2018 State of the City Address

Thank you all for being here today for my third State of the City address.

Nicki Anderson and her staff at the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce put countless hours into making this event a success. Let’s give them a big round of applause.

All of you know the value the Chamber brings to your business and the region. I want to give a special welcome to new Chamber board chairman Emily Ory. Her passion and commitment promises to take the Chamber to even greater heights.

A big thank you as well to NCTV17’s Liz Spencer and her staff for the endless hours they spent producing all of the videos you’ll see today. I also want to thank the Embassy Suites for hosting today’s luncheon.

I want to give a special thank you to Greg Bizzaro and his staff from Jaffee Events. They have generously donated their time the last three years to provide audio services for this event.

My wife Julie has joined me today, and I can’t say enough about how her support helps me. Our entire family plays an important part in letting me serve Naperville. Julie, thanks for your constant love and support.

While Julie and my family are my partners at home, I have eight partners on the City Council who are just as dedicated to Naperville’s future. While we have eight very different personalities, our shared strength comes from our dedication to making the best decisions possible.

It’s no surprise Naperville is a leader in the region and the state. Working with my counterparts helps us all prosper.

Recognition of special guests

We are honored to have Illinois House Minority Leader Jim Durkin with us here today. (Editor’s Note: At the last minute, Durkin was unable to attend.) Jim has been a strong leader and advocate for the western suburbs in Springfield. I know I can rely on his advice as we work together to advocate for our community. Jim, thank you for being here today.

I’d also like to acknowledge several other mayors we have in the audience. I’m privileged to call them colleagues and friends.

Today you’ll hear a great deal about our past, present, and future. None of that is possible without our city staff, who work day after day to keep Naperville running.

City Manager Doug Krieger and Deputy City Manager Marcie Schatz lead a team of directors who mix inspiring ideas with technical know-how. Together, they keep our city moving forward.

Doug, Marcie and directors, please stand and be recognized.

Reflect and imagine

Today is a day to reflect and to imagine. It’s a chance to look back in celebration at the achievements of 2017 and to look ahead to our future.

As Mayor, I’m honored to play a part in where we’ve been and where we’re going. So today, let’s take a look back on our history.

Think about the leaders who came before us. They had the audacity and the tenacity to plan a city not just for that moment in time, but for generations they would never know.

They had the courage to take risks. They understood that out of all those great risks would come great reward.

Great communities don’t just happen by accident. Careful planning and thoughtful decisions made Naperville the city it is today.

We are who we are because we stand on the shoulders of giants.

These are the men and women who are household names in Naperville. They are who we tell our children about when we see a street, building or park named after them. They are the local heroes who put “we above me” to create a community rooted in service through moments in time.

They are notable names like Frank Slocumb, who gave so generously of their time and talent to serve Naperville. Frank passed away this January, but his support for many Naperville organizations lives on. We are fortunate that each generation has taken the good work of our giants – like Frank – and built upon it.

Let’s take a look at some of the pivotal moments in our almost 200-year-old history. Now, don’t forget – we’ve done a lot in that time. More than I can show you in a few minutes. Everyone’s contribution is memorable, meaningful and appreciated, even if you don’t see it on the screen today.

We have one of our community’s giants here with us today. Mayor Emeritus George Pradel is truly a living legend. When we think of Naperville, we think of him. Let’s give him a round of applause.

So how do we propel ourselves to build on that legacy? How do we take what has been entrusted to us by those long gone and make it better?

We must fight complacency – and the status quo – all day, every day.

We cannot allow ourselves to just stay the course. Nothing we saw in that video would have been possible if the leaders of yesterday decided Naperville had reached its peak.

When a city stands still, it’s actually falling behind.

Let me be clear: Naperville is a leader. We always have been, and we always will be. It’s simply who we are. But I do believe we need to recognize how easy it is to become complacent and perhaps a little too comfortable.

Yesterday’s success is truly the foundation of a vibrant tomorrow.

Our residents are the foundation of our community, and our businesses are the great innovators that remind us to embrace change and thrive. Let’s see how some of our businesses are adapting and growing every day to remain competitive.

No successful community is made up of just businesses or just residents. I’ve said it before, and it’s worth mentioning again: a blend of both is essential for our success.

