



Linn County, IA

State of the County - April 20, 2016

Presented by:

**Ben Rogers, Chairperson
Linn County Board of Supervisors, District 3**

Linn County, Iowa

I want to thank you and welcome you to this year's annual State of the County. The most valuable asset we have is time and I am grateful you are choosing to spend your time with us today. I would like to thank the wonderful volunteers from the League of Women Voters who have helped organize this event, now in its 11th year, and their continual efforts to improve citizen engagement in government and within the civic process.

My name is Ben Rogers and I am this year's chair of the Linn County Board of Supervisors. As chair I have the high privilege and distinct honor to present to you the State of the County. For this year's address, I wanted to change the format so you could hear from your other county elected leaders on the issues facing their offices. So, following my address, the County Attorney, Auditor, Recorder, Treasurer and Colonel John Stuelke, on behalf of Sheriff Gardner, will each speak for a few minutes about their respective offices.

I hope you all had a chance to 'vote' by ballot or on our new touch screen voting machines on some survey questions. It is important for our organization to listen to the voice of the customer and I will read the results at the end of today's presentation.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to thank the elected officials throughout Linn County who are in attendance today. As a point of personal privilege, I would like to introduce my colleagues on the Board of Supervisors: Brent Oleson, John Harris and Jim Houser.

One name missing is Linda Langston. On March 31, Linda announced her resignation from the Board of Supervisors effective April 15 and she is not able to join us as she has started her new position as Director of Strategic Relationships with the National Association of Counties in Washington, D.C. NACo is the largest county advocacy group in the country and Linda previously served as President of NACo from 2013-2014.

Linda was first elected to the Board of Supervisors in 2003. She was, and remains only the fourth woman ever elected to the Linn County Board of Supervisors. In fact, this is the first time since 1973 that a woman has not been on the Linn County Board of Supervisors.

Linda has long been a champion and passionate advocate for people with mental health challenges and disabilities, for the arts and cultural community, flood recovery, resiliency and public health.

Linda was considered one of the go-to officials during flood recovery. Her relationships and contacts within key federal agencies, Congress and the White House provided invaluable leverage in funding, legislation and attention to our community. During her NACo presidency and extensive travels, Linda brought national exposure to Linn County's flood recovery and rebuilding efforts, to our quality of life initiatives and to our strong fiscal stability. She frequently reported back to the Board how amazed other counties were in what Linn County was able to accomplish.

Linda will long be remembered for her many accomplishments, but a lasting imprint will be improving Linn County's resiliency. Resilient Counties was Linda's NACo Presidential initiative. Resiliency is more than preparing for the next natural disaster. Resiliency is the ability to anticipate and adapt to all types of change, to be flexible and responsive. It's making connections and relationships before a crisis and continuing to nurture and strengthen those relationships into the future.

One of the hallmarks of an effective leader is one who leaves an organization in better condition than when they found it. Through her steadfast leadership, tireless advocacy and unapologetic passion, Linda leaves Linn County stronger, more resilient and better equipped to provide services with greater effectiveness and efficiencies. Linda's 14 years on the Board of Supervisors is a legacy we can all be proud of. While she is not with us today, could you please join me in thanking Linda for her years of dedicated and loyal public service and best wishes for her new role at NACo.

In keeping with the theme of improvement, this past year Linn County has embarked on an endeavor to transform and improve how we serve you—our customers. Through recent strategic planning and an ongoing investment in employee training and development, we are undergoing a culture transformation to become more customer-centered, to use transformational strategies that will improve operations, and to become more effective and efficient. We are guided by our new five-year strategic plan that will focus on the following strategic outcomes:

- 1) Customer Satisfaction
- 2) High Quality of Life
- 3) Financial Health

As an organization, our top priority is **customer satisfaction** for you, our most valuable customers. We also recognize that in order to become a higher performing organization, internally, we have to treat each other like our most important customers because no one accomplishes a lofty goal by themselves. We need the support and cooperation of our fellow team members.

This transformational shift of creating a customer-centered culture and implementing principles of business to improve our operations sets us apart us from other counties in the nation. We have all the right ingredients to become the best, most customer-centered county in the nation. I truly believe that. It won't happen overnight, but I believe it can happen. This change will challenge us to look at what we do more like a business. For instance, I will make reference throughout this speech to Linn County products. You may be asking yourself what product does Linn County produce?

A product is something that is a deliverable, can be made plural with an 's', is countable and specific. Using that definition, we have thousands of products at Linn County and that fact alone means we have to review our products and make sure we have the right products for our customers' needs and expectations.

