

**2019 State of the County Address
May 8, 2019**

Presented by:
Stacey Walker, Chair
Linn County Board of Supervisors, District 1
Linn County, Iowa

It is with great pride that I stand before you today, with the awesome task of presenting the state of the county address: an occasion I am sure everyone here has been looking forward to since the date was announced. I know in my heart that you are all here because you want to be, and not because your employer bought a table and needed it to be filled.

My sincere thanks to the women and men of the League of Women Voters for doing the hard work of organizing this event – and many others – designed to keep the general public informed of and engaged in the happenings of our democracy. You all are heroes.

Before I begin, I would like to recognize the other county elected officials that are with us today. I will list the names and positions, and I would ask those in attendance to stand and remain standing until I have called on everyone. I would ask that you all hold your applause until the end. I will begin with my colleagues on the Board:

1. **Supervisor, Ben Rogers, Vice Chairperson of the Board of Supervisor.**
2. **Supervisor, Brent Oleson.**
3. **Linn County Attorney, Jerry Vander Sanden.**
4. **Auditor, Joel Miller.**
5. **Recorder, Joan McCalmant.**
6. **Sheriff, Brian Gardner.**
7. **Treasurer, Sharon Gonzalez.**

We are also joined by other elected officials at the state and local level and some former elected officials as well. If you currently hold office – or have held elected office in the past – please stand to be recognized.

The actual work of government is carried out by hundreds of dedicated individuals who make up our departments and agencies. I could spend a thousand lifetimes thanking them for their service to this community and still fall short of conferring upon them the appreciation they deserve. In an effort to recognize them from this stage, please give a round of applause to all of our government workers. We appreciate you.

Over the past few years, our county has balanced extraordinary growth and change with steady leadership rooted in the fundamentals: do not

spend more than we take in; provide high quality customer service to all residents; tackle problems head-on; and as best we can, plan for the future.

Budget and Financial Health

As the second largest county in the state and one of the fastest growing areas in Iowa, it is imperative that our government maintain fiscal excellence while meeting the needs of our residents and tackling the challenges ahead. When it comes to finance and budgeting, Linn County has been a model for governments across the state and for more than twenty consecutive years, we have been recognized by the Government Finance Officers Association as best-in-class for our financial reporting and budget presentations. Since I joined the Board, we have kept our property tax rates low. In fact, our levy rates are among the lowest in the state compared to other large counties. We have either cut rates, or kept them the same. Our Budgeting for Outcomes process yields a balanced budget and ensures that our highest priority needs are addressed before we commit taxpayer dollars to any other project or initiative. Our general obligation bonds have been rated Aaa – the highest rating possible – by Moody's Investors Service. This rating is

based on our strong financial management, a diverse and substantial economic environment and tax base, and a low debt burden with a rapid payout.

While politicians love to take credit for economic prosperity, Linn County's worst kept secret is that nearly all of the credit in this arena is attributable to our Finance and Budget team, led by two of the brightest minds in the discipline: Steve Tucker, the Linn County Finance Director, and Dawn Jindrich, our Budget Director.

After 36 years with the County, Steve Tucker is retiring, having built and managed an accurate and impressive finance operation, all while navigating the tricky waters of state and local politics and understanding the true needs of the community. He has engineered financial strategies that have helped this government survive and rebuild after catastrophic natural disasters and is in the process of implementing transformative technological innovations in our tax and financial systems that will ensure his successor can carry on his legacy of excellence. Steve, you have earned your break. This community is a better place because of your efforts. From all of us at Linn County, thank you for your service.

Steve will be sorely missed, and he will undoubtedly leave big shoes to fill; but there is no job on this earth that is too big for a smart woman. As we bid our friend Steve farewell, we welcome Dawn Jindrich as the incoming Finance Director, who we suspect was Steve's secret weapon all along.

Year In Review

We have the blocking and tackling of county government down. However, our strong financial position has also given us the opportunity to push forward with new, bold initiatives and projects.

Harris Building

This fall, county residents can look forward to the opening of the Dr. Percy and Lileah Harris Building, a 63,000 square foot, LEED certified state-of-the-art facility that will house Linn County Child and Youth Development Services, as well as the Linn County Public Health Department. The project is on budget and on time, thanks to the expertise of OPN Architects and Rinderknecht Associates. The leased-purchase financing mechanism – spearheaded by Supervisor Oleson – has allowed us the flexibility to work with contractors that can be trusted to get the job done right. We have also been able to implement

cost controls and other measures that ensured local labor and local building trades can do what they do best: build up our community, building by building, brick by brick.

