

# State of the City: Our Vital Signs are Good

(March 1, 2019)

Text of Mayor Jean Stothert's State of the City speech.

Each year, we measure our progress against our goals, share exciting changes ahead for the city we love, and focus on the challenges before us.

Those we serve are confident and optimistic. Omaha is an extraordinary city.

The people we live and work with every day, our neighbors, friends and family, make this possible.

I want to thank everyone who is doing their part to make Omaha the city it has become, and I believe our future is even brighter.

This year, I am especially pleased to report the impressive strides we have made to make Omaha a safer community.

Our commitment and the investments we have made to improve public safety are paying off. I appreciate the City Council's valuable ideas and support.

We track seven categories of crime and all seven decreased last year.

In 2018, there were 22 homicides in Omaha, the lowest per capita in 20 years.

When compared to ten comparable cities, Omaha recorded the lowest number of homicides; fewer than Wichita, Tulsa, Kansas City and Minneapolis.

Last year, our police department solved 91 percent of all homicides; a ten-year high, and a clearance rate much better than the national average of 53% for cities our size.

The number of shootings also continues to be low; 100 injured in 78 incidents in 2018.

These are not just numbers that look good. These are trends that show strong progress.

Declining crime rates, a high clearance rate, a reduction in complaints against officers, and strong police community relations. Chief Schmaderer calls these our city's vital signs, and our vital signs are good.

This is especially encouraging since our city has experienced strong population growth and expanded city borders.

We've added about 35,000 residents through annexation in the past six years. So, better results for a larger city.

Unlike other achievements or milestones however, there are no celebrations or high fives for improvements in our crime numbers.

Too many lives are still affected by senseless violence.

Our progress has only made my resolve stronger, knowing we can improve this most important aspect of our service to the public.

We will press on, full speed.

So, why did this progress occur and how can we continue to improve?

We have sharpened the focus and created strategies that bring us to where we are today. We have increased the number of sworn officers from 804 to 902. This summer, we will open the new fifth precinct headquarters in Elkhorn. The traffic division, bomb squad and swat team will also be based here. Precinct boundaries will be redrawn, and a new class of recruits will complete their training to coincide with the grand opening.

The new precinct and increasing the number of police officers is part of our strategic plan to provide the necessary resources for excellent police services throughout the city.

The level of public engagement by our police department has led to a high level of community cooperation and support.

This public trust encourages citizens and organizations to assist with our crime prevention and enforcement efforts. They are as responsible for our progress as anyone.

Public safety starts with every Omaha police officer.

The officers assigned to our uniform patrol are on the front line.

Their daily work supports our public safety goals, and we can attribute our declining crime rate to their commitment and professionalism.

Uniform patrol officers who work in each of our precincts are here to represent the hundreds of officers who are patrolling your neighborhoods today, answering your calls to 9-1-1, and attending your neighborhood meetings.

Officers Ray, Keenan, Buckley, and Schlotzhauer, thank you!

It's always a pleasure to recognize those who are dedicated to serving our city.

Will you please help me thank Chief Schmaderer, his command staff, and these officers?

We are a safer city because of our results-oriented police department.

There are of course, hundreds of city employees in other departments that provide critical public safety services.

Since February 4<sup>th</sup>, our street maintenance staff has worked 24/7 to keep our streets open and safe.

It takes a team to keep the city open during severe winter weather.

The street maintenance staff is represented today by employees who have been plowing snow and patching potholes all winter, and their supervisor, Street Maintenance Engineer Austin Rowser.

Gentlemen, thank you for your constant work in winter's worst conditions.

Today seems like the perfect opportunity to share a national recognition.

We have just learned that the American Public Works Association will recognize the City of Omaha with its Excellence in Snow and Ice Control Award for 2019.

This award is given to recognize best practices in snow and ice removal while minimizing environmental impacts.

Congratulations to this hard-working team.

We are certainly ready for spring! 19 days and counting!

Public safety is also ensuring safe and healthy housing.

The public saw firsthand the work of our housing inspectors at Yale Park apartments last September.

