

Mayor John Kovash | State of the City
January 26, 2015
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Good evening, and welcome to the 2015 State of the City of West Linn.

It is my honor and pleasure to report that the state of our city - is strong and vibrant and it is one of the best places to live in the world.

A few introductions.....

And so tonight, I'd like to talk about a bit about where we have been, our strengths, our pride of place, and some our weakness and what this means for you, as a West Linn neighbor.

One of our strengths is our staff who keeps improving our processes including technology. For last year's State of the city they created poster board visuals that were placed so that they could be viewed after the speech.

This year we have informational slides that you can see during and after this presentation. Let's see how they work.

Every two years a regional polling firm conducts a survey of our residents and, and asks questions about how residents' feel about their city.

The first slide gives us the polling questions and responses from 1,000 of our residents - 300 by phone and 700 online.

1. STRENGTH:

The upward trend in citizen satisfaction with the city continues as 84% of our residents give West Linn an eight or higher on a scale of one to 10.

This indicates that residents continue to feel that the City of West Linn is a good place to live, with particularly high scores from families and this tracks with my experiences. I often ask people how they like the city and virtually every time they say I love it here.

Our polling also shows that residents believe the City of West Linn does a good job communicating with the public

There was more than 80% agreement that, we should encourage economic development.

A strong majority agreed that if the Stafford area is brought inside the Urban Growth Boundary, the City of West Linn should plan and regulate any development near our city

And, eight in ten agreed that the City should encourage a mix of uses in the Arch Bridge area, with agreement higher than two-thirds among all demographic groups.

It is an interesting survey so please read the rest of it later tonight or on the web site.

Let me mention a few things we accomplished this past year.

We increased the street maintenance fee by 75% in order to stop the general decline in the condition of our streets. We're now on a path of annual street maintenance that protects our investment in our important road network.

We recently installed a traffic light at Santa Anita and Rosemont, creating a safer crosswalk for our Rosemont Ridge Middle School students.

All this takes money and management and the staff and council have worked to be careful and prudent with revenues and to manage the city in a businesslike manner.

But that hasn't always been the case:

It was not that long ago that West Linn was often the laughing stock of the region and off the radar of regional policy makers.

Embezzlements, near default on our utility bonds, senior staff leaving by the droves; council meetings punctuated by loud, angry voices and personnel attacks. You would almost have to have lived through that to understand how dysfunctional our government really was.

That is in our past, and we are now in a position of strength, both within our boundaries and in the region. And it makes a difference.

As you probably know, last year we received more than \$200,000 from Metro to plan the future of West Linn's Arch Bridge/Bolton neighborhood and what you probably did not know was that Council President Thomas Frank was elected to the board of the League of Oregon Cities.

This is the organization that influences Oregon legislation pertaining to cities and this put him in a position of considerable influence in this state.

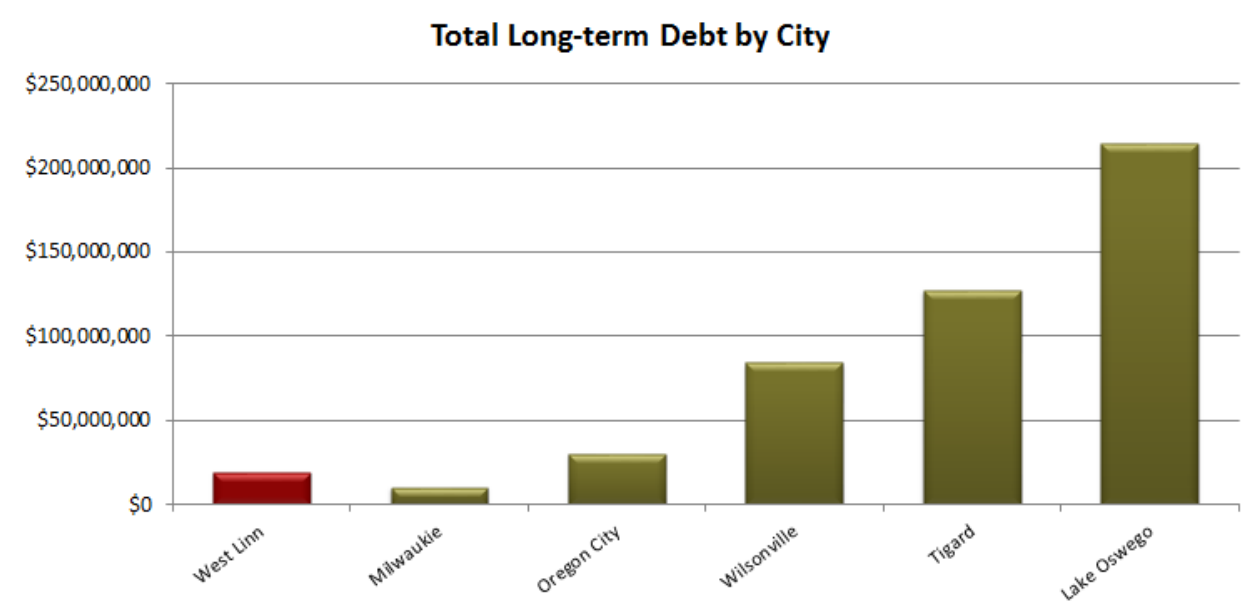
Our staff is routinely called upon to offer their professional assistance to other cities - currently, our Finance staff is helping the City of Damascus; and our IT staff is helping the City of Oregon City.