Our businesses provide a significant portion of our tax base and the amenities required to make Naperville work. Residents visit those businesses and move to Naperville because of all the amenities we offer. Together, they make a city into a community.

It’s why last year Niche named us the second-best city to live in. It’s also why just two weeks ago Niche named us the best city to raise a family in America, and it’s why we made the 50 Best Cities to Live list.

Our City’s foundation is made up of four ends policies. These tools govern our actions and evaluate our progress.

Our first ends policy is financial stability. While we don’t formally rank these policies in importance, I believe financial stability is the foundation for success in all other categories.

We define this stability as maintaining a triple-A bond rating, which is the highest rating possible. For 22 years in a row, we have received that rating from Moody’s and Standard and Poor’s.

We achieve this because we maintain a diverse tax base and because we implemented strong and strategic financial principles – and these principles are working.

We’re maintaining a structurally balanced budget. In fact, we’ve decreased this year’s general fund budget, despite increased pension and debt service costs.

We’re on track to increase our cash reserves to 25% by the end of 2022 while reducing our debt by 25%. In fact, we’ve already reduced our debt by almost $20 million since 2014. Our cash reserves are back up around 21%, with a $33 million goal by the end of 2022.

As a service organization, our costs are substantial. Personnel and benefits are a large part of this cost.

Make no mistake: we have some of the hardest working employees around, and you’ll meet a few later. But we also believe in serving as a model for leaner government.

In 2017, our Water Utility, Legal Department, and Clerk’s Office conducted internal reviews. This was to see if they were operating at the most efficient levels. Each review led to restructuring and efficiencies within those departments.

Overall, we’ve reduced our personnel costs by $1.5 million. In fact, our staffing is the lowest it’s been since 1996, and we’ve saved over $1.6 million in healthcare costs since 2016.

We know that containing costs benefits you, our taxpayers. As a Council, we must do our part to reduce your local property tax burden.

I’m proud that we’re on track to abate $1.8 million back to taxpayers this spring. When we do this, we will have reduced the city property tax rate yet again.

Right now we have the lowest property tax rate we’ve seen in the last 50 years, and we have the same number of employees now as we did in the mid-1990s.

But we’ve increased the size and scope of our city considerably in the last 20 years.

That means we’re running a much larger city and providing top notch services with essentially the same property tax rate and staffing of two decades ago.

That’s just good government.

Good government and progress in DuPage & Will counties

Speaking of good government, we’re proud to have like-minded financial leadership at the county level.

For the tenth year in a row, DuPage County passed a budget with no property tax increase. Chairman Dan Cronin is a true model of lean and efficient government. Dan and board members Janice Anderson and Jim Healy, thank you for your leadership in this.

Of course, I can’t forget Will County. There are lots of exciting changes happening, like breaking ground on their new courthouse and opening their new Public Safety Complex.

We have Chuck Maher and Suzanne Hart with us here today, and I’m thankful they represent our community so well.

Regional relationships are important, because Naperville’s financial stability is dependent on the strength of the local and regional economy.

Economic development

Our economic development ends policy formalizes our commitment to bringing businesses to town and keeping them here.

As a community that has reached build out, reinventing the space we already have is critical. We’ve had tremendous success in this area.

One goal was to find tenants for two of our larger empty spaces by December 2019. I’m proud to say that we have met that goal two years ahead of time, and we’ve exceeded it. This is a huge win!

Last year I mentioned how Chervon had moved into its new facility on Warrenville Road, and last April we announced the long-vacant Menards building would become a Patel Brothers grocery store, which is now open for business.

More recently we announced the sale of another long-vacant space – the old Walmart building along Route 59.

By late summer, it will be the Mall of India. Residents will have a grocery store, food court, learning center, and retail stores all in one place. Eventually a banquet hall will be added, and the mall will bring over 250 jobs to Naperville.

We’re also seeing smaller vacancies fill, like the building near 95th Street and Route 59 that will be an Aldi flagship grocery store in May.

And the exciting project of reimagining 13 acres of city owned land in our train district is moving along.

The City partnered with Ryan Companies to gather community input on what would work best for this area.