These inspectors completed more than 9,000 inspections in 2018, resulting in safer housing and improved living conditions for thousands of people.

And of course, the first responders of Omaha's fire department.

In 2018, the Omaha Fire Department responded to more than 54,000 emergency calls.

We have installed new station alerting technology in our fire stations to greatly improve communication between 911 and first responders.

We will build two new fire stations, the first at 34<sup>th</sup> and 'Q'.

It will replace Station 31 currently at 25<sup>th</sup> and "L". We will soon ask the City Council to approve the land purchase.

The second station is planned along the 72<sup>nd</sup> and Cass corridor, replacing station 53 at 80<sup>th</sup> and Dodge.

We will continue to purchase and replace fire trucks, medic units, and other equipment necessary to improve public safety.

And effective today, March 1st, the Omaha Fire Department has earned a Class One Rating by the Insurance Services Office.

This is important because a Class One Rating can have a significant impact on your homeowner's insurance rates.

Of the 46,000 fire districts rated by the Insurance Services Office, less than 1% earn a Class One Rating.

The rating is based on many factors, including the number of fire stations and fire apparatus in a city, training and fire prevention programs, code enforcement, and personnel.

In just the last two years, 41 fire academy graduates have joined the Omaha Fire Department. In April, another class of recruits will graduate.

Congratulations to Chief Olsen, his command staff and the Omaha firefighters here today representing all three shifts.

The firefighters, housing inspectors and street maintenance staff all provide services that ensure your safety, every day, every emergency.

Another area of great importance is the Omaha economy.

This includes strong wage growth, low unemployment, very encouraging business expansion, and new development.

Great American cities have growing and thriving downtowns.

Cities that are struggling have downtowns that are cut off from newer parts of their city, and that leads to economic stagnation and decline.

Downtown Omaha is in the midst of one of the most significant growth periods on record.

So many important milestones have led us to today, beginning with the Gene Leahy Mall in the mid 1970's.

When I visited Omaha for the first time 27 years ago, there was no CHI Health Center Arena, no TD Ameritrade Park, Kiewit University, First National Tower, String of Pearls along Abbott Drive, or Bob Kerrey pedestrian bridge.

No Heartland of America Park, Holland Performing Arts Center, Gavilon or Gallup campus.

Every one of these developments has impacted the growth of downtown Omaha.

Yesterday, we broke ground on the \$300 million dollar riverfront project.

Importantly for taxpayers, about 80% of the cost will be funded by private donors.

That money has already been committed by our generous philanthropic community.

We are thankful to the Downtown Riverfront Trust and its donors, led by Mogens Bay and Ken Stinson. This type of partnership just doesn't happen in other cities.

Thank you for your vision and leadership.

I believe this will be one of the most significant projects in Omaha's history

It reflects the generosity of donors, the beauty of the riverfront, and our faith in the future.

This project will be Omaha's new signature and I can't wait to enjoy it with my grandchildren.

But, that's not all that's happening, far from it.

The ConAgra Campus – a \$500 million development featuring retail, residential, a hotel and green space in the first phase. A plaza will connect to the Old Market, and that is very important.

The Highlander 75 North in North Omaha – an exciting project that has created affordable housing, commercial space, and a community center to an area of our city that needs quality investment.

We are excited about the opportunity to receive a \$25 million federal grant. Omaha is one of four finalists being considered to receive "Choice Neighborhood Funds".

If selected, this grant would fund the North 30th Street Transformation Plan.

With the work already underway at Highlander and neighboring Prospect Village, the stage is set for transformation of North 30th Street.

The Millwork Commons project in north downtown will transform an old industrial area into commercial space, with local company "Flywheel" as the first tenant.

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

The Kiewit Global Campus is part of the Builders District in north downtown and will be home for up to 650 Kiewit employees.

The Capitol District - this downtown project is already open for business with a new Marriott hotel and entertainment district.

Each of these projects realizes our goals to make downtown Omaha the economic engine of the region, to offer a great quality of life, unique civic and cultural resources, and open public spaces.