And perhaps the greatest show of our regional strength came late last year, when West Linn and Tualatin's opposition to the Stafford urban reserve designation was upheld, and the decision was remanded back to Metro.

We have carved out our place as a strong community in the Portland Metro region, and we will continue to work in partnership with other agencies.

FINANCIAL STABILITY & PLANNING

Another source of strength is our low level of debt:



While other communities in America are struggling, West Linn’s debt is very low, our credit rating is a “solid double-A” and our financial strength continues to improve but with a big caveat which I will discuss in a few moments.

1. PRIDE:

I’d like to switch gears a bit and talk about the shared sense of pride we have in West Linn.

In the last four years, we have made significant investments in West Linn.

We built a new, safe police station for our first responders.

This facility is seismically secure and was designed for our police today, and far into the future.

We also expanded the parking area at the West Linn Library.

This means we have more and safer parking, especially for families when they visit the first floor of our library.

We completed important long range planning projects, like the Highway 43 plan and the Arch Bridge/Bolton concept.

Long range plans help us to create the future we want for West Linn.

We also made sizeable and important investments in our infrastructure - by investing in our streets and planning other utility improvements.

In the last few years, we have worked to develop a successful strategy for the city to employ in furthering our local business community. We have made some progress but it is something we struggle with.

We've also developed the Leadership Academy to engage more folks in the government and this has been very successful

So what's next?

Our Utility Advisory Board has recommended an 18 percent increase water rates because our water pipes need serious fixing.

51 miles of our water pipes are more than 40 years old.

And we have 12 miles of asbestos-coated pipe.

We can't defer maintenance on some parts of our water system any further.

We're reaching the point where it's irresponsible to not invest in our water system.

Can we get an 18% increase in water rates? Well I don't know. Our recent poll showed more support for a more modest 10 percent increase in water rates to address these maintenance needs.

In this coming year, we'll be having serious community conversations about water rates, and why a one-time increase in rates is necessary to keep our water system in good repair.

SURVIVABILITY

Perhaps one of the most important subjects I will discuss tonight is Survivability.

You probably all know by now that a huge earthquake caused by the now locked subduction zone off the Oregon Coast is inevitable and our past preparations for a little earth shaking are not close to adequate for what we face.

We have made progress. Fortunately we have a seismically secure water source coming on line in the form of the Lake Oswego-Tigard water project.

Unfortunately, delays in the construction have recently been announced and this comes at the expense of the livability of a part of our city now into the year 2017.

I understand that some of the most difficult construction is behind them and that the water plant's intake line is now under the Willamette River and in due course will be connected to the West Linn Water system giving this city an invaluable piece of infrastructure.

This means that even if something catastrophic happens to West Linn's water system, we'll have a connection to another system as back up. (And their system is connected to a web of other water systems.

The night time pipe laying on 43 is about half completed and once the pipe is tested the road will be paved.

The LOT project has yielded \$5 million to West Linn, which we intend to use toward replacing our 100 year old Bolton reservoir with a new seismically secure reservoir.

While a much improved water system is a huge benefit for our survivability during a major earthquake, there are two other steps I would like us to make.

Some of you are familiar with the Map your Neighborhood Program.

This is a program to help you, your family and neighbors prepare for an emergency. We want to develop a city-wide roll out of the program to ensure that all West Linn neighbors have an opportunity to learn about and engage the MYN program

The people who run this program are two of our top volunteers; Grant Oakes and Denny Richey.