To assist us in this process, Linn County has partnered with the Iowa Quality Center to bring transformational strategies into our products and processes, such as Lean processing, continuous improvement, quality control/assurance and 5S to name a few. We held an energizing management training with nationally acclaimed speaker and author, Ted Garnett of PS Culture Matters, a culture assessment and improvement firm based right here in Cedar Rapids. We have held employee workshops with Rob Lawton, a renowned consultant and author on creating a customer centered culture, to guide Linn County to implement quality, innovation, excellence and connecting the voice of the customer. Transforming our culture and becoming a higher performing organization has the full support of the Board of Supervisors, and the support of the elected officials, department heads, managers, front line employees and the unions.

What does this mean for you? It means a local government that will put itself in your shoes to better understand the experience of the end-user and challenge our own biases on how we think we can best provide services.

It means an organization that will do more to measure outcomes, manage data, align products with customers' expectations, innovate and improve those products to meet our customers' needs and to be relevant for the times we live in. Most importantly, it means an organization that fosters an environment that welcomes the risk of ideas.

I would like to highlight some of the transformational projects we have created to better serve our customers.

Linn County's Planning and Development department implemented a Lean process for its new housing permit application and cut the wait time by over half. Before the Lean initiative, a customer had to wait eight business days for a permit to be approved. After reviewing the product (the permit), scrutinizing the process, observing the total hours or days of touch time and number of staff interactions, Planning and Development was able to reduce the process to just three days. This improvement means less wait time for the approval of a permit and creates minimal disruption to the building schedule. This simple process demonstrates time, money and resources can be saved by simply asking the question "why" throughout each step of a process.

By asking "why" and putting ourselves in our customers' shoes, we also discovered that residents applying for building, entrance, well and septic permits for new house constructions had to go to three different county departments and buildings: Planning and Development, located at the Public Service Center; Public Health located near Roosevelt Middle School; and Secondary Roads located out on Highway 13 and County Home Road.

If there was an error in the process, a resident may have to make multiple trips to each department. This was simply unacceptable and because of inter-departmental collaboration, by this summer, residents will have a one-stop shop to apply for all three permits.

In last year's State of the County, Linda spoke about our Public Health Department receiving a prestigious national accreditation from the Public Health Accreditation Board. Linn County Public Health is the only public health agency in Iowa, and at the time, only the 50th agency in the nation, to be accredited. Linn County Public Health achieved this rare status in part, by implementing transformational strategies like quality assurance, quality improvement, continuous improvement and lean processing to improve the products that make Linn County a healthier community.

And in a few moments, you will hear Linn County Treasurer Sharon Gonzalez talk about the transformational strategies she has implemented to reduce customer waiting time at the Treasurer's Office and streamline operations to improve customer satisfaction.

Understanding the customer experience is not just words we say; it is principles put into action. I believe strongly in putting myself in our customers' shoes and I took it upon myself to become the end-user of one of Linn County's products and to challenge my biases and assumptions on how that service was delivered.

Linn County has thousands of products for me to choose from. I could have paid my property taxes online, purchased a radon testing kit from Public Health, taken a ride on our para-transit buses for people with disabilities to get to and from work, or renewed my passport at the Recorder's Office.

With all those products and services at my disposal, it was only natural for me to ask Sheriff Gardner... to tase me.

Last year, after months of harassing and calling the Sheriff chicken for not tasing me, he had me come to the Sheriff's Office, lie down in a padded room and connected 50,000 volts to my body. You may be asking yourself the very question my wife asked me... "why?"

I thought I could win her over with the argument that this was the only time I was going to be tased and not hear the phrase "you have the right to remain silent." She didn't buy that argument. I then told her I was putting myself in the customer's shoes to better understand the experience. She didn't buy that either. Honestly, I just wanted to see what it was like. Plain and simple.

This is what 50,000 volts at 25 watts for five seconds looks like, or what I like to call being customer-centered!

[Play video]

As the end-user of that product, I can report back to you that I did not like that experience one bit! However, in all seriousness, understanding what our customers experience and changing the lenses through which we view how we provide services is vital to our organization's ability to produce a better product that meets your needs and exceeds your expectations.

Linn County's second strategic goal is a **high quality of life**.

Quality of life is an important factor in determining a county's success. Linn County offers a wide variety of products and services to help residents achieve a higher quality of life. These include exceptional public services and infrastructure that promotes public safety, environmental protection, personal health and opportunities to enjoy life.

One of our most popular products is our system of award winning county parks. Would it surprise you to learn that Linn County welcomes over 1 million visitors to our county parks every year? These visitors contribute more than \$20 million in economic development spending in the communities that surround our parks. If you have children, then I highly recommend visiting Squaw Creek Park's newest playground that received the 2015 "Best Playground Award in the Nation" by Play World Systems.

