
City of Idaho Falls - Mayor's Message

2016 State of the City Idaho Falls

**The archived video of Mayor Casper's January 14 State of the City can also be viewed by clicking [HERE](#).*

January 14, 2016

Introduction

It hasn't escaped me that these remarks follow some other, fairly significant "State of" addresses given by government leaders this week. I am referring to the State of the State given by Governor Otter on Monday and the State of the Union given by President Obama on Tuesday. While our community's State of the City may not carry quite the same gravitas of those important events, I would like to share an observation.

When making the State of the Union address, the President addresses the 535 Members of Congress. Likewise, our Governor addresses 105 Legislators. I, on the other hand, have the luxury—and the privilege—of simply addressing my community. And, unlike Congress and our State legislature, this legislative body—the City Council—is not divided by partisanship. Instead, we are friends and neighbors, fellow citizens of Idaho Falls and Eastern Idaho who are united in our quest for solutions and for ideas that will enhance the quality of life we share at the local level, in this place we call home.

As I prepared my remarks for this evening, I reflected back upon 2015, and my thoughts immediately went back to last March when we unexpectedly lost Councilman Dee Whittier—a local public servant. Barely elected in the fall of 2013, Councilman Whittier had only given about 14 months of service before he left us. But in that short time his efforts exemplified the best of what elected officials do—he identified problems, sought solutions, and then worked to get them implemented. And Councilman Whittier did so honestly, openly and optimistically. He was not discouraged by a difficult task. A good word to describe him might be dauntless. We honor this service and his dauntless approach to it. And by extension, we honor Dee's graceful wife, Amy Whittier, and their children for their strength and their continued engagement within our city. Thank you Whittier family.

2015 Milestones and Accomplishments

This past year several distinct honors came to our community and to our city government.

- Just this week, Idaho Falls and other localities were named as being in the top five Idaho cities for achieving work-life balance.
- Last week Idaho was ranked fourth in a measure of those moving into our state—suggesting a positive growth trend ahead.
- In 2015 Idaho Falls was officially recognized as a "Playful City USA." (That's a real thing which reflects well on our Parks and Rec Department.)

Those are the fun awards. But 2015 brought other, more prestigious professional honors to various city departments:

- The IFPD received an elusive top ranking for our Property and Evidence Unit after an outside audit.
- The River Gardens Park on the west side of the Snake River won its third award in two years—this one from Idaho Smart Growth.
- Our Community Development Services Department won an American Planning Association Award for our city's comprehensive plan.
- The Idaho Falls Airport was recently recognized for training excellence—one of 92 out of 2500 airports nationwide. That puts us in the top 3-4%.
- Idaho Falls Power was awarded the—Reliable Public Power Provider, "RP3 Diamond" designation—one of only 54 power utilities in the nation to be so honored for providing reliable and safe power—that puts us in the top 2-3%.
- Our Idaho Falls Wastewater Treatment Plant was awarded a 1st place designation at the 2015 Engineering Excellence Awards Competition through the American Council of Engineering Companies (ACEC) of Idaho.

You can see that award-winning performance excellence is the daily standard for our city. Idaho Falls residents are fortunate to have the caliber of professional leadership that we do have in our departments. Besides the awards, we have made a great deal of progress. Time does not permit me to give you a department-by-department rundown as I have in the past, but here are a few highlights:

Idaho Falls Power— Idaho Falls Power had a terrific year with many accomplishments. The transition to advanced metering was completed, we paid off a 30-year bond, a significant anniversary was memorably celebrated, large commercial customers became partners in energy conservation, we continued collaborating with INL and we more than solidified our industry and regional leadership. But one of the most important things IFP achieved this year was to deliver a decrease in electric rates this year—and this was in spite of Bonneville Power Administration's rate increase.

Idaho Falls Fire Department— Work on funding, siting, designing and planning for a new Fire Station #1 took most of 2015. We celebrated with a groundbreaking ceremony last week. Barring something unforeseen, our new downtown headquarters should be in operational within the year.

Idaho Falls Police Department— Everyone knows this has been a rough year for policing throughout our United States. Yet here in Idaho Falls, we have seized upon the opportunity to lead out with community engagement efforts. The IFPD initiated many social media and public relations events; such as "Blue in the School," "Chief Chat," "Copzition," and "Coffee with a Cop." The Department also reinstituted its bike patrol. All of these programs are aspects of community policing—the policing model we use to control and reduce crime in our city. Clearly, this was the right response at the right time. The results have been heartening. This past year the IFPD has received more positive letters and email, was the subject of more positive editorials, and received other forms of appreciation and expressions of thanks from the public for the hard work and dedication of our officers and staff than ever before.

