction value of these permits is over one billion dollars. That's one of the highest amounts on record and the highest since i have been mayor

Business growth is vital for our future.

In September 2015, Carmen Tapio opened Northend Teleservices, a locally-owned business on North 24<sup>th</sup> Street that provides call center services to many sectors including medical, financial, education and the United States government.

She started with seven employees. Today, she has 120 full-time employees.

2020 will be a year of tremendous growth for her company.

Carmen plans to increase her staff to 300 by late summer, tripling her workforce in just three years.

The starting hourly wage at Northend Teleservices is \$17.25 an hour. That's increasing too, to \$19 an hour.

She plans to expand her facility in North Omaha and open another call center in South Omaha.

Carmen Tapio is running the largest African-American female-owned business in the State of Nebraska.

She offers good jobs, good wages, and opportunities for advancement.

She has the only supervisor apprenticeship program in our state.

She offers tuition assistance for employees and their families and even offers transportation to and from work for her employees.

When a company like Northend Teleservices succeeds, our city succeeds.

Carmen – thank you for investing in people and building your business in Omaha.

To advance job training and employment opportunities, the city supports many programs.

A year ago this month, with our partner the Salvation Army, we selected the first participants for our "A Way to Work" program.

"A Way to Work" is a work readiness program that provides employment, training, and services to persons who are homeless.

We offer jobs in our Parks Department, good wages, tools for long-term success, and additional resources the Salvation Army is trained to provide.

In our first twelve months, we have assisted 38 men and women who are experiencing homelessness.

13 of them have found employment, 14 have found housing

I am proud to recognize everyone who has successfully completed the program, and to introduce Bradley.

Bradley lived at Siena Francis for over a year.

After beginning our program, he served two months in jail.

The day he was released, he called the Salvation Army, asking to return.

He successfully completed the program, and trained at Metro Community College.

Bradley is now employed by Drake Williams Steel, earning nearly double the minimum wage, and he has moved into his own apartment.

Congratulations Bradley. We wish you continued success.

Thank you to Salvation Army Major Greg Thompson for your support, program coordinator Maryann Slack, and the Salvation Army team, and Parks Director Brook Bench and staff.

Our first year results show we can succeed, so I will ask the City Council to support additional funding in 2021 to expand the program, and help more people like Bradley learn a trade, earn a good wage, and live in safe, affordable housing.

“A Way to Work” expands our commitment to workforce development, including Heartland Workforce Solutions, and the Empowerment Network Step-Up jobs program for teens and young adults.

Today, I am pleased to announce we will make a new investment in an internship program for Latino students.

A pilot program launched last year by the Latino Center of the Midlands has demonstrated early and impressive results.

With support and funding from committed community partners, the program will expand this year to offer jobs, training, and mentoring for youth ages 16 to 19.

I will ask the City Council to approve and initial \$25,000 for this program, joining partners including the Greater Omaha Chamber, Heartland Workforce Solutions, Avenue One Scholars Foundation, Hawkins Construction and Metro Community College.

We have a history of supporting workforce training programs with established goals and partnerships.

The Latino Center has provided services in Omaha for 50 years and has a measurable record of performance.

This program meets or exceeds our funding requirements and will fill a much-needed void.

In addition to public and private investment, Omaha's dynamic philanthropic community plays a critical role in making our city one of opportunity and enjoyment.

The generosity is extraordinary and throughout Omaha we see signs of this commitment.

One example – Heritage Services and the city worked together to build the new Siena Francis House shelter, for those who are experiencing homelessness.

Donors provided an impressive \$18 million dollars for the shelter.

The City of Omaha paid for infrastructure costs including the demolition of the former day service center and the cleanup of the property.

We cut the ribbon in December and now 450 people can find shelter and receive services in a safe, respectful and friendly environment.

Our goal must be to end homelessness, anything short of that is unacceptable.

Work is well underway on the transformation of our riverfront with new parks, green space, entertainment and recreation areas.

This is one of the most significant projects in Omaha's history.

This \$300 million project, of which 80% is funded by private donations, will forever change our city.

Let me update many City initiatives that will impact citizens in the near future.

In January 2021, our new solid waste, recycling and yard waste collection contract will take effect.

Step 1: we awarded the contract to FCC Environmental Services.

Step 2: preparing for implementation is underway.