And there's more – in west Omaha, Heartwood Preserve –the 500-acre housing, office, retail and entertainment project near Boys Town.

When fully built out, it will include over 2,000 new homes, apartments and condos with a project value of over \$1 billion dollars.

Avenue One at 192<sup>nd</sup> and Dodge will be another billion dollar mixed use development. AkSarBen Village - now home to HDR, and the Blackstone District, continue to grow and attract new residents, businesses, and customers.

The historic Blackstone Hotel is being renovated and will again be a grand centerpiece of the neighborhood.

“Linkedin” has committed to a new location at Sterling Ridge in west Omaha. Within three years, “Linkedin” may double their current payroll in Omaha.

And, we are actively working with interested developers on the Civic Auditorium site, and Crossroads. Stay tuned!

Another important measure of growth is the number of building permits we issue each year.

In 2018, we issued more than 14,000 permits, for a total valuation over \$800 million.

That brings the total to 93,000 building permits valued at \$4.6 billion, since I have been Mayor.

Our neighboring cities are also doing well and that is so important for us and the greater metro area.

This includes amazing new technology and community-driven projects in Sarpy County and the “Rivers Edge” campus in Council Bluffs. These projects all spur even more development, grow our economy, create jobs, and generate recreation and event opportunities.

Just imagine how the impressive riverfront project – and all the development underway, will change Omaha as we see it today.

New energy, new life, new opportunities, new work, and new entertainment and leisure activities. It's all exciting, isn't it?

I love reading city ranking reports to see what others think of Omaha.

Omaha is number one on the list of "Five Up and Coming Tech Hotspots", according to Livability.

Zip-Recruiter lists Omaha as a number one city for college graduates to start their careers.

And "US News and World Report" lists Omaha as one of the ten most affordable cities in the country.

For Omaha to continue to excel, the services and industries that drive investment and talent must also remain strong.

One good example is Eppley Airfield.

A well-managed and thriving airport is critical to economic growth and livability.

More people than ever used Omaha's Eppley Airfield last year, more than five million passengers.

More airlines offered more service and travelers responded.

Ten years ago, Eppley had 17 non-stop destinations. Today, there are 34. As you know, one of the most necessary services we provide to taxpayers will change significantly when we choose a new contractor for solid waste collection.

The new contract will be awarded this year and a new system must be in place prior to the end of 2020 when our current contract with Waste Management expires.

This is a critically important decision that impacts all of us, and could double our current annual costs.

That's why we started planning in 2016, with an analysis of the environmental and economic impacts of yard waste collection and disposal.

We held a series of public open houses and equipment demonstrations, completed a pilot of 2,500 households to test covered carts and automated trucks, solicited input through telephone surveys, and collected e-mail feedback from thousands of citizens.

The four bids we received are being reviewed now, and I will make a recommendation to the city council soon.

We need a modern, safe, efficient, and environmentally friendly collection system that we can afford.

We will choose the best system possible within our current budget.

I will not support a tax increase to pay for this contract.

We also need modern, safe and efficient transportation options.

I'm really excited about "ORBT", the Omaha Rapid Bus Transit system.

ORBT will offer convenience and technology on the initial route on Dodge Street from 10<sup>th</sup> street to Westroads.

The construction of the ORBT stations will begin this spring and the first bus will be on the road in 2020.

At every transit stop, there is an opportunity for new, dense development.

We are in the process of asking for your input on the best type of development along the route. Three more public meetings will be held this month to solicit your feedback.

ORBT is just one piece of the future transit needs of our city.

Omaha is one of eleven cities selected to participate in the "Smart Cities" initiative.

The goal of smart cities is to use technology to improve city services. Our focus is transportation.

A steering committee, chaired by myself and Werner Enterprises CEO Derek Leathers is studying three initiatives:

First- a "smart district" in Omaha to test new technology, second - a series of pilot projects, and, third- a unified regional transportation plan.

Expect an announcement in the next few months!

A reliable transportation system starts with maintaining our infrastructure.

This year, we will continue our aggressive street resurfacing program. We have 69 projects on our 2019 schedule.