Idaho Falls Airport— New air service, a terminal expansion and a considerable increase in passengers topped the list of 2015 accomplishments for IDA. Our passengers increased by 12% which is remarkable growth in the airline industry. Our airport continues to operate in the black and does not rely on city general fund assistance for any of its improvements.

Public Works— I would like to share a quick list of Public Works projects that speaks for itself:

- Construction on Hitt & Sunnyside Road was completed in the summer season.
- Parts of Woodruff Avenue were fully reconstructed.
- Pancheri Road was beautifully widened from Skyline to Bellin. And, with the installation of three HAWK crossing signals, the road is now safer than it has ever been for student-pedestrians.
- Broadway Bridge was improved by the construction a concrete wall that separates vehicles from pedestrians as well as the installation of attractive new railing to increase safety on both sides of the sidewalk.
- The stoplight at Hitt and 25th street was reconfigured to facilitate traffic exiting the Target parking lot.
- Phase 1 of the Auto-load refuse Collection Program was successfully completed. Phase 2 rolls out this summer.
- The City Council adopted a Master Water Facility Plan which will inform city water policy for the next several years.

Community Opportunities

The high professional standards achieved and maintained by our Department Directors allows me the time to cultivate additional opportunities for our city. As the nation's economy slowly improves and as businesses look for promising opportunities and places to expand, Eastern Idaho starts looking better and better for investment and all sorts of innovation. I believe this is one of the reasons why the beginning of this new year has seen a steady stream of news about future opportunities for Idaho Falls.

Energy— Many of these new opportunities involve energy and power. Owing to the presence of INL and the many talented contractors and support industries it attracts, Eastern Idaho has become a hub for energy development and innovation. The Lab has gathered a wealth of regional talent that does research into batteries, biomass, geothermal, and grid dynamics—all in addition to new variations on the nuclear work that our Lab has always pioneered.

Speaking of nuclear, we have other recent initiatives like GAIN, announced by the White House last November, that INL is lead on. We'll hear more on that in the coming months. And just today Senator Crapo announced that he is introducing a bipartisan bill. (We are fortunate, by the way, that most energy legislation is bipartisan.) that would allow for more private-sector partnerships when it comes to researching nuclear technologies. This is great news for potential private sector Lab partners—many of who already call Idaho Falls home

One up-and-coming nuclear project in particular has the potential to change the world. Idaho Falls Power, owing to our membership in UAMPS, is one of several utilities leading out in support of bringing Small Modular Reactors to the marketplace. Work on this project is proceeding carefully and methodically, as it must and should. It is exciting work as many eyes throughout the country, and

indeed the world, are watching our progress. Should this SMR technology be fully realized, our community will see great benefits in energy production and power reliability as well as tremendous economic and environmental benefits that will doubtless, change the energy world.

Power— Idaho Falls is a city based on the production and delivery of hydroelectricity. We are very fortunate that former city leaders saw fit to invest in and develop our hydropower capabilities. Hydro is both renewable and green. Our local power utility strives to provide us with reliable power. But our grid is stretched thin. We are always looking to expand our service with an eye toward reliability. Just today we received notice that a federal DOE grant we applied for has been approved—this will allow for approximately \$1M to be spent in support of modernizing our local grid—this will translate into improved power delivery for Idaho Falls Power customers. We are excited to work with the Idaho National Laboratory and other industry partners on this grid modernization project. Congratulations to IFP.

And as you know, there are also multiple wind projects in Eastern Idaho—and it is from one of these that Idaho Falls Power purchases electric power. And so between wind, hydroelectric, and a great potential for the future application of SMR nuclear technology, Idaho Falls has, and will continue to have, a very small carbon footprint for its electric power generation. This positions us well for the future vis-a-vis all those communities in this country that are struggling with not-so clean carbon-based power like coal and natural gas. This is a very real marketplace advantage.

Water— Eastern Idaho's water has been in the news this past year. If you have lived in this desert for very long, you know that drought has always been a feature of water management for us. Yet we are blessed by the presence of the Eastern Snake Plain Aquifer. A rich source of clean and safe groundwater is what makes the growth of Eastern Idaho cities like ours possible. Managing the aquifer is critical. In the past several decades we have seen water levels in the aquifer decline—partly because we are drawing more out and partly because we are putting less in through what is called incidental recharge. Our challenge today is to manage the aquifer intelligently. I believe this includes engaging in managed recharge—or deliberately putting water into the aquifer. As mayor, I am working to ensure that we are able to do as much recharge as possible to sustain the aquifer. I believe that every drop we put in supports our city's water future. We also are working with other city leaders throughout the state who are planning for their city's water futures. In this past year, as calls on less senior water rights have been made, many of Idaho's cities have been seriously impacted. It has become clear that not all water users are the same and certainly agricultural use and municipal use are not the same; the effects of water use curtailment on people are very different from the effects of curtailment of crops. We do understand that Idaho's water law naturally evolved from its agricultural roots, and I respect that rich heritage. But as water becomes more valuable, we cities must now to seek legal clarity and protection in the face of scarcity. It is important that I share this with you.

