

Nappanee State of the City 2016

Common Unity

A succinctly written quotation from a young poet, the late Mattie Stepanek, expresses my thoughts of Nappanee: “Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.” Although I have been in office for just four short weeks, I continue to look around and be inspired by where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. The unity of families, businesses, neighborhoods, churches, and schools provides the bond that continues to strengthen our City.

It is truly an honor and a privilege to stand before you tonight as your mayor. This is the first time in twenty years that Mayor Thompson has not addressed this body. I would like to publicly recognize and thank Larry and his family for the many years they served—and will continue to serve—Nappanee. I also want to thank all of our elected officials, city employees, board and commission members, and residents who work extremely hard to make Nappanee a very special place.

As I begin serving as your mayor, I would like to share with you my thoughts on Nappanee and ask for your input as we work together toward common goals that will unite us in our effort to enhance our already thriving City. Before we look forward, I want to take a moment to look back at our rich history, because I believe that understanding our past is critical to shaping our future.

Nappanee was established in 1874 and became a City in 1925. The railroad was the catalyst that gave Nappanee its start. Access to transportation, combined with an entrepreneurial spirit and an abundant supply of lumber, provided the economic engine that fueled the spirit of unity within the City. We saw the evolution of businesses that turned the raw lumber into manufactured goods, which were then shipped around the region and around the nation. As Nappanee grew, we diversified business to provide the products and services necessary to meet the needs of a growing community. Local leaders planned out infrastructure and utilities to support current operations and future growth. Amenities such as a hotel, an auditorium, a library, a park, a school, and a community center were eventually added to improve the quality of life for both residents and guests.

It is this strong heritage of hard work, service above self, and future vision that continues to shape Nappanee. While some of the original buildings may now be gone, we are blessed to have a solid architectural inventory still in use today and a wonderful archive of photos that tells the story of our past. Our downtown has repurposed many of the existing buildings, allowing us to evolve and adapt to changing times. However, if you look closely at the tops of many of the buildings and at the murals, you will see our strong connection to the past.

While the buildings tell an interesting story, it is the people who make our City so special. Many of our residents are able to trace their lineage back to the settlement of Nappanee. These families have graciously welcomed and embraced new families along the way, creating an incredibly warm and inviting atmosphere for all of those who call Nappanee home and for those who are visiting or just passing through.

It is this history that brings us to the present. We continue to have a thriving and diverse economy, a population of residents who care about their neighbors, and a government that is financially strong and serves its constituents well. Our downtown continues to thrive as the heartbeat of our community: with many retail shops, professional services, eateries, and other amenities. It is the site of our annual Apple Festival, many Second Saturdays events, and our Miracles on Main and Market Street event. We are excited to have a new open-air pavilion at Rotary Park that will provide another venue to bring people downtown. We continue to work with the Chamber of Commerce and building owners to fill empty storefronts, enhance existing buildings, and improve sidewalks and parking to keep the area accessible, attractive, and inviting. The historic Coppes buildings have come back to life as a hub of retail development. After many years of residents not knowing what would become of this historic building, Thomas Mast and his family have turned Coppes Commons into an integral part of the community. Our eastside retail area provides residents with restaurants, groceries, fuel, banking, pharmacies, hardware, and professional services. We are pleased to say that we are making progress on filling some of the vacant buildings and will continue to invest in making all of our retail areas more attractive and appealing.

Our existing industry continues to grow on the west and east ends of town. We are working with several industries looking to expand and continuing to work with developers to provide shovel-ready sites for future development.

The finances of the City are healthy as we move into 2016. We still struggle to deal with property tax caps, but we are able to provide solid services to our residents. The conservative financial leadership has brought us through some difficult times and has allowed us to weather the storm. Our cash balances remain strong, and our assessed value remains high. Investments of specific funds in interest-bearing accounts have allowed us to generate more revenue. Our consolidated Tax Increment Finance (TIF) areas provide an added revenue source that allows additional funding for infrastructure and improvements that contribute to more economic-growth-added amenities. The recent Local Option Income Tax (LOIT) for public safety has allowed us to provide better funding for our police, fire, and EMS.