Small group and stakeholder meetings have provided valuable feedback, and working groups and a steering committee let the community be fully engaged as a vision and concept is created.

In addition to reinventing spaces, we’re also seeing businesses reinvest in Naperville.

A great example is BP. They recently announced they were consolidating their campus and reinvesting tens of millions of dollars into the remaining buildings.

Not only does that show a continued commitment to Naperville, but it also provides an opportunity to enhance our research and development corridor.

One of the most exciting developments is the recently announced CityGate North.

Naperville will now be home to DuPage County’s largest multi-use sports complex, entertainment and expo facility. CityGate North will have space to seat 4,500 people and feature two regulation-size ice rinks.

This is a huge deal. I’m excited to see how this project progresses.

A strong economy doesn’t just bring and keep businesses here. It also makes Naperville a place people want to call home.

Last year, we issued the highest number of building permits in two decades – 8,637. We have to go back all the way to 1998 to find a similar number.

Our residential building permits were the highest they’ve been since 2008. In 2017, we performed a record number of inspections – almost 35,000 – beating our previous single-year record in 2003.

Like I mentioned earlier, we’re doing this all with fewer employees due to internal efficiencies and innovation.

While there’s a lot to be excited about coming up, we can say that 2017 was a success in development. Let’s take a look.

Naperville Development Partnership

Christine Jeffries and her board of directors at the Naperville Development Partnership are a big part of why I can share all this good news.

Christine and the NDP board, please stand. Let’s give them a big round of applause for their outstanding work.

We also look at economic success as filling empty retail centers. A great example is the east Ogden Avenue corridor.

I believe this area is prime for a new look and feel as Naperville’s Uptown district.

Along with the NDP and Chamber, the City held an open house last fall to discuss rebranding and reimagining this area.

I don’t want to lose that momentum. It’s an important entrance to our city, and it’s long overdue for a facelift.

In the meantime, we are making progress. Andy’s Frozen Custard opened its second Naperville location in this area last fall, and the vacant strip mall east of Jewel is being reconstructed.

Closer to the border with Lisle, the Gerald Auto Group reinvested in their building, and the Fair Oaks Ford property is under contract for future development. These are two critical parcels that will help create the Uptown brand.

Ultimately, though, it will take partnerships to transform this area. After all, good government requires good partners.

Health & Welfare

This is especially true when it comes to the health and welfare of our community.

Our police and fire personnel are second to none in achieving our third ends policy of public safety.

Police Chief Bob Marshall and Fire Chief Mark Puknaitis run award-winning, world-class police and fire departments.

In fact, in 2017 our Fire Department received a fifth consecutive accreditation. It also received the Heart Safe Community Award from the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

This could not happen without Chief Puknaitis and his dedication to consistent innovation in the fire service. Chief Puknaitis could not be here today, but let’s give him and his staff a round of applause.

Our police and fire departments work together alongside the whole community. They must – and it’s paying off.

Niche has named us the safest city in the country for three years running, and Homes.com named Naperville the safest city in America last year.

Naperville is not entirely crime free. But we believe a Safer Naper, to borrow the tagline from Chief Marshall’s innovative public education campaign, comes when the community and public safety work hand in hand.

That means everyone doing their part.

The City has been pushing out more information so that people can be aware of what’s going on in their neighborhoods. For example, we started using Naper Notify to send emails, text messages and phone calls about large scale public safety incidents.

If we can make our residents more aware of crimes, then we can hopefully inspire them to change their behavior, which will help reduce crime further.

We know that this type of information may make people feel uncomfortable. But we hope it empowers them to make Naperville even safer.

People do want to know what’s going on.

Our online public safety incident map has had more than 71,000 views since it launched in December of 2016. It’s the most viewed interactive map on our website.

Our crime rate in Naperville consistently ranks the lowest when we compare it to similar cities, and with your help, we can keep it that way.

Chief Marshall, thank you for all your efforts. Please stand and be recognized.

Relationships are critical to facing tough issues with courage, compassion, and conviction.

Addressing public health concerns

Drug addiction is a major public health concern in this country, and Naperville is proactively addressing it through partnerships and funding.

Since 2012, the Council has set aside 50,000 dollars per year in social service grant money. This goes to fund programs that address suicide and drug abuse prevention.

