**Mayor Stothert's State of the City**

**February 16, 2018**

As we gather today, I ask our citizens to keep the city of Parkland, Florida and the school community of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in our prayers.

Let’s begin with a moment of silence for those killed and injured, their families, friends and the first responders who answered the call.

This is the fifth time I have had the privilege of presenting the State of the City.

Each has been an opportunity for reflection and focus on our best qualities and our biggest challenges.

Today, Omaha is strong and improving by nearly every measure by which great and growing cities are judged.

Citizens tell me that they are confident and optimistic, and they are excited about our future.

Our city is safer, more people are at work, wages are up, and development is strong.

The momentum and vital growth we are experiencing requires the work and input of everyone:

Parents, community organizations, employers, non-profits and philanthropy, public and private employees, entrepreneurs, the faith community, and neighborhood groups.

It takes the wisdom of the elderly and the energy of the young.  We need those who don’t give up on themselves or each other.

We all share the responsibly to improve the city we love, and through our work together, I believe we have a promising future.

We are benefitting from a strong regional and national economy, boosting the stability for which Omaha is known.

We have learned and adjusted from our history and heritage over the decades.

The industries we relied on when the city was young, meatpacking and transportation, are still very important today.

Now, however, we have a diversified economy with a strong presence in banking and finance, health care, insurance, technology, education, and other important economic sectors.

The perception of Omaha across the country is enhanced by rankings of America’s best cities.

I never get tired of reading them!

These headlines build momentum and grow the Omaha brand.

The popular crowd-sourced review site “Yelp” ranks the “Most Up And Coming American Cities”.

Omaha stands out as number 3!

The “Forbes Best Cities for Raising a Family”, ranks the Omaha metro number seven, citing our low cost of living and high rate of home ownership.

“The Best Cities in the United States” published last month by National Geographic, lists Omaha in the top 30.

And one of the world's largest travel websites,  Trip Advisor rates Omaha among the top 10 destinations on the rise in 2018.

What’s more important is how we see Omaha.

How do we perceive the city that we call home?

Our self-identity is strong; something vitally important for our city to continue on the path of growth and progress.

Allow me to share some good news,  and some challenges about the current state of Omaha.

Public safety has been  and always will be the primary responsibility of local government.

I can’t imagine there are many more professional, capable, and results-oriented police departments than ours in Omaha.

We are a safer city because of the efforts of our men and women in blue, and our community groups and individuals working with them on this common mission.

We have an overall declining violent crime rate because of these great relationships.

For the first time since we started tracking the number of shootings, this number fell below 100 in 2017.  What a contrast to just ten years ago, when nearly 250 shootings defined our crime rate.

We also had 30 homicides, one more than in 2016.

While this is positive for our community, it is of little comfort to the families and friends of those taken from us.

Over the last five years, the Omaha Police Department has solved homicides at an all-time high; near 80%, and that is well above the national average for a city our size.

The work to make our community safer is never ending and it’s the most important challenge before us.

Our investments in public safety are paying off and will continue.

Just this morning, 27 police officers graduated from the academy, 24 more will graduate in April, bringing the budgeted number of police officers to 860.

We will increase that number to 900 officers in 2019.

Omaha will meet or exceed the profession’s "gold standard" of two officers for every one thousand citizens.

This year, we will complete our body camera deployment for all officers to enhance scene evidence and increase accountability.

The fifth police precinct building is underway in Elkhorn and scheduled to be open next year. The new precinct will improve coverage, service, and response times.

All of these steps are important and have built a highly acclaimed police department.

However, one of the things I am most proud of is the way Chief Schmaderer, his command staff and officers work with our citizens to build trust.

One example of building relationships is the PACE program; Police Athletics through Community Engagement.

More than ten years ago, the Latino Peace Officers Association started a free soccer league with 90 players.

The idea was to create “good gangs” to keep at-risk youth from real gang membership.

Officers volunteered to coach and mentor, teaching the skills of the game, and the principles of responsibility, sportsmanship and teamwork.

Each year, the program and its reputation grew, adding more players, more sports and more coaches.

This year, PACE will have 3,000 kids signed up for  soccer, baseball, flag football and cross-fit.

The officers will tell you they get more out of it than the kids do. They appreciate the opportunity to build relationships with young people and their families.