The building will be sited in the Oakhill Jackson neighborhood and will be a true community asset. We will make the gym and meeting spaces available to the public. In addition, the site will feature an accessible playground and green space for the neighborhood. This building will stand as a monument to two titans in our community who gave their lives over to public service. If you know the story of the Harris family, you would understand why this building will also serve as a powerful reminder of how love will always triumph over hate; the outcome of generations of righteous souls bending the moral arc of this universe toward justice.

Dows Farm Agri-Community

The County continues to make progress on the Dows Farm Agri-Community project – the brainchild of Les Beck, our intrepid Planning and Development Director. This ambitious endeavor is one of the first to ever be attempted in the state and when we are successful, we will show developers, governments and citizens that there are different,

more sustainable ways to build community. Our plan keeps 75% of the entire site as conservation open space. While only 25% of the space will be developed – with a mix of housing types, community spaces, and small commercial uses – the development value of this project is estimated to exceed \$100 million¹. This project will spur economic activity while managing the challenges and opportunities of urban sprawl.

LIFTS and Access Center (videos)

The public elected this Board to drive change and lead this county into a brave new future. Along with that mandate, we must also keep in mind county government's most important role: to provide for the general welfare of our residents; the blocking and tackling if you will. Simply put, we exist to help people and solve problems; and if we perform both of those duties well, we will drive change. Whether our General Assistance office is helping people pay their heating bill during the cold winter months, or the Ryan White program is connecting individuals who test

¹ "Linn County News." Linn County, IA - Official Website, www.linncounty.org/930/Dows-Farm-Agri-Community.

positive for HIV with life-saving services, to quote my good friend Ben Rogers, we are the safety net for the safety net.

This next video will give you a glimpse at the work of our LIFTS program, a public transit service providing door-to-door rides for eligible elderly and disabled residents in the metro area of Cedar Rapids, Marion and Hiawatha, and public transportation to all Linn County residents outside the metro area. Priority is given to people who are unable to use city buses because of a disability or a disabling health condition.

[PLAY LIFTS VIDEO]

As we seek to fulfill our solemn responsibility of helping people – especially the most vulnerable – government has found itself grappling with how to address the mental illness crisis ravaging our communities. While the challenge is great, so too is our resolve. Thanks to Supervisor Rogers, Linn County is leading the way once again, leveraging the resources of government to save and transform lives.

This video will give you more insight into our work on that front.

[PLAY ACCESS CENTER VIDEO]

Social Justice Initiatives

(Implicit Bias Training, Law Enforcement Roundtable, SET, Expungement Clinic)

As we think about the hard problems that we must face, we know in our hearts that much of our work will require honest conversations and education about race and broader social inequality. It is regretful that pointing out the obvious on these matters typically falls to the few leaders of color in our community. May God speed the day when more of our leaders will find the courage to help carry this load. Until then, I will be the broken record agitating for change.

We must all push back against the notion that we have somehow entered a post-racial society, or that economic hardship is proportionately distributed, or that our justice system is without blemish. We have a long ways to go on these issues, and I know that to be true because no person in this room would enthusiastically trade places with any Black person in our community. It would not be because you are racist. You would not do it, in part, because you know you would not be as well off. This is not a wild assumption; this is a reality:

- The poverty rate for Black families in Iowa is a staggering 40%².
- In one of our core neighborhoods, the median household income for African Americans is \$8,194. – 97% of that neighborhood is considered socially vulnerable³.
- Given that Black men have the lowest life expectancy of all major ethnic populations, the color of my skin on a young Black boy in this community means that their most likely cause of death between the ages of 15 and 34 will be from a bullet, shot from a gun held by one of their peers.

I sat with a young man in my office not long ago. He was facing attempted murder charges, but he swore to me that he was innocent. In fact, he knew the individual who pulled the trigger, but because of the street code, he did not want to give up their name.

² State Data Center of Iowa, and The Iowa Commission on the Status of African Americans. *African Americans in Iowa: 2019*. Feb.

³ United Way of East Central Iowa. *Cedar Rapids Neighborhood Comparisons*. 2015, Cedar Rapids Neighborhood Comparisons.

