

# STATE OF THE COUNTY OF LINN 2018

---



Presented by:

**John Harris, Chair**

**Linn County Board of Supervisors , District 5**

Linn County, Iowa

May 30, 2018

Welcome, everyone. Thank you for being here with us today. I'm John Harris and this year's Chair of the Linn County Board of Supervisors.

I'd like to start by thanking the League of Women Voters who have organized today's event. They are tremendous advocates for civic engagement, and we all benefit from their dedication and hard work. Thank you.

I would also like to recognize our County Elected Officials who are here today. Please stand, if you would:

Supervisor Jim Houser

Supervisor Brent Oleson

Supervisor Ben Rogers

Supervisor Stacey Walker

Auditor Joel Miller

County Attorney Jerry Vander Sanden

Recorder Joan McCalmant

Treasurer Sharon Gonzalez and

Sheriff Brian Gardner

Former Supervisor Lu Barron is also joining us today. Please join me in welcoming Lu.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank all Linn County staff for the work you do on behalf of our residents every day.

And now, a disclaimer. Everyone has a disclaimer these days, don't they? If you don't have a disclaimer, perhaps you should get one. Mine is this...I am not a professional speaker. So, as we get started here today, I want to tell you that most likely the best part of this State of the County luncheon will be the food.

A question we sometimes hear in county government is “What does the Board of Supervisors do?” By the end of this lunch, everyone here should be able to answer that question. We’ll even make it easy for you by playing a short video.

[ **PLAY VIDEO** ]

Linn County government is not the Board of Supervisors, only. It includes the city governments throughout the County. If you are a member of city government in Linn County, please stand.

There are 18 cities and towns in Linn County, and I salute and thank those local governments for their work - and sometimes thankless efforts - to make Linn County a safe and prosperous place to live and work. I want to thank and acknowledge our co-workers in government, the Mayors and Council persons of Linn County!

I believe we also have some state legislators with us today as well as school board officials. Please stand. Thank you for joining us.

Today I want to walk you through the past, then into the present, and finally get out my crystal ball and look a bit into what’s to come.

As many of you know, this is the last State of the County address when you will see five Supervisors for at least the next six years. Perhaps in six years the voters will vote again on what’s right....And that’s five. But come January, there will be three.

Prior to the 2008 election, the voters decided that five Supervisors was the right number, and Supervisors Rogers and Oleson joined Supervisors Houser, Langston and Barron in January 2009, six months after the Great Flood of 2008. And thank goodness and thank God for those five. They set about the huge chore of putting Linn County back together again. We lost two County buildings in the 2008 Flood. Clean-up and repair carried on for those buildings we could save.

All-in-all eight buildings were repaired and improved; two new buildings were constructed; and we sold two historic buildings to private development: the Mott Building, which is now loft apartments along the Cedar River near downtown, and the Witwer Building, which is now the White Star Alehouse in downtown Cedar Rapids. Both of these historic buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

For those of us who were here in 2008, we know all too well the destruction that was left by the flood. My own home in Palo was among those flooded. But we are blessed with our Iowa resolve to work hard and get back up when we are down.

A FEMA worker told me, “We go all over the country helping with flood and hurricane recovery. But we’ve come to love Iowa and Iowans more than any other place in the nation. It’s here in Iowa where we have seen the hardest working people and neighbors helping neighbors.”

During that time of rebuilding our infrastructure, the Board of Supervisors worked to minimize the cost to taxpayers as much as possible. The total cost to repair and rebuild County buildings was \$61 million, and through the creative efforts of the Board of Supervisors in working with the State and federal governments, the total cost to local taxpayers was \$11.5 million.

This included two new buildings designed to serve specific needs of the public: The Community Services Building that houses Linn County's human and social service departments, and the Juvenile Justice Center. The cost also included customer-focused improvements to our renovated buildings that are now LEED-certified and energy efficient.

While recovering and rebuilding, other needs had to be met like where the county government could temporarily relocate, and getting important infrastructure repaired and functional.

One example was Secondary Roads. 200 roads needed attention throughout the county due to flood damage. Our dedicated staff worked 16-hour days and, within five days, 197 roads were restored to traffic level. Lewis Access Road, which crosses the Cedar River southwest of Center Point, is shown here. While our team worked hard to repair damaged roads, this particular one took a bit longer than five days. Lewis Access Road lost more than a quarter of a mile of road. It took several weeks of hauling from quarry to get it up to grade, a month to make it open to traffic, and another year to complete work that returned it to pavement and stable slopes.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention that next month is the 10-year anniversary of that epic flood. We have come so far as a community, through struggles and challenges. We are resilient, and strong, and we have much to be proud of. Linn County is a proud sponsor of the Epic Rebirth event on June 13 that will celebrate our community's achievements during the past 10 years.