Many of the PACE coaches and board members are here today:

Deputy police Chief Greg Gonzalez

Captain Ken Kanger

Lieutenant Cathy Cook-Frazier

Sergeant Ken Fox

Sergeant Marcus Taylor

Sergeant Danette Culler

Detective Tony Espejo

Bradley Frazier

Taylor Haynes

Please help me thank every officer and volunteer involved with pace for their dedication to our city,  on duty and off.

We are also making significant investments in fire department personnel and equipment.

Twenty two new recruits will graduate in May.

Our purchase of new medic units, firetrucks, state of the art portable radios, a new station alerting system and emergency medical equipment provides the best tools available  for our first responders.

Recently, Fire Chief Dan Olsen announced a first for the department.

He named the first woman to the position of assistant chief.

Congratulations to Chief Kathy Bossman!

Chief Bossman oversees the C-shift and the emergency management services division.

Thank you for your leadership, the example you set and your service to our citizens.

Last year at this time, i was knocking on thousands of doors, talking to voters about their priorities.

In every neighborhood, our citizens want to feel safe, and they want us to work faster to fix our aging infrastructure.

And we are listening!

In just the last five years, we have doubled the street resurfacing budget.

We completed 63 resurfacing projects last year.

Our 2018 resurfacing schedule will begin with 58 more, for a cost of $12 million.

A few examples of these projects are Lake street, from 24th Street west to 40th Street, the Adams Park neighborhood, Vinton Street, from 13th to 24th, 24th street, from “l” to “U” and West Center Road, from 120th west to 144th.

The complete list of the 2018 resurfacing projects is available today on the city website.

On May 15th, Omaha voters will have the opportunity to vote on bonds that will fund street and sewer projects, public safety and public facilities, and improvements to city parks.

Voting for these bonds will not result in a tax rate increase.

Many of the projects are already included in our six-year Capital Improvement Plan, adopted by the City Council.

These bonds will help provide the local match in order to receive millions of federal dollars for the projects.

I encourage all voters to learn more about the projects funded with these bonds.

The Capital Improvement Plan is available on the home page of the city website, Cityofomaha.org.

And, be sure to vote as you decide what is best for the future of Omaha.

We do remain challenged by the decades old policy that requires property owners to pay the total cost to rebuild substandard or unimproved streets; those not built to code, some dating back 50 years or more.

As a result of street construction shortcuts, these roads are quickly deteriorating.

Omaha has 300 lane miles of unimproved streets.

Last year, I asked a citizens advisory group to recommend a new policy.

They presented a change that would be fair to all taxpayers and affordable for the city.

But amendments passed by the council had the potential to greatly increase the costs and prolong the process through appeals.

These changes did not represent the consensus of the advisory group, and I  vetoed the policy.

So today, we are back to square one.

The property owners remain responsible for 100% of the cost. The City Council could approve a cost-sharing agreement on a case by case basis.

But, this is not a sustainable option.

Our estimates show it will cost $300 million to reconstruct all 300 lane miles of unimproved streets.

We will again ask the City Council to approve a new policy.

We will also improve our communications with everyone who owns property on an unimproved street.

This spring, we will introduce a new tool on “dogis” – the city’s database and mapping source.

The new “Omaha PASER Rating Lookup” will provide detailed information about every unimproved street.

PASER is the system that rates street conditions on a scale of one to ten.

Coinciding with the new lookup page, every property owner on an unimproved street will receive information about the PASER rating.

We will also explain plans to perform routine maintenance and the process for creating a street improvement district or a road maintenance district, if they choose to do so.

Another area of growth and progress is employment and wages.

Omaha’s unemployment rate is 2.6 percent, nearly a 20-year low.  And while that is good news, it does highlight the need to ensure a capable and high quality workforce.

The city invests in workforce development and training programs including the Greater Omaha Chamber’s Reach program, re-entry, mentoring, truancy prevention, and youth job programs.

We are the largest funder of the Step-Up Summer Jobs program, increasing our commitment to $1 million this year, and we fund Heartland Workforce Solutions with $520,000.

We are excited to announce that this spring we will launch a new jobs program to help those who want to work but don’t know where to turn for help.

These are often people on the street, the homeless and the panhandlers, looking for work, and who legitimately need income for themselves and their family.

