

City of Coshocton
State of the City
Monday January 25, 2016
Mayor Steven D. Mercer

Members of council, fellow elected officials, co-workers, guests and citizens, I want to start this year by acknowledging my wife Sharon, my immediate staff Jerry and Cherry, all the department heads, supervisors and all city staff, along with the other elected officials, who work together to make this city all it can be. Thank you!

As I consider the current State of the City, I look back and see the tremendous highs we experienced and the shocking low dealt to us by WestRock's closing. No one event, or series of events, will define us or determine our destiny, but they are merely a step in an ever changing world to help mold us into what we will become. As I see it, what occurred last year, parallels the scripture in I Corinthians chapter 12 that says, "For there is one body but many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body." Sound strange? Many parts make up a city, some by design, some by accident and some by default. Just as in our personal lives, cities experience mountaintops and valleys, positive and negative changes. We are surrounded by people that want to define changes from their perspective. Everyone's personal experiences help mold the way they see the world around them, and though some might see changes as the sky falling, others see a new door opening.

There's room for everyone in this city because we need each other to be complete. Each member, each business, each organization, needs to fulfill their mission and purpose. It takes uniquely different focuses and talents but never to the point where one says to the other, "I have no need of you". I call on all individuals and groups to work earnestly this year to direct their energies on pulling together to make a new Coshocton greater than the old one. We need constructive dialogue to add new perspective to old problems. Let's give each other plenty of room to contribute our value to that goal.

Let's review 2015, not with indifference, but with due respect for each of these accomplishments.

Starting with our financial picture, we ended 2014 with our general fund in the red by -\$22,000. However, by the end of last year, we finished with a \$268,000 positive balance. Two key factors attributed to that turnaround: increased Income Tax Revenue and the passing of a Safety Services Levy last May.

Our Income Tax Revenue has increased modestly 5 straight years until last year when it jumped 17.21%, much of that as a result of the safety services levy. \$430,000 was specifically dedicated to the safety fund. And what was the result of passing the 1/2% income tax for safety services? It reversed the projected staff and revenue reductions in the Sheriff contract. We were able to sign a new 3 year contract, increase deputies on the streets and plan for systematically replacing worn out cruisers. We also began the process of increasing everyone's security in city buildings and parks.

Our Public Works Department made remarkable achievements in the most visible city service, our streets. With partners like the County Commissioners, the County Engineer, ODOT, Ohio Public Works Commission and the Appalachian Regional Commission, we undertook our most aggressive paving schedule ever, spending over 3 million dollars in resurfacing and repairing projects. These include 4.9 miles of State Route 541 from the East to the West city limits, 8 blocks on Main Street, Clow Lane, Morgan Run, and a major slip on Cambridge Road. These

were made possible because of the matching money made available through the 5 year street levy passed in 2014. With the deplorable state of many streets, these key projects literally changed the attitude of how people felt about our community.

After more than 10 years in the making, the city and county finalized the agreement for us to accept all the currently connected water and wastewater lines outside the city limits, and to assume their remaining debt. Having the city own and operate the entire regional system will insure we will be a part of any future growth in or around the city and provide an expandable customer base. This agreement represents perhaps the most significant visionary action and forward thinking planning that will reap benefits to the city for decades to come.

Private, long term investments that were being made in 2015, included:

- The Kraft/Heinz expansion started in May. Investing over \$40,000,000 and adding 300+ new jobs is a shining star project making us the bacon capital of the universe.
- The McWane Corporation purchased a vacant warehouse and is investing over \$10,000,000 in a process to add a new product line and more jobs.
- Coshocton Grain, after the fire, choosing to rebuild their grain elevators at the current location, at a cost over \$10,000,000.
- Columbia Gas undertaking another upgrade project in Coshocton of 23,000 feet of new main service lines that adds over \$2,000,000 in taxable property.

And, on a smaller scale, but no less significant:

- Todd Salmans and wife Jackie, building a beautiful new dental facility.
- Philip Wagner Inc adding new offices and warehouse space.
- The Autumn Greens Condominium Project on Cambridge Road.
- The New Pizza Hut Plaza.