This was all before these issues were making national news. Because we took ownership early on and invested in finding solutions, we’re seeing positive results.

The Prescription Drug Drop Box Program received these funds. It takes medications out of the hands of people who might abuse them by providing safe, secure disposal sites at our Police and Fire stations.

It’s been a success. Last year, almost 3,000 pounds of medication was collected, the most since the program began in 2014.

The Collaborative Youth Team also addresses challenges facing our youth.

In 2017, this group launched the Crisis Text Line. This service is available to anyone who may be experiencing depression or bullying – or anything where someone needs help.

People can text REACH to 741741 and connect with a trained counselor all day, every day.

Remember – asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness. We don’t want these issues to live in the shadows.

Public Safety & Mental Health

Our public safety departments are also building their Crisis Intervention Team. This will let them better address mental health related service calls.

We now have 34 Police personnel who are better prepared to de-escalate situations and connect people to services to help them. Our Fire Department has a goal of training 90 percent of its members in crisis intervention by 2019.

This is a great example of our employees striving to do better, and it’s not just our public safety personnel.

It’s the heart of who we are as a service organization.

People, respect, trust and pride

Two years ago, the City named its four core values: people, respect, trust, and pride.

Personally, I think these are human values, not just organizational values. Without people, respect, trust, and pride, we can’t function as a society, much less a city.

Every day our employees live out these values to provide the best possible service. Let’s meet some of the faces who work on the streets and behind the scenes to run Naperville.

Our employees and these core values let us be a high performing government, which is our fourth ends policy.

We see data as critical to achieving success in this area. Our open data portal launched last June and has been visited 29,000 times.

We also know data helps us be more efficient. Our new enterprise resource planning system is helping in this effort.

When done in 2019, this system will make sharing data between departments easier. This will help us interact with the public more efficiently.

We love seeing our customers in person, but we know that’s not always convenient for them.

Being a high performing government means making it easier for people to do business with us. That means businesses need to see openings – not obstacles – when working with the city.

Last year, we streamlined our taxicab license process from six months to two. Looking ahead, we’ll evaluate our liquor license renewal process, and we’ll streamline how we handle solicitor applications.

High performing government also requires humility. It’s knowing when we need to do better and implementing the right changes.

We learned that lesson when it began to rain one week back in April 2013.

You may remember we got a lot of rain downtown then. Some parts of Naperville got even more. In the Cress Creek area, there was a lot of flooding.

We learned that we needed to upgrade our infrastructure. We made it a priority to fix what needed fixing.

And last October, when we got eight inches of rain in one weekend, the dollars we invested paid off. Instead of over 100 sewer backups, we only had two.

That’s real results for our residents.

Facing our challenges head-on and striving to do better isn’t anything new for Naperville.

2018 will be no different. We’re going to build upon the challenges and successes of the past and continue moving Naperville forward for the next generation.

We need to realize our world and our workforce is changing. Millennials like to work very differently than many of us in this room.

We need to offer amenities and infrastructure that help us retain our graduates. We want them to stay here so that we can capitalize on their immense talent and world-class education.

That includes offering the downtown, urban living experience they crave.

One Nineteen on Main is helping meet that need. These apartments, which used to be filled by college students, have returned to the open market. They offer the amenities young professionals expect.

We also expect to see new development opportunities on empty land next to Nichols Library and behind the Main Street Promenade.

I have to thank Katie Wood and the Downtown Naperville Alliance for keeping our downtown vibrant, fresh, and attractive to all ages.  Katie couldn’t be here today, but I want to give her team thanks for all they do.

The Naperville Jaycee’s Park I announced from this stage one year ago is becoming reality.

This outdoor work space will offer WiFi, charging ports and a comfortable working environment. It’s all thanks to half a million dollars in generous donations from private parties and the Naperville Jaycees.

We’re in the process of moving plans through commissions and to the City Council for final approval. The goal is to break ground soon.

The Naperville Jaycee’s Park will be very visible. But we also need to consider capitalizing on what we can’t see.

Our past leaders made some very smart decisions when they started building out the infrastructure to support a fiber optics network.

Although technology was more limited back then, they wanted to be prepared for the future – and that future is now.