Modeled after the successful “There’s a Better Way” program in Albuquerque, this day-labor program will provide a cash payment for a days’ work, a free lunch, and access to resources that help people get back on their feet.

We will bring the dignity of work to those who are willing and able.

The work will be coordinated through our parks department; the Salvation Army will be our non-profit partner.

Major Greg Thompson and his Salvation Army team are here today. We are very pleased to be working with you and look forward to a formal start in a few months.

Overall, demand in our city for talented employees will continue in the coming months, due in part to high-quality development and construction projects underway.

In 2017, we issued more than 40,000 building permits, for large projects and small, with a value over $1 billions.

Among the most visible are:

A reimagined Conagra campus that will provide office, residential, and commercial space, and public access, to a beautiful part of our city.

Kiewit’s new corporate headquarters in north downtown.

Hdr’s global headquarters at AkSarBen Village.

Completion of the Capitol District including the new Marriott Hotel and Omaha’s first entertainment district.

Impressive medical and health-education facilities at the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Creighton University.

West Farm, the 500 acre, $1 billion dollar project at 144th and West Dodge.

Avenue One at 192nd and West Dodge,

And a project currently being designed that will create a new signature for our city.

I am referring to the cooperative effort to reimagine the waterfront and Gene Leahy Mall.

This project has the potential to kick-start decades of growth in housing, recreation, entertainment, business, and tourism.

After more than a year of work, and multiple public input meetings, we will have a design ready to share this spring.

It is important to acknowledge the work and private support of those leading this project to create a lasting and exciting legacy for future generations.

To the entire riverfront revitalization planning committee, especially Ken Stinson and Mogens Bay, thank you, and be assured the city is your reliable partner.

This trend of growth, development and rehab extends to our neighborhoods, and small business districts.

We are beginning our third holistic neighborhood revitalization.

After our previous successes in the Prospect Village and Deer Park neighborhoods, we have returned to North Omaha.

We will focus on an area within the Neighborhood Action and Fact, from Ames Avenue to just south of Wirt street, North 24th Street to the north freeway.

We are working with the residents to identify their priorities and then reinvigorate this neighborhood.

We will also prioritize 24th Street in the heart of the South Omaha business district.

The American Planning Association has recognized 24th Street as one of the country’s Five Great Streets.

South 24th Street links Omaha’s rich ethnic past to our present and future.

It is truly one of our most unique spaces.

The small businesses that line the street show the fruits of hard work and determination, community groups provide essential services, such as job training, and tutoring.

This year, we will repair the streets and sidewalks, and we will restore and update the artwork, sculpture, lighting, planters and landscape to maintain this inviting community space.

This summer, we will also propose another annexation package. Annexation is important to the continued growth of our city.

Over the past five years, we have added more than 27,000 people to our city, broadening our tax base by more $2.4 billion dollar valuation.

Quality air service and expanding airline flight capacity are vital to our economic development efforts.

Our well-run Eppley Airfield just recorded its busiest year ever, serving over 4.6 million passengers.

Omaha reaches 34 non-stop destination airports, major facility renovations are underway, and our first international service to Toronto starts this spring.

With growth, comes the need for improved transit.

Metro Transit expects ORBT, the bus rapid transit system, to be operating next year.

And later this month, we expect to receive and review the final studies on a streetcar.

This will be the completion of a federally-funded study; another step to determine what the costs might be.

It will not be a recommendation or a project design.

Our city finances are strong and well-managed, and I thank the City Council for your ongoing ideas and support of our financial priorities.

Our current projection for 2017 is a year-end surplus of approximately $10 million.

As required by the City Charter, this amount will be directed automatically to the 2019 budget.

This is our fifth healthy year-end surplus and the result of careful budgeting, expense management and Omaha’s strong economy.

The sources for most of our city government revenues, city sales taxes and the local property tax are strong thanks to a growing economy and a positive real estate market.

We strive to provide excellent customer service to taxpayers and we are always open to new and better ways of providing services.

In early March, we will brief the City Council and announce to the public our recommendations for the next trash collection contract.

After more than a year of public outreach, including a pilot project, a series of public meetings, telephone surveys, and hundreds of emails from citizens, we learned taxpayers want a modern, automated system with wheeled carts.

They also want to expand recycling, and maintain yard waste collection.

Our challenge will be to provide the expected services at a cost the taxpayers can afford.