Our utilities—water and sewer—also remain financially strong. We continue to provide residents with safe, clean drinking water and effectively treat sewage at our wastewater facility. Our Parks and Recreation Department continues to be one of our greatest assets. With more park land per capita than most cities, we will continue to maintain and look for ways to enhance our existing facilities. Our Street Department does a great job of keeping our public streets, alleys, and parking areas maintained and clear of snow and debris. Additionally, we continue to provide a 50 percent match for residents to replace damaged or unsafe sidewalks. Our Elder Haus Senior Center provides a safe environment for older residents to socialize, exercise, and stay active. Our buses provide transportation to the Elder Haus, grocery stores, doctors' offices, pharmacies, and day and evening trips to area attractions and restaurants.

Our Public Safety Departments—police, fire, and EMS—keep our City and surrounding areas safe. We take public safety seriously and provide our staff with the best equipment and training available to provide residents with the best possible service in the event of an emergency. Our full-time staff are great, but we would not be able to provide the level of service we do without the many dedicated volunteers who serve this community. Our Zoning and Code Enforcement Department regulates buildings and property in the community, making sure we have safe, well-built, and well-maintained neighborhoods and built environment.

Looking to the future, we have a few challenges. The first quarter of 2016 we will bid out the construction portion of our long-term control plan for the Combined Sewer Overflow project. While we are pleased to have a thirteen-million-dollar Rural Development grant from the US Department of Agriculture, this unfunded EPA mandate will still have a significant impact on our sewer rates. Once bids are received, our financial advisors will review the information and project the rate increases for our users. Additionally, we continue to struggle to have adequate funding from the State of Indiana to maintain our local roads and streets. As the State Legislature contemplates the potential of additional funding, we will do our best to maintain our streets and look for ways to extend the life of existing paved roadways. One challenge that residents can help with is supporting our local economy and being engaged in Nappanee. Our retail businesses will only survive if they have the support and patronage of our local residents. I would invite you to visit local businesses and see what they have to offer. I also encourage you to share your passion and find ways to give back: volunteer to help plan an event, mentor a child, get to know an elderly neighbor, coach a team, create a neighborhood association, help a struggling family—and the list goes on. Invest yourself in your community and others, and I guarantee that you will get more out than you put in.

Our future is a little brighter due to the recent announcement of the Regional Cities Grant for North Central Indiana, which will allow the opportunity for transformative economic growth in our region. Another initiative, Vibrant Communities of Elkhart County, kicked off January 26. This will provide a chance to discuss quality-of-life initiatives in all of our unique communities and in the county as a whole. Vibrant Communities is just the beginning of an update to Nappanee's comprehensive master plan. Working together, we will identify areas that need improvement and look for exciting new ideas that we can implement to make Nappanee the best place to live, work, and play. I would like to challenge all of us to be engaged, be active, and help shape the future we would like to see.

In the meantime, we will continue to work daily to make adjustments that will help to make Nappanee more efficient, attractive, and safe. We will look for ways to utilize technology to help communicate with residents. We will explore options to integrate and link community websites, research ways to implement automatic online payments for utilities and park programs, develop an interactive community calendar, and provide web-based and in-person resources for residents to

share information and ideas about improving the community. We will conduct neighborhood conversations to gather ideas for improving each area of Nappanee.

We will also work with Wa-Nee Schools, Nappanee Boys & Girls Club, and Family Christian Development Center on a shared Wa-Nee Community Vision 2020. This four- to five-year project involves a new high school soccer field at Wellfield Park, a new Boys & Girls Club at Nappanee Elementary School, a relocated Family Christian Development Center, an improved Elder Haus, and additional downtown parking. We will also work with the high school and County Clerk's office to conduct an election for a Legislative Body Youth Advisor. This position would be filled by a senior in high school, elected by his or her peers to sit on the Nappanee City Council.

In closing, I will share a final quotation, also from Mattie Stepanek. He says, "Even though the future seems far away, it is actually beginning right now." My slogan from the beginning of my campaign was "Together, Building a Better Nappanee." I encourage all residents and businesses in Nappanee not just to Embrace the *Pace* but to Embrace the *Place*. Let's work together to make Nappanee the envy of the nation. I invite you to share your diversity as we continue to develop our common unity to move our community forward.