You know, I often talk about the three stages that a flood survivor goes through: the nightmare, the bad dream, and the bad memory. I hope we are in the bad memory stage, but it still stings to remember 10 years ago.

And now, today. I believe that Linn County's tradition of excellence continues. Despite the challenges of the 2008 Flood, the County levy rate has remained stable for the past 10 years, as shown in this graph.

County elected officials and department managers have worked to sustain their operations and essential services under this frugal budget. And I know this isn't easy and has required much effort. We have also retained our Triple A bond rating, which is a testament to our financial stewardship.

I also believe that the current Board of Supervisors is the most capable, diverse and caring group of elected officials I have had the privilege of working with in my 25 years of public service. And despite our diverse backgrounds, we have, most of the time, joined together as one united Board to tackle issues like mental health, infrastructure and public safety.

Here we are - your Board of Supervisors. What started as a joke turned into a contest of who was the cutest pre-teen. You might notice that two of the pictures were taken before the

invention of color film.

In preparing for today, I asked each Supervisor what they are most proud of during their tenure on the Board.

Brent Oleson's passion is conservation, parks, trails and nature. He's also an attorney which adds to his unique contributions. Brent's most memorable accomplishment as a Supervisor is the voter-approved Linn County Water and Land Legacy Bond which will address water quality, parks & trail expansion, and address future conservation measures far into the future. The \$40 million bond issue was put before Linn County voters in 2016 who overwhelmingly approved it at nearly 75% of the vote.

Stacey Walker champions improving the human condition for those who struggle in our community. He has a great rapport with our young population, and introduced the County's first ever Future Leaders of Linn County Day last month to answer the question our students and many of you often wonder about, "Just what does a Supervisor do?" - to which you now know the answer thanks to our video. Supervisor Walker said he is proud of Linn County's commitment of \$100,000 to the Safe, Equitable and Thriving Task Force priorities; Linn County's proclamation affirming support for religious and ethnic minorities; and supporting Linn County's effort to raise the minimum wage.

Jim Houser can recite chapter and verse about anything that has to do with the history of the County. And we all know that there is much to learn from history. In Jim's 23 years as Supervisor, he has served as Board liaison to virtually every Linn County department, and, among other responsibilities, is now serving on the Public Health's Opioid Steering Committee. He's willing to assist with any problem encountered with our Facilities Department and knows a lot about roads and vehicles and law enforcement, as he has served as a reserve Sheriff's deputy for nearly 40 years.

Ben Rogers' heart is with our citizens who are physically and mentally challenged, those who are homeless, and all who need a hand up. He is proud of voting to raise the minimum wage in Linn County; spearheading Linn County's Customer-Centered Culture initiative with department heads and staff; and securing funding to create a behavioral health Access Center in partnership and collaboration with both area hospitals, mental health and substance abuse providers. The access center will more adequately and appropriately treat people with mental illness and substance abuse issues, and divert them from the more expensive and often less effective levels of service such as emergency rooms and jail.

That brings us to me. And what gives me pride over the last eight years? It's the opportunity to use my position to help in time of great need. For example, I've had a hand in assisting in storm relief for Toddville and Prairieburg after tornadoes, and making rural roads safer by leading the process to control 19 rural intersections by providing additional signage. I like to think that being involved in city government in Palo for 15 years allows me to represent the rural point of view to

the Board.

Linn County has achieved a number of successes in just this past year. All of them can be traced back to the three objectives in our strategic plan, and those are:

- Customer Satisfaction
- Quality of Life, and
- Financial Health

This month we broke ground on the new Linn County Public Health & Child and Youth Development Building, also known as the Harris Building.....No, not named after me. I could never hold a candle to the people it's named after. It's named after Dr. Percy and Lileah (Luh-lee-ah) Harris, a couple well known in Cedar Rapids for their lifetime of dedication and service to health and education, as well as their pioneering civil rights advocacy.

The contractor for this building was selected using what's called a lease-purchase agreement. This process entails a few added steps to the traditional "low bid" procedure, which I won't go into today. Simply stated, the lease-purchase process emphasizes the use of local labor for construction. We expect to see the Harris Building completed in October 2019 and whoever delivers this State of the County next year will have some dandy pictures of the building's progress.

With a groundbreaking ceremony scheduled for tomorrow at noon, we will soon to be watching the construction of the Prospect Meadows baseball/softball complex. The facility is expected to open up next spring. Phase 1 will include eight fields, plus a Miracle Field for persons with special needs. Phase 2 is expected to be finished in 2023 and will include an additional eight fields to the complex.