One thing is certain, the next contract will be far more expensive.

Access to information and input on decisions that affect our taxpayers is always an important part of governing.

In addition to the new street rating tool I mentioned earlier, we are completing a public GPS mapping system to follow the progress of our city snow plows.

This real-time tracking system shows you where plowing is underway or complete.

Every plow in our fleet is equipped with GPS to ensure accuracy.

This feature will be live on the city website next week.

Recently, we introduced Warple.

Warple is an Omaha-based technology startup providing live views of what people think.

Warple is also a product, which gives everyone a voice and provides a way to see how your opinion compares to the collective public opinion.

We have also created new advisory groups to provide input in areas of special interest.

The military service advisory, the millennial advisory and the LGBTQ+ advisory are all at work now.

We have also completed the application and interview process for the Native American advisory board and will announce those members soon.

The Active Living Advisory Committee recommended that we study and develop a Vision Zero strategy. We have named a task force and that work is underway.

“Vision Zero” is a strategy to reduce and eliminate traffic deaths.

Already this year, 22 people have been killed on Nebraska roads and interstates.

“Vision Zero” is a common sense goal we should strive for.

And finally, later this year, we will introduce a new locally created and managed app for citizens to report concerns. It will replace our current city-sourced app.

It will improve customer service and save money.

It will be another service managed by the excellent staff on the mayor’s hotline.

Last year, the hotline handled more than 16,000 service requests.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to your concerns, and we appreciate your feedback, like this message received just a few days ago:

“I was amazed how fast the reaction time was to my request! You really accomplished a lot in a very short amount of time, and i want to let you know how appreciative I am!”

Thanks to Leslie for that message.

And thanks to my staff that provides this important service – Kelsey, Brandi, Jacob, Anna and Terri,  these are the good people who answer your questions and help to resolve your concerns.

I want to share a thought on education in Omaha.

While city government is not directly involved in the management of our schools, we work together on many issues.

The success of our students certainly determines their own futures and also the future of our city.

I am very encouraged by the variety and quality of educational institutions in Omaha.

As Mayor and an 11-year member of my local school board, I know this is the result of tremendously difficult work.

I am encouraged by the new leadership at the Omaha Public Schools and the stability it will bring to the state’s largest school district.

I wish new superintendent Dr. Cheryl Logan well.

The city will do all we can to support the important work of our school districts.

It is an honor to serve as mayor and to work with this council to make Omaha safer, expand our economy, manage city finances, and be more accountable to the taxpayers.

Today’s vital growth and our promising future is best revealed in the spirit and determination of our citizens.

Our challenges will be met by cooperation and the responsibility we all share to make our city better.

We can accomplish anything together.

(April 11, 2018)

Play Ball!

A worn, but well-loved baseball field at Miller Park will be rebuilt this summer, in memory of Omaha Police Officer Kerrie Orozco.

Officer Orozco coached youth baseball for PACE, Police Athletics for Community Engagement.

“I never thought that losing Kerrie would get us here today,” said Omaha Police Sergeant Ken Fox and co-founder of the Black Police Officers Association. “She was a special person, there’s not many other people in the world that can bring us together like this.”

“I know Kerrie made a difference,” said Mayor Jean Stothert. “This baseball field will make a difference too; for all the young players who will step up to bat, for the coaches who will teach them, and the fans who will cheer.   Can’t you picture Kerrie on the sideline, encouraging her players and teaching the important lessons of sportsmanship?”

The renovation includes a turf field, scoreboard, bleachers, field fencing, concessions lights, dugouts and batting cages. Private donations will pay for the new complex.

“We are humbled to partner in this amazing project,” said Parks Director Brook Bench. We are excited for the future of this community, for Miller Park, for Omaha, and for the countless lives this field will impact.”

Officer Orozco was killed May 20, 2015.  Police Chief Todd Schmaderer called it one of the darkest hours in the city.  “But it rose our city up, our community relationships skyrocketed, Kerrie would be proud,” he said.

“This field will be a lasting tribute to Kerrie’s legacy of kindness and giving,” said Mayor Stothert.

I am proud of her service to our city and proud of the example our city has set; a community that supports and respects our police department.”

The ballfield was renamed in Officer Orozco’s memory after her death.  The renovations are scheduled to be completed later this year.