Years of drought and growth really have made water more valuable. In economic terms, water becomes more expensive as it becomes scarcer. To ensure that city revenues for water are spent wisely, we in city management will be looking for more and better ways to conserve or otherwise use our community water more efficiently. And Idaho Falls residents, as you plan for your own household use, I would invite you to do the same. Look for ways to save and be careful about water waste. You can also look for more information about our state's water profile at the highly educational Smithsonian water exhibit that will come to our library later this spring—thanks to a grant from the Idaho Humanities Council.

Education— Much has been said about education in the past few days. As one who has benefited from the public education opportunities in my life, I know first-hand how important a strong system of public education can be. I also know how important nurturing a strong education system is for a community like ours. In the short run, we want to be attractive to new residents who are looking for the best schools for their kids. But education is also a form of long-term investment into our community's future. In the past year, several reliable sources have sounded an alarm in Idaho about education and job training. If we do not act to change the status quo, Idaho will see a shortage of trained workers to support local industries and businesses. I see this fact as nothing but a great big opportunity for Idaho Falls.

What we are hearing from the Lab and other tech-based industries is that really good jobs will be there in the future, we simply need to step up to ensure that our children—the next generation of Idaho workers—will be prepared and ready. Preparation and readiness means education and training. This is why I am more than ready to help our community have the conversation about how to do this. I was very excited to hear of the Governor's offer of \$5M to aid with the start-up costs for a community college here in Eastern Idaho. In the coming year I will work to support a serious dialogue about education.

Simply put, I believe that the education we fund today determines the economic future we will enjoy tomorrow.

Economic Development— Very quickly I wish to report that the promise of regional economic development cooperation has been realized. This past summer, REDI—Regional Economic Development for Eastern Idaho—was launched successfully. The organization currently comprises both Bonneville and Bingham counties. I can report that a dynamite director was hired and progress is being made. Speaking with a unified voice gives us a larger presence when it comes to attracting new business. REDI is proving that multiple cities and counties can pool

their resources, efforts and assets to achieve greater visibility for our promising part of the world.

We also hired an Economic Development Coordinator for our city a short time ago. This position serves as the primary point of contact for contractors, developers and business owners in an effort to streamline the communication and coordination process for those professionals who make local growth possible. This, along with the recent roll-out of software that completely automates planning and building applications, reviews, inspections and public notification processes, is the essence of the “one-stop-shopping” voters said they wanted back when I was running for office.

Emergent Themes

I hope you are starting to see why Idaho Falls is a really exciting place to be these days. I see several large themes emerging out of all of these city and community efforts this past year. Excellence— The city achievements I have noted are not exceptions to the norm—high standards, ambitious planning and professional merit from city managers and local industries are the norm. Leadership— Idaho Falls is at the center of many of the efforts I have discussed. We clearly have the talent in our midst. And right now, we also have a lot of opportunity. Leadership happens when someone with talent seizes upon an opportunity and brings the rest of us along. Without question, this is what is happening here in Idaho Falls.

Cooperation— This year, we have seen the good that can come from intergovernmental cooperation. Our tremendously hard-working, all-volunteer Planning and Zoning Commission has begun meeting together with the County’s Planning and Zoning Commission. Likewise, the County Commissioners and City Council members also have met together in preparation for the months-long Area of Impact process. And, through intelligent budgeting, and a smart partnership with Bonneville County, the residents of Swan Valley can expect enhanced services as the Idaho Falls Fire Department expanded its service territory to provide ambulance service to Swan Valley. We will also see an additional ambulance in the Metropolitan area. Over time, all Bonneville County residents will pay less in tax and receive more in service. It is a good story about what can result from intergovernmental cooperation and good management.

Working together, Idaho Falls and Ammon also have demonstrated that win-win cooperation among cities is possible. This past summer construction on the Hitt & Sunnyside Road intersection was completed just in time to facilitate much new growth. And it was this same inter-city cooperation that enabled the Target parking lot solution to roll out just in time for the holiday shopping season.

Citizen Service— Recently, Idaho Falls city leaders have become more focused on the quality of options we provide for city residents. We seek to offer improvements in what many people call customer service. But as I have thought about it, I have realized that citizens really are not customers. Citizenship is far nobler. And the privilege of serving citizens demands that city employees and city officials give our citizens the best experience possible.