5G communication and the “Internet of Things” have given us the potential to use that fiber network. This could help us provide the bandwidth for smart services and products we use every day.

Of course, we need to weigh the risks and benefits of this. Smart investments are just as important as smart services.

This is a topic that requires a measured decision, which is why we hired an outside consultant to advise the city on how to best use these assets.

All of this makes Naperville appealing to millennials. But we can’t forget our seniors who have called Naperville home for decades.

As seniors age, their living choices may need to change. Bringing in senior-friendly housing developments is critical, and we’ll continue to focus on this.

We also must consider how to provide the right infrastructure to support all our residents, no matter what age or stage of life they are in. Resources from the federal and state government could go a long way in helping meet those needs.

For every dollar we send to the state, only a small fraction of that comes back to us. We must change this.

For example, as a Council we committed to increase spending on our road maintenance program over the next four years.

It’s the right decision, because a robust roadway network literally lays the foundation for a thriving economy, and our residents have told us in citizen surveys that this is an area that needs attention.

But we need to consider how we’ll obtain that funding, and recognizing outside sources as a potential solution is critical.

We can’t forget to look inward as well.

Collaboration, consolidation, and efficiency

Collaboration, consolidation, and efficiency can help us meet our goals while being fiscally responsible.

The Council has directed city staff to identify cost saving opportunities between the city, Settlement, and Library. We want to see where we could potentially share internal resources to reduce the cost burden to our taxpayers.

These aren’t new concepts.

We have a history of partnering with others, like when we jointly purchased our public safety radio system with Aurora.

That partnership moved forward again when Aurora’s Public Safety Answering Point merged with our Emergency Telephone System Board.

This agreement makes sense since we are each other’s backup 9-1-1 service. We envision even more savings and collaboration going forward.

A good example is the potential to partner with Aurora on an enhanced 9-1-1 system upgrade. This would cost us millions of dollars if we paid for it ourselves.

And, our cities jointly received a $1.3 million FEMA grant that will allow us to better prepare against coordinated terrorist attacks.

Speaking of consolidation, our Fire Department is exploring if it can consolidate its fire stations.

Safety is the number one concern, of course, but we recognize Naperville has reached build out. So we need to ask the question if our stations are in the best locations, or if reconfiguring them could provide better service.

We’ll also move forward with establishing an administrative hearing system.

This would allow us to handle smaller violations, like parking tickets or code violations, in-house instead of at the county.

This has the potential to save money and improve staff productivity. Most importantly, it will be more convenient for our residents.

This is all exciting news. However, it’s important to remember that working efficiently doesn’t mean we stop growing.

Let’s take a minute to see what’s on the horizon for 2018.

Working more efficiently requires creativity.

At the city, we draw inspiration and strength from our community partners and all that they bring to the table.

Kids matter to KidsMatter

We will soon say farewell to a leader who has been a champion for children since she became KidsMatter’s first executive director in 2001.

IdaLynn Wenhold is the very definition of joy. Her enthusiasm for helping kids realize their potential has impacted not just this generation, but those to come.

KidsMatter believes that we need to listen to what our kids are telling us. Their State of the Kids report released in January was eye-opening.

Over 70% of Naperville 7th and 10th graders who took a survey said they experienced stress from school, competition, and peers. Pressure from parents, pressure from themselves, and conflict with parents also contributes.

This is a complicated subject, and there’s no easy answer. But we must empower our kids and help them grow up healthy.

KidsMatter is a leader in this effort – and the organization is moving forward in good hands.

Kamala Martinez was named KidsMatter’s new executive director, and I know she will take their mission to the next level. Congratulations, Kamala.

While I’m confident Kamala and KidsMatter will continue providing resources to kids, parents, and families, no one can ever fully replace IdaLynn.

Let’s see what this exceptional woman has meant to Naperville.

IdaLynn, thank you for all you’ve done the past 17 years. Please stand and be recognized.

Speaking of helping our youth with the fundamentals, Harley Jones was chosen as the new 360 Youth Services CEO a few months ago.

I look forward to seeing how 360 continues to provide critical resources like counseling and housing to youth in need. Harley, welcome.

Schools, health and recreation

School Districts 203 and 204 are giving our children the skills and talent base they need to be competitive.

