

January 19, 2016

## STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Tonight as I deliver my State of the City Address, I reflect back over this past year as Mayor, and realize the City has had a progressive year. We have had some struggles that have caused concern but overall it was a great year. I would like to take this opportunity to review some of our highlights.

Last year the City of Willmar saw its tax base increase by adding 12 new housing units and 5 duplexes. As we have heard, housing is a growing concern and the Kandiyohi County housing task force study shows need in every level of housing. This includes single-family housing as well as affordable and market-rate housing units. Our housing for our retired residents and those moving closer to care givers also sees demand that remains unmet.

The City saw an increase of \$35 million in total construction valuation with some of our larger projects being the continued renovations at Rice Hospital, update and remodel for Highland Apartments, MnDOT building update and additional office space, Chappell Central and Willmar Poultry expansions, Bethesda Housing which has a large remodel and new building project that will allow combining their two long term care facilities, along with our city-owned Rice Rehab facility, and the Barn Theater project. These projects took a strong community vision and many staff hours to bring to the table.

Our Building code staff should be commended for the work they do so we can keep these inspections local and not transferred to the State Building Code Offices.

Willmar is the recipient of one of the largest TIGER Grants in the nation. Our project partners have secured a \$10 million TIGER Grant for the Willmar Wye Project (rail by-pass). This project is one many folks have been working on for a few years and is a true public-private partnership. Working with our elected officials in Washington and St. Paul allowed us to secure this funding. Our local match, and that from BNSF, shows the willingness to look at opportunities that will bring safety to Willmar and our surrounding communities. Decreasing the pinch point in Willmar will allow commodities to be moved by rail to distribution hubs not only here in Minnesota, but Chicago as well. This project was highly rated by Governor Dayton and BNSF. This \$50 million project is slated to begin construction in early 2017. I'm grateful to our staff, namely Bruce Peterson, and all involved for their hard work to bring this project to completion. The ability to reroute train traffic along this bypass will benefit our community in many ways and increase safety in our railyard and community.

Other notable infrastructure projects in 2015 included the reconstruction and overlay of streets, our joint project with Kandiyohi on the parking lot reconstruct at the County Office Building, street lighting, and numerous infrastructure maintenance improvements. The City has improved 2.6 miles of our pathways in 2015; this and various underground utility projects were overseen by City staff for a construction valuation of \$1.8 million dollars. For 2015, the Public Works Department managed a seasonal snowfall over 30", as well as snow removal at our airport.

In 2015, the City accepted and adopted our updated Master Park Plan; this was done after numerous community meetings seeking input. Participation at these meetings allowed our citizens to be heard about what our current park conditions are and then have input on where we are going in the future. Having the majority of our park equipment exceeding 20 years of useful life is unacceptable, in my opinion, and a message our citizens expressed as well. We need an incremental and sustained plan to maintain and expand recreational opportunities here in West Central Minnesota. As you know, a plan that sits on the shelf doesn't do anyone any good.

I would like to thank our staff for obtaining \$97,500 in grant funding to replace some of our unsafe park equipment. As Council we have asked staff to leverage grant dollars so we can stretch our local dollars to improve our city parks! Job well done community education and rec staff, keep up the good work!

Our Community Education and Public Works staff provided outdoor winter entertainment at four skating and two hockey rinks this past year along with keeping access open so Robbins Island can be used by numerous mixed-facility users. This includes hiking, sledding, winter biking, ice fishing, cross country skiing, snowshoeing and the occasional disc golf pickup game. In the warmer months, staff assisted with shelter reservations at Robbins Island. These facilities were used about 100 times in 2015, 16 Showmobile reservations were taken, and I would like to thank Cal Miner for his dedication to this project prior to his retirement. Cal you will be missed at Music in the Park. Along with these events, numerous additional community activities were arranged and managed by our staff.

Ball Diamond and field preparations were made for over 650 soccer, football, baseball and softball games. The gun range in the newly renovated City Auditorium is another valuable Willmar asset that reopened this year and is a project we can all be proud of.

To continue beautification of our City, Public Works staff planted 165 trees and managed the Brush/Compost site. which accommodated over 14,000 visits this past season.

The Wastewater Treatment Facility saw the startup of the new MnWest Lift Station and Force main. Their Bio-Solids Program hauled nearly 6.4 million gallons of bio-solids to MPCA approved cropland this past year.

A couple highlights from the Wastewater Department include an award for Certificate of Commendation for outstanding operation, maintenance, and management of our Wastewater Treatment system. We also received the Minnesota Wastewater Treatment Facility Operational Award and various staff awards to include: Central Section State Class A Operator of the Year, Collection System Operator of the Year and Class B Wastewater Treatment Facility Operator of the Year. These awards are presented by industry peers and continue to show the caliber of staff we have working for us. Too many times we are quick to point fingers and should instead take time to commend our staff for a job well done.

The Public Works Department established and filled the position of Environmental Specialist to help manage and facilitate the many environmental/regulatory issues for the City. This position was one that will allow better management of our storm water system along with lightening the load in other areas across the city. We also filled the Assistant City Engineer and these two changes will allow this department to run with improved efficiencies.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has accepted our 20-year compliance schedule for our storm water permit renewal process allowing us to meet the new salty discharge limits required by the Comprehensive Watershed Management Plan being integrated into the new permit.

In 2015, the Willmar Police Department continued to serve the citizens of our community while sustaining a higher call load than the prior year.