In October, Coshocton was notified by the Ohio Magazine, a longtime publisher in the travel and tourism industry, that we were selected as one of Ohio's 5 Best Hometowns. Chosen from this independent source, it confirmed statewide what we here already know about this great area.

Then in October came the WestRock announcement they were closing this paper mill. After consolidating only months earlier with RockTenn, it was obvious their plan was to shutter several locations. Unexpected to our community, this felt like a sucker punch to the stomach that left us gasping for air. The 150 year old plant was here since the Civil War and was still a profitable plant. Affecting the employees and their families along with the city, the aftershocks of this closing will be felt for years to come. As a paper mill, their process used nearly half of our total daily water production, thereby subsidizing one of the lowest municipal water rates in the state. We are in the process of implementing staffing and expense cuts in the Utilities Department. We have already reduced the annual budget from 3.7 million in 2015 to 2 million this year. However, that still leaves an operating shortfall that can only be filled with a rate increase – a very bitter pill to swallow, both for us who provide the service, and for our residents. But this is not the time to turn out the lights, as a few small members of the body have declared. The sky is not falling.

Coshocton has taken hit after hit as the corporate world continues to change. We aren't the same city of 75 years ago, or even 25, we are evolving into a new one. Change is hard and sometimes ugly. To the workers that lost their jobs, it was gut wrenching. Fortunately, many have already found new jobs, some are being retrained and yet others are still searching. We in public service have also anguished over this loss. But, we will go forward with the understanding that sometimes in the life cycle of businesses and communities, there must be necessary endings before there is room for new beginnings.

With what expectations can we now proceed into 2016? We will continue our aggressive paving and street maintenance. We have done the major roadways but there is much more to do. This

year we will be repaving Otsego Avenue from 7th Street to the railroad tracks, including redoing the berms, adding storm drains and culverts. We'll be paving on Highland and Fairview Boulevards, and 12th and Orchard streets. There will be extensive crack sealing to extend the life of marginal streets and continue the necessary patching.

In conjunction with improving the streets, the Tree Commission oversaw the continued removal and pruning of diseased and blighted trees along our public roads and parks. They coordinated with ODNR to hold a local Tree Academy class at COTC that successfully graduated 8 local residents. These efforts, combined with the group Coshocton is Blooming, have positioned the city to be eligible to be nationally recognized as a "Tree City USA".

In cooperation with the Commissioners, the state awarded us \$300,000 in a critical infrastructure grant to help upgrade major storm sewers throughout the city. This will include installing new storm drains at the intersection of Main and 7th Streets where there have never been any.

In long range planning, we are currently in the design stage with ODOT for major bridge replacements on Chestnut Street for 2018-19. The land bridge over SR 16 will create a totally different and welcoming look for those coming or passing through our area. The Three Rivers Bridge will be resurfaced with new sidewalks and decorative fencing to allow for safer pedestrian traffic and better viewing of the river. These projects will give the city a completely new and fresh appearance.

Finally, all these projects merge with my primary focus for the next 4 years:

"To improve our neighborhoods by fostering pride and revitalize business districts to attract new companies." We have a beautiful county with a historic city full of classic period architecture. The attraction of new business and industry is entwined with people's perception of the community. Our buildings, our houses, our streets and landscapes are part of the attraction to locate here. We have the elements that draw people to rural areas, but we have to maximize our assets and present them in the best possible light.

Over the last few months, council has passed legislation to strengthen our property codes and enact better methods to administer them. I hope we will soon establish the new Property Code Investigator position that will work both with complaint/compliance issues, and be proactive with the many vacant and orphaned properties, often left by deadbeat, out of state owners. All communities throughout Ohio have these issues, so we also will join that fight to stabilize neighborhoods, restore our downtown and help make Coshocton a business destination, not a bedroom community.

This will require working together as a whole body, each joint supplying its own valuable part, joined for the purpose of building up, to leave Coshocton's next generation better than ours.

In closing, as I often have repeated, our purpose here is to align ourselves in such a way to remind God of His promise to us in Jeremiah 29:11 – "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to Prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you Hope and a Future."

May God bless you and bless this city.

Thank you!

Mayor Steve Mercer