In addition, the City Council has adopted our Capital Improvement Program (CIP) which will provide over \$320 million for transportation projects over the next six years.

Road repair and resurfacing will remain a priority. Since I have been mayor, we have already resurfaced 640 lane miles, at a cost of \$58 million.

An important service we provide to taxpayers is the Mayor's Hotline, for citizen opinions and complaints.



Last year, we resolved 39,000 requests ranging from potholes, to trash collection, and just about anything else you can imagine.

Six weeks ago, we launched another hotline communication tool -- “Omahahotline.com”.

Users can easily report their concerns and track the status.

Already, more than 1,400 reports have been received on this new website.

We are now working on a new app that will put more city services at the fingertips of residents and visitors.

We want your interactions with city government to be positive.

We are in the customer service business and these hotline tools offer good, responsive, customer service.

Of course, we have challenges.

We are currently working on steps to improve the safety of rental housing.

Last fall, we took unprecedented action against the owner of Yale Park apartments for unsafe and substandard housing.

The conditions were horrendous; conditions no one should live in.

We relocated the refugee families that same day, a complicated task.

I want to thank all of our partners who helped care for these families during an uncertain time, especially the city staff at Adams Park and Columbus Park Community Centers.

Orinthian Everett and Pam Perry are the center managers.

They're here today with their teams so we can say thank you for truly going above and beyond to make the best of a traumatic experience.

We have to make sure nothing like that ever happens again.

We must ensure that the property owners who do a great job do not experience burdensome regulations, or expensive fees that will result in higher rents.

I will work with the City Council to pass an ordinance that focuses our attention on non-compliant landlords, and not punish those who maintain their property.

There has been a great deal of attention lately on public pension plans.

While we have made progress – significant progress- to improve the outlook of the pension plans our employees and retirees rely on, more must be done.

We cannot let the pension financial liabilities that have built up over decades, diminish quality retirement plans. And, we cannot expect the taxpayers alone to take on these costs.

Regarding property taxes, we must continue to control costs, make only wise investments, and reduce the tax rate when we are able.

I am proud that we have lowered the tax rate twice in the last five years. The City of Omaha portion of your property tax bill, is just 21%.

We share the responsibility, along with other units of local government and schools, to help reduce high property taxes.

This is especially true with property values increasing as they are now.

I am pleased the Nebraska Unicameral will consider major property tax relief legislation.

The state has the policy authority and financial resources to enact major structural changes in how we fund local government, but local control and flexibility must be preserved.

I would like to thank you – the City Council – for your ideas and hard work.

I believe we run local government as it is meant to be run, full transparency, shared goals and a co-operative approach.

We work towards what is best for taxpayers, and when we don't see the issues the same, we are able to work out our differences with respect.

Together, based on feedback from our citizens, we have changed the fireworks ordinance and developed a new cost-sharing policy to pay for unimproved streets.

We have increased our investment in workforce development, increased recruiting in South Omaha for the successful Step-Up Jobs Program, and with our partner, the Salvation Army, our new "Way to Work" program is providing jobs to persons who are homeless.

I also want to recognize the hundreds of citizen volunteers who serve on city boards, commissions and advisory groups.

Some are required by state law, others by city charter, ordinance, or a mayor's executive order.

The advisory groups I have created provide input in many areas, active living, millennials, LGBTQ+ and Native American communities, and military service.

Later this month, I will receive the recommendations from the Vision Zero Task Force.

Vision zero is a common sense goal we should strive for to reduce traffic deaths.

The Millennial Advisory is recruiting volunteers to serve on city and community boards and add a young professional's point of view.

The LGBTQ+ advisory is studying models for a community resource center.

Thanks to all of you for your ideas and enthusiasm.

It is an honor to serve as mayor, to work every day to help our citizens and city reach their full potential.

There are so many positive things happening in our city right now and our future is very bright.

Thank you to everyone who shares responsibility to impact our city and make it better. You are making a difference.

The unique, co-operative spirit that is found in Omaha is taking us to new places.