This is reflected in everything from:

- Staying open late on Monday nights for in-person utility payments, to
- Offering one-stop shopping for developers, to
- Offering free home energy audits, to
- Providing safe, meaningful, worthwhile volunteer experiences for those who want to serve, to
- Offering Free Wi-Fi and charging stations at the airport, to
- Offering family-friendly and affordable recreation option such as movies in the park, to
- Offering access to Rosetta Stone language learning opportunities for library cardholders. And the list goes on. If you find yourself not understanding why or how it is we do things the way we do in the city of Idaho Falls, please approach us with your questions.

My office team and each of our Department Directors are prepared to help you get answers. We are committed to citizen service.

Year of the Citizen— Last week when Mayor Kirkham offered her State of the City address in Ammon, she was the first to introduce yet another joint effort between our two cities—which is that we two mayors have determined to make 2016 the “Year of the Citizen” in our respective cities. What does this mean? As the year goes on, we each will share thoughts about the privileges and opportunities of citizenship. Tonight I want to emphasize the rich tradition of citizenship that has built Idaho Falls into the city that it is. Let me offer a few examples to illustrate.

Consider Tautphaus Park. Named for Charles C. Tautphaus, the park was a personal project of his as he sought to develop his own private property into a beautiful garden spot. Later, this beautiful property was donated to our city though it surely could have fetched a fortune had it been sold off in parcels. And today the value we have derived as a community because we have such a beautiful park is

simply too great to be valued. The Tautphaus family members were indeed citizens of the highest order.

Consider Kate Curley. An early Idaho Falls citizen who organized the Village Improvement Society, she helped to remove trash from city streets and worked with others to get an ordinance passed to prevent livestock from roaming city streets. She worked with others to secure a grant from the Carnegie Foundation to help build our first library—now part of the museum—another rich city treasure. We have to ask ourselves what Idaho Falls would be like today without the early efforts of determined citizens like Ms. Curley who sought to tame our young and wild western city at the turn of the last century.

We also can look to modern-day examples. The work of the Idaho Falls Rotary Club. Our River Walk was not always the jewel on the river that it is today. I am told the water's edge once was not a place where polite people wanted to congregate. A combination of leadership and citizenship have resulted in many, many tens of thousands of dollars being raised and donated to the city to pay for River Walk improvements. Today, a walk along the river is a big part of how we enjoy good weather around here. In fact, city guests and residents actually wore out the original walking path. Recently, our Parks and Recreation department responded by securing funding—some of it from Rotary—to rebuild and widen the most-used stretches of the river trail. We can thank citizen-Rotarians for this.

The Exchange Club. If you have been to the Field of Honor at Freeman Park over Memorial Day weekend, you have experienced something very moving. I encourage all to visit this coming Memorial Day to experience heartfelt patriotism and citizenship in action—made possible by Exchange Club citizenship.

The same can be said for the work of all of our civic clubs—Civitans, Kiwanis, etc. The work they do is pure citizenship. And Idaho Falls benefits.

And when it comes to individual citizens, were you aware that in 2014 we had 1,250 volunteers in the Parks & Rec department alone? This translates into more than 42,940 hours of time. That freely-donated labor brought us nearly a million dollars of what otherwise would have been purchased with tax dollars. A million dollars. That is more money than we could raise in a single year if we raised city taxes by the full amount allowable by law!

Because Idaho Falls has citizen volunteers with civic spirit we are able to offer much, much more than we could if we simply limited our services to what we can provide with actual dollars. Volunteering is citizenship at work to be sure. These few examples illustrate the essence of citizenship and civic spirit and what can be accomplished when people in a community desire something more and step up to provide more than what tax dollars alone can provide.

Conclusion

I will conclude with a personal reflection. I want my fellow citizens in this great city to know how much I appreciate local government. One of the things that it means to be local is that we make our laws and we set our budget all out in the open. We meet right here several times a month in open meetings. And for those who cannot travel the few miles to be here in the room with us personally, we stream and archive our meetings over the internet.

Another important aspect of local governance is that our problems are close and visible and we usually can apply local, tailor-made solutions to them. And I have to say that we manage really well with the many state and federal regulations that we must comply with. We cope well, we comply well and we do it economically. From my vantage point, in Idaho Falls there is no room for the kind of cynicism that we find at the state and national levels of government. In Idaho Falls we govern with optimism. This is not just something I am proud of, it is what makes Idaho Falls a gem in the State of Idaho. It is a great place to be.

Finally, I happily report that Councilman Whittier was not the only citizen in Idaho Falls who is dauntless in the pursuit of a better Idaho Falls. Some are elected, some get paid, some volunteer, and some merely pay their taxes, obey city ordinances, mow their lawns, shovel their sidewalks, pick up their own litter when they visit the park and perhaps most importantly, teach their children to do the same.

Tonight I salute you—the Citizens of Idaho Falls.

Thank you,



Mayor Rebecca Casper