Our Police Department was also able to restart its canine unit through donations from local businesses. Canine "Axel" is trained in narcotics detection, apprehension and tracking. The Police Department continues to interact and promote partnerships with citizens of the community. Increasing police presence in our downtown area has been well received. This was started following a request by business owners and I have received numerous compliments on their interactions and presence in our downtown.

A formal citizen recognition program was started to acknowledge citizens that provide assistance or perform heroic acts in Willmar. These awards are well received and have received positive coverage from our local press and the community members involved.

As most have noticed Police squad cars took on a new look in 2015 with a switch to Ford Police Interceptor Utility Vehicles from the traditional cruiser and there was a graphics change to a more traditional “black & white” look. Have you noticed the blue line on the back of these squads? Ask one of our officers what this represents and why it is important for us to proudly display this additional graphic! We are fortunate to have a highly respected Police Chief and I would like to thank Chief Felt for his dedication to our community.

The Willmar Fire Department again has a new Chief. Frank Hanson was hired as our new Fire Chief/Fire Marshal. Frank has 22 years of firefighting experience with the WFD and co-served for 19 years as a Police Officer with the City of Willmar. We welcome Chief Hanson to our leadership team and look to his leadership allowing us to continue with a paid on-call Fire Department.

Having a paid on-call department saves the city about \$45,000 per firefighter according to a study conducted by Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs and released this year. The study is “Empty Boots, Quiet Sirens” if you wish to review the report on your own. In 2015, the Fire Department applied for and received two State grants, \$13,000 to train personnel in Hazardous Materials Response and they also received \$26,000 to study a county-wide shared fire services report.

Today our fire department personnel totals 34, with an average of 8¾ years of service. The average response time from dispatch to on-scene was reduced from 8 minutes 45 seconds in 2014 to 7 minutes 35 seconds in 2015. With fire doubling in size every minute, this is a significant time savings. Property loss remains very close to same from 2014 to 2015 at \$467,000.

In 2015, our Emergency Management System was tested with the avian influenza crisis. Kandiyohi County was hit hard and the epi center of this National disaster. Of the 108 cases in the state, 40 of them were in Kandiyohi County. The Kandiyohi County Emergency Operation Center was ground zero for managing the statewide effort. Emergency Management Director Don Ericson stated it took a huge amount of cooperation from the City, County, State, Federal agencies and beyond to manage the situation. Mr. Ericson complimented the City stating a number of the departments were just a phone call away when needed. Good job to all involved in managing this terrible situation. It should be noted that local planning for this started a number of years ago and that preplanning and knowledge of the community partners allowed for a smooth operation as everyone already knew each other and mutual respect had been gained. Thank you to our EOC staff and our local business that stepped up to make this a successful operation.

Our community continues to serve as a regional center for West Central Minnesota. We are blessed with Rice Memorial Hospital and strong medical clinics in APMC and Family Practice Medical Group, all of whom are exploring new ways to work more closely together in this ever changing health care climate. By expanding physicians’ specialties and hospital coverage we will be able to meet demand placed on our region and serve our citizens well. The Willmar Cancer Center is one example of this continued partnership.

Vision 2040 continues to be engaged in our community’s future providing “Movies in the Park,” and two Leadership programs. This group of community-minded individuals has been instrumental in bringing us our dog park, the study on affordable housing, diversity, supporting our downtown and many more projects! As a result of the group’s work, Blue Cross Blue Shield will be investing significant dollars to promote a Willmar Healthy Living Initiative. I look forward to the continued work Vision 2040 is doing in our community and invite those interested to join in the vision. There will be another community report on February 29<sup>th</sup> so stay tuned to our local media outlets for more information and details on how you can be involved.

Our City ended the year with a new face at City Hall. We are extremely fortunate to have Larry Kruse as our new City Administrator. Larry comes to us with over 30 years of municipal experience. Larry, along with a very competent staff, manage the day-to-day operations of the City while we as Council focus on the policies to guide them in their daily decisions. Kevin Halliday worked hard under difficult conditions to keep our City operating during our transition between city administrators and I would like to thank him for his work as Interim City Administrator.

I have identified a few areas that our important to me in the coming year.

**First**, I want to thank the Council for what has been a good year. The Council dedicates a lot of time and effort to make Willmar a better place. I personally thank you for your dedication! As most know, the turmoil regarding the departure of our former City Administrator Charlene Stevens and the recall election fragmented our Community. Some time has passed, but those wounds continue to run deep. We all need to take ownership of that and do some healing. You have my commitment that I will do my part to bring our team together. I believe the Council is unanimous in wanting to hold a retreat and get down to the business at hand and details will be forthcoming.

**Second**, I want to hang our “Willmar is open for business” sign and make it real. We are the major economic engine for West Central Minnesota and our industrial park is ready for expansion and new businesses. Plans are on the drawing board for some industrial and commercial projects now, which just goes to show that if you build it, they will come. Growing existing industry and business is key to continued growth as a regional center. It is also important that we build strong public partnerships and continue positive working relationships with our joint EDC, Kandiyohi County and the Willmar Area School District. Having these strong relationships and working along with our business community we can, and will, make Willmar a great place to conduct business.

**Third**, we developed our Master Park Plan and we need to continue working our plan. We budgeted and approved \$706,000 which will enable us to get our plan moving. Spring is soon upon us and the Council needs to work our plan so we and our community have a clear vision for our park and recreation systems.

In closing, we have a great community! I look forward to serving as your mayor and I will do my part to make Willmar a better place to live, work and raise a family! Thank you and may God bless our City!

Marv Calvin  
Mayor for the City of Willmar