He talked to me about wanting to get a better job, so that he could earn enough to move away from the trauma and chaos that consumed his life. He wanted better for himself, but a criminal record stymied his social mobility.

A member of our staff played with his young son while we chatted. – He died just yesterday from complications of a gunshot wound.

We cannot be afraid to have conversations about privilege or our implicit biases. We cannot be afraid to point out institutional harm and its disproportional impacts on certain groups of people. We are capable of having nuanced conversations, and distinguishing between an intelligent critique and a disparaging attack on an individual's character. However, in order to get there we need our leaders to push through the noise and understand their role in creating a new paradigm for progress. Although we have had some early challenges, I remain encouraged.

A group of law enforcement professionals and community leaders from across the county have been meeting together with me in private for a few years now to build and repair trust, to discuss ways we can work together to address violence in our communities, and other justice

reform efforts. Despite the vast difference in perspectives and life experiences that are represented in these meetings, we have made meaningful progress.

- We have obtained in-person implicit bias training for our law enforcement officials and county attorneys.
- We have reexamined Use of Force policies and published them online.
- Local law enforcement agencies have updated body-camera technology and revamped policies that govern their use.
- We have ramped-up community policing strategies and enhanced our outreach efforts to diversify applicant pools for jobs in law enforcement.
- We have begun to explore restorative justice practices for low-level offenders in our criminal justice system.

This is only the beginning. To my knowledge, there has never been a consistent effort like this in the county, and likely in the state. -- The lesson in all of this is clear: we are capable of doing great things when we push past the ego; when we free ourselves of the superficial limitations of tradition, and well-worn dogmas, and tired allegiances.

After years of work, we have landed the SET Task Force; a multi-jurisdictional partnership between Linn County, the City of Cedar Rapids, and the Schools tasked primarily with studying youth violence and making recommendations on how to curb it. We had to move heaven and earth to arrive at this point but after a while, no one will remember why it was such a hard slog, because it will not matter. What will matter in the end is that this community ultimately decided to be brave and dedicated energy and resources to curbing violence and poverty. We have not committed enough to this effort just yet, but I am confident we will get there.

Finally, we partnered with the City of Cedar Rapids and Iowa Legal Aid on hosting Linn County's first ever Expungement and Employment Barriers Resource Clinic. Dozens of area attorneys dedicated their time and expertise to put on the largest expungement clinics ever held in the

entire state. This one-day event helped over one hundred individuals not only clean up their records, but law students from the University of Iowa, our friends at the League and the ACLU helped individuals with getting their voting rights restored. Other social service agencies set up shop there too and offered help where they could. It was an inspiring day; government and the public sector at its finest.

A New Era of Progress

As we look to the future, we recognize that some things have to be believed, in order to be seen. And good leaders must be courageous enough to put a stake in the ground and make bold declarations, signaling their intent to do the hard things; to make meaningful and lasting change.

I offer to you a few of our intentions going forward:

1. Our government will continue to lead the way on an ambitious Fair Chance Hiring campaign. We will work with the Economic Alliance and the City of Cedar Rapids to educate area businesses on the benefits of these practices and encourage them to join a growing coalition of employers who fully understand the dignity of work

and how barriers – some of which we can have a role in deconstructing – prevent good people from getting a job. Last year, we became the first county in this great state to “Ban the Box,” prompting other counties and governments to follow suit. We have implemented other trainings to help our managers select qualified candidates without bias. We have grown and diversified our applicant pool, and demonstrated once again, that government can be a catalyst for change.

2. Another staggering challenge that governments must address is food insecurity. Recent reports show that there are about 341,890 Iowans that are food insecure⁴. Just under one third of that figure gives us the number of children in this state who lack reliable access to a sufficient amount of nutritious food. Solving food insecurity, like most hard problems, requires more work than any one government can do alone, but until we get to a point where we are all committed to addressing the underlying issues that lead to conditions like food insecurity, there are some actions we can

⁴ REPORT: *Map the Meal*. Feeding America, 2019.

take to provide relief in the meantime. During our last budgeting process, this Board appropriated funds to begin a Food Rescue Program. We will leverage new technologies that enable us to create a digital network of grocers, restaurants, and markets who have available foods that they are no longer using. Instead of letting it go to waste, we will gather the food and deliver it to people and organizations that serve and house food-insecure individuals. We will bring this program online – in partnership with our Department of Public Health and the Food Systems Council – in the upcoming fiscal year. This effort combined with our support of programs like Meals on Wheels, will make a small – but meaningful impact – in the fight to end food insecurity in our communities.