My wife and I took our 4-year-old there recently, and I had so much fun I was the one throwing a temper tantrum when we had to leave, not our 4-year-old. It was awkward for the other children and families that were there. Trust me; it is that great of a playground. We also took him to Wickiup Hill last Sunday and I am so thankful we have a place like Wickiup for children to explore the outdoors, learn about nature and become more connected to the basics of life.

Achieving a higher quality of life is also more than community amenities and attractions. For me, it is creating an environment that works to dismantle barriers and obstacles that restrict residents from being more fully engaged, invested and woven into the fabric of what makes our community great.

You may recall that last year Linn County sold the historic Mott Building located on the river bank next to the Cedar Rapids Police Station. The proceeds from the sale of this building presented a unique opportunity for the Board of Supervisors to use this money to impact quality of life initiatives throughout the community above and beyond our \$200,000 economic development line item within our budget.

As many of you know, I am passionate about addressing issues related to mental health and disability services. One of the projects we funded with the sale of the Mott Building—and one I am most proud of—is our investment of \$100,000 to the Arc of East Central Iowa and their collaboration with Project Search to help individuals with disabilities become competitively employed.

Project Search is an international organization whose primary objective is to secure competitive employment for people with disabilities. The Arc, in partnership with St. Lukes Hospital and Project Search, created internships for 10 people with various levels of disabilities to learn how to become successful in the workplace. These individuals participated in three, 3-month internship rotations in different areas within St. Lukes. Each day before their shifts began, the interns spent one hour learning soft skills about the expectations in the workplace and spent an hour after their shift talking about their experiences.

After the nine-month program concluded, nine out of 10 of the interns received job offers within the hospital and in other community businesses. One of the graduates is now working 38 hours per week with benefits. These individuals had not been competitively employed before. At the graduation ceremony, parents tearfully remarked how they never thought their child could ever have a job due to the level of their disability. They simply thought it was not possible. But when opportunity and possibilities meet, amazing things can happen.

These kinds of programs are critical because the landscape for employing people with disabilities is changing due to federal regulations. Options of Linn County is a name familiar to many of you in the room. It is a service that has been in existence for 50 years. One of the programs within Options is the sheltered workshop for adults with developmental and physical disabilities. The sheltered workshop is an environment where Options consumers can work on various jobs for local companies.

The federal government views sheltered workshops as segregating people with disabilities from the public, and on June 30 of this year, the sheltered workshop will close. While the closing of the workshop is not the outcome many of us wanted, it is not the end of Options of Linn County. Options is changing to meet the new federal rules while still serving people and families that have been part of the program for many years by expanding its day habilitation program for adults with developmental disabilities. The expanded program offers more choices in daily activities, including group activities in the community

and community-based volunteer opportunities. The volunteer work allows the consumers to work on projects like stocking the Veteran Affairs food pantry, helping deliver Meals on Wheels to seniors or cleaning donated books for the Cops 'n Kids book program with the Cedar Rapids Police Department. These volunteer opportunities give Options consumers the same sense of purpose and satisfaction we all get when we volunteer our time for a meaningful cause.

Linn County will continue to work together in common cause with other municipalities and the private sector to make Linn County a healthier, more vibrant and inclusive community for all, no matter a resident's age, ability or geography. Linn County is where I choose to raise my family because it is the best place in the world to raise a family. I have traveled the world and I am always reminded of why I choose to make Linn County my home. We live in a community that is unfinished and what a great gift that is to shape and change it for the next generation.

Our third and final strategic priority is **Financial Health**. Linn County is committed to maintaining excellence in budgetary and financial management.

Linn County's fiscal strength and stability is the direct result of day to day oversight of Linn County's budget and budget priorities. It is what sets us apart from many other counties.

We have the two best finance and budget personnel in the state of Iowa: Dawn Jindrich and Steve Tucker. Through their guidance, the Board of Supervisors has been able to keep our levy rate the same for the past three years despite slower valuation growth and reduced revenue from commercial and industrial tax bases. In fact, our levy rate is the second lowest among our comparable counties in Iowa.

Linn County's financial health is the envy of the state and Linn County has been recognized nationally for our innovative budgeting practices and fiscal management. For 18 years in a row, Linn County has achieved a Aaa bond rating—the highest level bond rating from Moody's Investors Service. Only Linn and Polk Counties have a Aaa bond rating in Iowa and this allows us to take advantage of historically low interest rates. In addition, we have received budgetary excellence awards from the Government Finance Officers Association for 20 years in a row.

The Linn County Board of Supervisors will continue to implement practices and policies that maintain Linn County's strong, stable and resilient financial health.

In closing, the state of our County remains strong and will be strengthened by the principles of a customer-centered culture, transformational leadership and having many more conversations with our customers to learn how we can better serve you and become a more dynamic organization. This is a great journey we are on and I look forward to you, our customers, experiencing the changes we are making and seeing your government continuously improve to meet your needs and exceed your expectations.