The second initiative is to coordinate with Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, neighborhood groups, and other agencies to plan an Emergency Preparedness Fair.

If you want to know what this is all about please read the Oregon Department of Emergency Management's "Living on Shaky Ground" brochure.

This may be one of the most important things you can do for your family.

Something else is changing. The world of communications.

You can no longer leave a voice mail for Coca Cola.

And even worse I cannot leave an email for my granddaughter.

Now, they only accept text messages.

I have seen something similar happen in City Hall.

While email and paper newsletters were once popular, now it's Facebook and Twitter.

That's good but we are also changing person to person communication.

Lori Hall as our Citizen Engagement coordinator gives us a whole new level of in-personal communications.

A couple of examples, last year, she went to people's homes to talk to them and their neighbors about planning issues. When there was a problem with the installation of the traffic Light she went right out and talked with the neighbors and she now coordinates all of the ways the city engages residents.

But above and beyond that -

We also rely on our residents to be good neighbors and share information in responsible ways. I'd like to showcase three of these people:

First, Michael Selvaggio.

As president of the Willamette Neighborhood Association - Michael runs a good meeting. He knows how to keep the discussion on topic and of interest to people who want to genuinely stay informed.

And then there's Lisa Clifton.

As the coordinator of the Robinwood Garden, Lisa was our Moore Award winner for 2014. She quotes Martin Luther King Jr., reminding us that we can all make a difference in our community. Lisa exhibits this every day in her kindness toward others.

And finally, Donna Bezio.

She was part of the Arch Bridge/Bolton citizen committee presentation which followed another part of the program where a small group actually booed a couple of their fellow citizens. Donna firmly reminded them that even our middle school students have more manners when they compete in Lego competitions. The rest of the audience applauded Donna. And so do I.

To me, people like Michael and Lisa and Donna represent the proud residents who make up West Linn.

And it is with people like them in mind, that the City Council developed our goals list for this year.

2. GOALS:

TRANSPORTATION

We have started a conversation about how we get from here to there in West Linn, and it will continue this year as we update our Transportation System Plan.

UTILITIES

As I am sure you have guessed, one of our goals is to further improve our utilities and we will continue providing information to you about the importance and value of our infrastructure and on revenue strategies to maintain the system.

Next month, the City Council will decide the location of the Bolton Reservoir. We have two choices –re-build it where it is, or pay an extra \$2 million and put it in Wilderness Park.

To me, this is a pretty obvious choice.

And also in 2015, our goal is to update master plans for our sewer and storm water systems.

And there is one more. Council President Thomas Frank convinced us to look at creating our own fiber network as this type of public utility could be a boon for our businesses and schools.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This year, we begin the multiple steps to implement the Arch Bridge/Bolton concept.

We also are going to begin a series of focus groups with local business and property owners to find out what they need to be more successful.

We want to work toward creating viable business districts and we want to coordinate with Willamette on their Main Street project.

CITY PROPERTIES

A new goal this year is to figure out how to maximize the value or benefit to our community of some underutilized city properties.

These include the old Police Station, Bolton Fire Station, Parker Road property, McLarty property, Pete's Mountain property, and Robinwood Station.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

The goal is to create even more and better new avenues in which we learn from our community.

We are going to look at the roll of our Neighborhood Associations and how to engage all neighbors (including those who do not attend meetings), and work toward reinvigorating NA's.

The City Council is also going to facilitation training, and another "Listening Tour" where we meet with and learn from community members.

We've directed staff to look at creating a Youth Advisory Council and, we intend to review our communications tools, including the web site to ensure it is user friendly.

3. CHALLENGES

Those are the principal goals of the year and now I would like to take a moment and point out a big challenge that we continue to work with.

We have a significantly low fixed tax rate. There's no wiggle room.

There are risks to this tax structure, and they directly affect us all.

When costs are escalating faster than revenues are increasing, we make reductions in staff or services.

4. CLOSING

In closing:

We've set a solid list of Council goals for the year, and your City staff continues to work their magic behind the scenes to make this one of the most desirable places to live in the country-.

I would like to thank everyone for coming tonight; for your interest and for your involvement in the city and I encourage you to be the essential ingredient in democracy...the informed voter

We have a strong, very livable city....I hope we can keep it that way.

Good night.