3. Finally, Linn County will work with other governments and community partners to develop a program that would make achieving a college education a reality for those students who may not otherwise be able to afford it. We have yet to determine the specifics or even identify all of the partners, but we have

agreed in our head and our hearts, that giving our students a chance to further their education is a worthy effort. Of course, an endeavor of this scale is complex and risky; but it is necessary. No great accomplishment has come without the chance of failure and the ominous presence of uncertainty. However, we do not call ourselves leaders because the job is easy and the problems are small. We do this work because it calls on all of us to rise to the challenges of our time.

- According to a 2018 Existing Industry Report put out by the Economic Alliance, 82% of responding employers noted that they are experiencing trouble recruiting talent to their organizations.
- 40% of respondents noted that the number of unfilled positions at their companies are increasing.

A comprehensive economic development strategy should most certainly include governments and the private sector working together to grow our own well-trained future employees. If we are to meet the

demand of our growing economy, surely we can understand the wisdom of guaranteeing at least two years of higher education, especially in the fields and disciplines that our employers are telling us they need.

We can do this. We can and we must. It not only makes good economic sense, but it is the right thing to do. Within the next three to five years, Linn County will work with all stakeholders to see to it that this program becomes a reality.

Yes, the state of the county is strong. We are in excellent fiscal health.

We are addressing the hard problems and we are doing our best to plan for and anticipate the challenges of the future. However, we can be even stronger. We can be a more welcoming community. We can become a more equitable community. We can commit ourselves to eradicating poverty and lessening institutional harm, but it is going to take a little more courage. It is going to take more leadership and meaningful investment. It will pose before all of us the essential question: what kind of community do we want for ourselves and others? We must figure out how to care as much about the life and wellbeing of our fellow man as much as we care about our own.

This is an ideal politics, but the closer we come to this ethic, the more clearly we will understand that a good society – one that is fair and equal – is founded on justice and compassion; two virtues that I know we can all get behind. Instead of being consumed by the easy cynicism that would call this notion naïve, or politically untenable, I challenge us to be the outlier. In the spirit of Pericles' sentiment of the Athenians, our little community does not need to be like all the others. Instead we can be a model to the world of how to do it right.

We will be more than just the ghosts of our children's memories. We will be known forever as the wily alliance of leaders who brought forth lasting change; masters of our own tiny little universe right here in Linn County because we believed in our ability to be bigger than our differences; in our ability to get in the arena, trading our fear and egos for the courage and tenacity needed to fight the good fight.

We are prepared to go the distance alongside all of our partners in municipal government. Not just on the major items like flood protection – which we all recognize is a high priority for this area – but on every issue where our help is constructive. This is not an empty campaign promise; this is reality. Please do not buy into the stories that would

have you believe otherwise. Linn County engages in numerous projects and initiatives with our friends in local government and we will continue to do it because it is in the best interest of our residents and because we are all adults. However, adults sometimes disagree with one another and that is okay. In fact, our democracy was designed for disagreement. Legislative bodies are more innovative when they grapple with competing ideas put forth by imperfect women and men. These ideas are then given a forum to be heard and vetted, until after ample debate, a compromise can be found and workable solutions are rendered.

History is an unfailing judge, and it will give all generations to come a dispassionate view of our leadership. In the final analysis, we will be made to answer whether or not we did all we could for the most vulnerable; whether we were fair and just in our dealings; whether we found courage during the hard moments.

Therefore, let us work to make our society better not for bragging rights or to cement our legacies. We work to make our society better because it is a noble cause, and it is the right thing to do and the generations that will come after us are counting on us to get it right. If we give

ourselves to this, history will be forgiving of our errors and will hold in even greater esteem, our successes. If we believe in this future, surely we will come to see it.

In his novella entitled *The Middle Years* – a story about how this life is much bigger than the material things; the fame the glory – the author Henry James provides a mantra that I have been meditating on for a few years now. In my view, it speaks to the essence of public service. I will leave it with you to think about:

We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. Our work is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art. Thank you all.