With Prospect Meadows, our youth will have a state of the art facility in our own back yard adding to the quality of life in Linn County. And, with the tournaments that Prospect Meadows will bring to the area, it will be a real boost to our local economy. It is anticipated that when Prospect Meadows is fully operational, it will account for up to \$20 million to the local economy per year. With most of the tournament teams staying from 1-4 nights in the area, it will also bring thousands of hotel rooms to Linn County, as its anticipated that up to 60,000 out-of-area tourists will attend Prospect Meadows for tournaments annually.

In addition to leasing the land to Prospect Meadows, Linn County is contributing \$1.5 million toward the project. An audit completed this year by Sports Facilities Advisory, LLC found the project feasible and demonstrates a strong likelihood for success.

This summer, Linn County expects to issue the first bonds for the Water and Land Legacy project that voters overwhelming approved - by almost 75% - in 2016. This level of support highlights the importance Linn County residents place on water quality, natural resources, parks

and trails. The issuance of bonds will create \$40 million over the next 10 to 20 years for the purposes of protecting sources of drinking water and the water quality of rivers and streams; acquiring and protecting natural areas for floodwater storage and wildlife habitat; and park improvements and trails. The Board of Supervisors appointed a Water and Land Legacy Bond Public Review Board to review and monitor the use of Water and Land Legacy Bond proceeds for compliance with the purposes stated on the ballot.

Earlier this year, Linn County received a Gold designation from the national SolSmart program for making it faster, easier, and more affordable for homes and businesses to go solar. SolSmart is a national organization funded by the U.S. Department of Energy that helps local governments develop solar energy in their communities. The SolSmart Gold designation recognizes Linn County for its leadership in encouraging solar energy growth and removing obstacles to solar development.

One of Linn County's ongoing priorities is enhancing customer satisfaction and workplace culture. This has been a focus of ours for a few years now.

As part of Linn County's commitment to a Customer-Centered Culture, we created a Culture Coordinator position dedicated to advancing this work. This position is in our Human Resources department and coordinates programs, trainings, projects and activities related to Linn County's Customer-Centered Culture.

We also added three new positions in the Treasurer's Office to better serve our growing customer base. This is Linn County's busiest office, annually serving more than 100,000 customers.

We also created a Service Coordinator position in our Veteran Affairs office. This outreach position is primarily serving our rural veterans who have transportation or other mobility barriers that prevent them from accessing services in our VA office in Cedar Rapids.

Options of Linn County successfully met—a year and a half ahead of schedule—the new federal requirement that all Medicaid funded programs that provide day habilitation for people with disabilities must do so in integrated settings and be person-centered. Staff developed a dynamic approach to providing services by integrating client activities throughout the department, increasing the number of large group activities and offering community-based activities to a broader spectrum of Options clients. At the conclusion of our successful site review, Options staff asked the reviewers if there was another program they could benchmark that meets the requirements. The reviewers' response was, "You're it."

The Linn County Auditor's Office is working to maintain the security of election systems by reviewing the office's cybersecurity procedures. The office is also preparing for changes brought about by the Elections Modernization & Integrity Act (Voter ID Act) and training poll workers on the new regulations mandated by the new state law, which include asking voters for ID at the polls. Elections staff are committed to doing all they can to ensure your voting experience is efficient and secure.

Public safety is a top priority and function of government. In Linn County, public safety and legal services make up the largest portion of our budget - a full 25%. Our Sheriff deputies take seriously their mission to protect the lives and property of our citizens and are often recognized with life saving awards. At Sheriff Gardner's request, the Board of Supervisors approved six new deputy positions for next fiscal year to meet the growing needs of the department and their service to you. The Linn County Sheriff's Office continues to embrace department-wide training designed to build positive community relationships through engagement, collaboration, trust and respect. The trainings focus on crisis intervention, leadership, ethics, and stress resilience.

The Linn County Attorney's Office has engaged in a series of meetings with local leaders and law enforcement officials in a collaborative effort to consider and offer proposals to improve the **criminal justice system. This group is considering strategies and measures designed to** strengthen police-community relations, promote public safety and improve equality and fairness in the justice system.

Just last month, the Linn County Board of Health approved the formation of a steering committee to address the public health crisis associated with opioid use disorder. For the last two years, Linn County Public Health has been working with local, state, and federal partners to find solutions to lessen the impact of opioid addiction in Linn County. The steering committee has already met twice and is a positive step forward in our efforts to combat this nationwide public health issue.

Safe and efficient transportation infrastructure is also a key element of county government. Each year, Linn County reviews and prioritizes road construction and maintenance projects for our 1,135 miles of roads. Nearly 30 road construction projects are expected to take place in 2018, all in an effort to improve the safety and travel experience for you and all who travel on Linn County roads. These projects are funded from multiple sources including local, state and federal funding, Local Option Sales Tax proceeds and the State fuel tax. You can visit our website and sign up to receive notification of our road construction projects.