Today’s students will work in careers with technology we can’t even imagine.

Both districts do a phenomenal job and are known across the country.

In January, District 203 was named the Best School District in America by the National Council for Home Safety and Security, and Neuqua Valley was named a National Blue Ribbon School for 2017.

The city wants to do our part to help introduce students to real-world experiences.

For the past three years, students interned with our Public Works, Communications, and Human Resources departments. The feedback has been incredibly positive.

Dan Bridges and Dr. Karen Sullivan, thank you for preparing our community’s future giants.

Nowhere is preparing for the future more evident than at North Central College. The opening and dedication of the long-anticipated Dr. Myron Wentz Science Center has added a state-of-the-art facility to our community.

Dr. Troy Hammond recognizes that the work of preparing tomorrow’s innovators starts right now. Thank you for your service, Dr. Hammond.

In 2017, our library’s mission to inform, inspire, and imagine led to them being named a 5-Star Library for the tenth year in a row. Our library is one of only 13 nationwide to achieve this honor.

The 95th Street Library also got a new look last year. That included new furniture, technology spaces and improved seating so that this heavily-used building continues to serve Naperville’s needs.

I would like to thank Julie Rothenfluh and the library board of trustees for your leadership and making information accessible to everyone.

Without good physical health, our community’s leaders couldn’t serve as well as they do.

Edward Hospital is at the forefront of medicine. That was evident when they were recognized as a Leapfrog Top General Hospital last year. This is one of the most competitive honors an American hospital can receive.

Thank you to Mary Lou Mastro and Bill Kottman for continuing Edward’s legacy of excellence.

Our Park District, led by Ray McGury and its board of commissioners, continues to set the standard in recreational excellence.

The much-loved Fort Hill Activity Center won two awards from the American Public Works Association and Illinois Park and Recreation Association, and I’m very excited to see what the district envisions for their last large open space in southwest Naperville.

Ray, thanks for all you do.

Local museums

So much of this speech has focused on history, and nowhere does history come to life like at Naper Settlement.

Their planned welcome center and exhibition space will eventually share the more recent stories of Naperville’s success. We know this will help preserve our community’s history for decades to come.

Under Rena Tamayo-Calabrese’s leadership, we saw attendance numbers at the Settlement increase substantially last year. This is a huge boost to our local economy.

Rena, thank you.

I’ve spoken quite a bit about past generations working together to create this community. Their decisions at the time may have seemed small, but looking back, we realize we inherited a legacy.

This is the case with the DuPage Children’s Museum.

In 2017, co-founder Louise Beem passed away at the age of 93. But her vision endures through the museum’s continued emphasis on early childhood education. And her first exhibit – Ramps and Rollers – is still part of the museum.

Sarah Orleans, her board of directors and her NextGen Board are expanding on that vision.

In fact, thanks to a recent grant the museum will provide more access to STEAM fundamentals, which puts children on the path to success.

Sarah, thank you for what you do.

Residents inspire community of kindness

As Mayor, I know that one person can’t come up with every solution. We know when we experience success, it’s all of us working together.

It’s not just people in formal leadership positions. Our residents inspire a community of kindness.

They are giants to those they serve, day in and day out.

Before we conclude, I’d like to introduce you to some of your neighbors, who are role models to all of us.

Whether they are a CEO or a next-door neighbor, we owe it to those who came before us not to sit still. We must race forward and create a history worth celebrating by future generations.

After all, the giants of tomorrow are sitting in front of us today.

Here’s my advice for our future leaders who are in this room: You can start leading right now.

Don’t wait for the right time or title, because the right time isn’t always evident and the title isn’t a prerequisite for action.

All of you have a choice every single day to determine the legacy you will leave behind.

I ask you to consider just that: Who will tell your story?

Will you be seen as a giant of today?

Will you stand up to mentor and encourage the next generation of Naperville’s giants?

I hope you will.

Because they’re out there. Some are in this room today, some work for you, and some are still learning in a classroom as we speak.

It’s our job to identify them, encourage them, and show them their voice and vision matters.

Remember: they need you, just as we will need them in the decades to come.

Thank you all for being here today and for all your contributions to Naperville.