FCC has ordered the automated trucks and covered carts and is in employment discussions with those who currently work for our contractor, Waste Management.

Step 3 is implementation.

We will hold FCC to a high standard of service.

This change in contractors and an entirely new collection process is a significant undertaking.

I appreciate the Council's support of our thorough preparation for this change; the environmental studies, professional evaluations, pilot program, community meetings, and public testimony that led to the final contract.

This will be a big change for all of us.

We will be ready for a successful transition on day one.

We are also implementing our new landlord registry and rental inspection program.

Landlord registration started last month and will continue throughout the coming months.

We estimate there are 80-thousand rental units in the city. We have received over 23-thousand registrations.

The deadline is the end of March.

Rental property inspections begin in 2022.

We will be fully staffed to carry out the requirements of the ordinance.

This first ever program for Omaha will benefit renters, especially the most vulnerable, while not being overly burdensome for landlords.

We look forward to its full implementation.

My recommendation to hire Omaha's first Vision Zero Coordinator is before the City Council now.

Our active living advisory committee recommended that we consider vision zero strategies to reduce and eliminate traffic deaths.

I formed a task force that made the recommendation to become a vision zero city, and demonstrate our commitment by hiring a vision zero coordinator.

We are ready to do that.

In 2019, Omaha Police investigated 36 fatal and 177 serious injury crashes Omaha.

We must change those statistics.

I will also bring an ordinance to the council this spring to regulate scooters.

The evaluation of our 2019 pilot will be complete soon.

An ordinance that clearly sets the rules for the safe use of scooters will be necessary if we decide scooters will be allowed in Omaha.

Transit is part of every discussion, every day.

Public safety, job growth, workforce training, development - all require a safe and future-oriented transportation system.

Metro Transit's ORBT, will begin this fall, featuring 60-foot accordion style busses.

ORBT's initial route will make stops between Westroads Mall and downtown, offer bus tracking technology for riders, and greater efficiency and convenience for those who use it.

I can't wait to take my first ORBT ride.

We are studying other transit options across Omaha, with many partners.

This spring, Metro Smart Cities will announce it's first pilots to test potential options for greater multi-mobility access.

One of the first projects will be a pair of "bikeways" on streets with high bicycle ridership.

We will install and evaluate temporary protected bike lanes for up to 18 months.

Smart Cities is the city-led initiative using technology and innovation to improve transit.

"Forever North" is a housing and multi-modal transportation study for North 24th Street.

The focus is on development, housing, transit and connectivity, art, history and culture, and of course people.

This is a plan developed by citizens, for citizens.

A draft of the Forever North strategy will be available on the city planning website on Monday.

This Spring, we will introduce a new City of Omaha mobile app, to make city government more accessible.

Taxpayers are our customers. This is another way to improve the taxpayer experience.

The app will offer many features:

You can make a report to the Mayor's Hotline, access all city websites, and review job openings.

Information about trash collection, road closings, and snow removal will be on the app.

There will be a social media hub, and much more.

Another reason we are optimistic about the future of Omaha is more and more young people are assuming positions of leadership.

In business, the arts, philanthropy, community organizations, and elective office, young people are rising to the challenge of making Omaha better.

Every day, our city is getting more exciting, diverse and rewarding for young people and young families.

Recently, the popular online technology company ZDNET ranked Omaha number two on the list of "fastest growing hot spots for tech professionals".

This progress will continue, I believe, due to the work of educators, industry recruiters, business incubators, partners like the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and most importantly the outreach of young leaders to their peers.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to an institution in Omaha that is taking on important, life-saving work.

At this moment, the highly trained experts at the Nebraska Medical Center are responding to the nation's call for help with the Coronavirus outbreak.

The medical center is an extraordinary institution.

The leadership has worked hard for years to prepare itself with the expertise and facilities to handle just this kind of threat.

The Medical Center's response, willingness to help, and public health mission perfectly reflect how an organized, civilized society takes care of each other in times of need.

To the Nebraska Medical Center leadership and talented and dedicated staff, thank you.

Omaha has certainly evolved over time from a small riverside town to the diversified economic leader we are today.

Our ability to affect change, to embrace it, and improve it, is remarkable.

Our citizens are leaders in making the public, private, non-profit and individual investment driving this change.

Together, our continued investment in Omaha will result in a stronger, brighter, and vibrant future.

Thank you to everyone in Omaha for what you do for our city, and for each other.