Since 1998, the Linn County Secondary Road Department has received native seed through the University of Northern Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center. The program is administrated by the Iowa DOT on behalf of the Federal Highway Administration. This plant material has been used along primary and secondary roads to provide weed and erosion control, reduce stormwater runoff, reduce snow drifting and provide food and habitat for pollinators and wildlife. Beginning this year, Linn County will make this native seed available to Adopt-A-Roadside sponsors to create even more roadside planting opportunities. We are always looking for more groups to adopt a roadside and this year, you can help create pollinator habitats while also helping us clean up our public rights of way.

For those of you who attended this luncheon last year, you might remember that Supervisor Oleson announced a call for a new County logo. We have spent the last several months working on this project as part of a larger rebranding initiative for Linn County. Implementation of this new look will begin this summer along with a redesigned website later this year that will make it easier for you to find the information you are looking for whether you are on a desktop or mobile

device.

And now my look toward the future and my advice for the three remaining Supervisors and County priorities, so no one drops the ball:

Linn County must continue to deliver on our mission of providing customers the most satisfying products while maintaining sound fiscal management and enhancing the quality of life in Linn County.

We must continue our progress to advance our strategic goals of customer satisfaction, high quality of life, and financial health.

The next three Supervisors must be diligent on spending and prudent with the levy rate as much as possible. Our strategic plan calls out our commitment to maintaining excellence in budgetary and financial management and demonstrating accountability to taxpayers through responsible budgetary decisions.

The Board must continue to cultivate our workplace culture where we live by our Core Values of open communication, accountability, respect, recognizing contributions, and creating a supportive and positive work environment. These core values translate into a positive experience for our **customers**. It's simple really. Let's just be nice to each other.

The County must care for those in need - our most vulnerable citizens. The state government has given that responsibility to counties, and it's one of our most important charges. We should never lose focus of that.

We have accomplished so much and have many things to be proud of in Linn County. These accomplishments are a credit to the more than 750 County employees who take pride in their work, are experts in their fields, and are committed to finding new and better ways to provide services.

While we take time to reflect on all that we have accomplished, we must continue to look forward, to see the vision of where we want to go and how we plan to get there, because there remains much work and opportunity before us. We must look for partnerships where they make sense, and find ways to work creatively with the City of Cedar Rapids to accomplish shared goals and visions.

We are all in this room today because Linn County matters to us. Let us all work together to make Linn County even stronger, and an even better version of the wonderful place it already is.

Thank you for your time today. In closing, a little advice for the future board, and also our other local decision makers.

I heard this poem at a John Denver concert in the 90's at the Five Seasons Center. I often think



of this poem in my private and public life when a problem needs to be dealt with. This is called "The Ambulance Down in the Valley."

Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,  
Though to walk near its edge was quite pleasant;  
Till over its side slid a Duke and a Prince,  
And it had fooled many a peasant.  
The people said something had to be done,  
But their projects did not at all tally;  
Some said, "Put a fence 'round the edge of the cliff,"  
Others, "An ambulance down in the valley."

The lament of the crowd was profound and so loud,  
As their hearts overflowed with great pity.  
But the Ambulance carried the cry of the day,  
As it spread to the neighboring cities.  
A collection was made to accumulate aid,  
And dwellers in highway and alley,  
Gave dollars and cents not to furnish a fence,  
But an ambulance down in the valley.

"For the cliff is all right, if you're careful," they said,  
"And, if folks ever slip and are dropping,  
It's not the tripping and sliding that hurts  
So much as the shock when they're stopping."  
And so on for years, as these mishaps occurred,  
Quick forth would those rescuers sally  
To pick up the victims who fell from the cliff,  
With their ambulance down in the valley.

Said one in his plea: "It's a marvel to me  
That you give so much greater attention  
To repairing results than to curing the cause,  
Why you'd much better aim at prevention.  
The mischief, of course, should be stopped at its source,  
"Come, friends and good neighbors let's rally;  
It makes far better sense to rely on a fence,  
Than an ambulance down in the valley."

"He's wrong in his head," the majority said,  
"He would end all our earnest endeavors!  
He's the kind of a jerk that would halt our good work;  
But we will support it forever.  
Don't we pick up them all just as quick as they fall?  
And treat them with care quite liberally?  
A superfluous fence is of no consequence,  
If the ambulance works in the valley?"

Well the story is queer as I've given it here,  
Though things oft occur which are stranger,  
More humane we assert to repair all the hurt,  
Than the plan of removing the danger.  
Before it all ends, it's time to begin,  
To attend to these things rationally,  
Yes, build up the fence, and let us dispense,  
With the Ambulance down in the valley.

Thank you all for coming today.