

In the Buskirk-Chumley Theater, 114 East Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, Indiana on Tuesday, April 09, 2024 at 7:00 pm with Council President Isabel Piedmont-Smith presiding over a Special Session of the Common Council.

COMMON COUNCIL
SPECIAL SESSION
April 09, 2024

Council President Isabel Piedmont-Smith called the meeting to order. She noted that the meeting would be considered adjourned when the Mayor Kerry Thomson’s State of the City remarks concluded. She then introduced Clerk Nicole Bolden to call the roll.

CALL TO ORDER [7:15pm]

Councilmembers present: Isak Nti Asare, Courtney Daily, Matt Flaherty, Isabel Piedmont-Smith, Dave Rollo, Kate Rosenbarger, Hopi Stosberg
Councilmembers absent: Andrew Ruff, Sydney Zulich

ROLL CALL [7:15pm]

Piedmont-Smith read a land and labor acknowledgement and introduced Mayor Kerry Thomson.

LAND AND LABOR
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT [7:17pm]

Mayor Kerry Thomson presented the State of the City Remarks (text provided by the Office of the Mayor), attached hereto.

STATE OF THE CITY REMARKS
[7:19pm]

The meeting was adjourned at 7:45pm.

ADJOURNMENT [7:45pm]

APPROVED by the Common Council of the City of Bloomington, Monroe County, Indiana upon this ____ day of _____, 2024.

APPROVE:

ATTEST:

Isabel Piedmont-Smith, PRESIDENT
Bloomington Common Council

Nicole Bolden, CLERK
City of Bloomington

Good evening. Clerk Bolden, City Councilors, members of our cabinet, distinguished guests, and my fellow residents...it is my honor and privilege to come to you for the first time as your Mayor – on this, my 100th day in office – to report on the state of this city that we all love so much.

As you all know, yesterday Bloomington welcomed thousands of guests to our community for a once-in-a-lifetime event – the total solar eclipse.

The city worked alongside the state, county, as well as our school corporation, IU, and other partners to pull this off and do it in style.

And, as this community has done time and time again, yesterday - despite the moon's best efforts - Bloomington's light shone through.

I want to thank everyone who helped make yesterday such a success – especially our parks, public works, and safety personnel. Thank you for the months of planning and a job exceedingly well done.

The eclipse gave us something hold in awe together, 4 minutes of astonishment as our skies darkened. As I sought a bit of shade yesterday, I was invited to sit with a family. Mylan and I got to talking about bullies and how they can make you feel, and also shared some ideas about how to get help, and how to create a community that works differently. I invited Myron Vergiels to share some poetry with you this evening.

Thanks Mylan, I hope you will join upcoming conversations as we work towards a kinder Bloomington for all of us.

You know what I noticed yesterday? Just before the eclipse, with only a tiny slice of sun left exposed, we still had full light. When darkness comes, it only takes a small light to overcome it.

With the eclipse behind us, it's now time for Bloomington to make even more history.

I want to highlight some of what we have to look forward to, and report what my administration has been working on over the past 99 days.

First, we built an incredible team.. A team of talent, hungry for innovation, and committed to service and collaboration.

From our wonderful Deputy Mayor to an experienced mix of new and familiar faces leading city departments, to the dozens and dozens of neighbors who raised their hands and are lending their time and expertise to serve on a board or commission.

And to all of our city employees, thank you for the amazing work you do for the city each and every day, often unseen. It is my great privilege to lead this group working to make our city better each day.

In my first days as mayor, I met with every city department to get feedback, learn about what my administration can do to support them, and encourage them to speak up, engage, and speak out.

I am so grateful for their dedication, honesty, and patience with me. To my city government colleagues, a heartfelt thank you.

One of the reasons I ran for this office was to bring more people to the table...to embrace new voices, perspectives, and lived experiences...and to work collectively to find solutions to the challenges we face.

While there is much more work to do on that front, in these first few months I am proud that we have indeed included more members of the community in discussions about our present and future. We ARE building a bigger and more inclusive table.

Recent town halls have been filled with people who have never been to a meeting in city hall. I've held listening sessions at homeless shelters, and resident advisory groups and collaboration sessions with council have targeted conversation to actually change the way we do government. When we need to create solutions together, we ought to be doing it in public, where we can and will create safe spaces to bring ideas.

Those tables are not always comfortable. But in Bloomington we must have the kind of conversations where we hear the hard truths and work through them together, because 3 minutes at the microphone doesn't solve problems, and often inflames them.

When we hear free speech at the microphone which turns to outright white supremacist and Nazi hate, we must speak against it. Ignorance and power plays are not supported in a city I lead, a city whose vibrancy, economic and social success depends on the vibrancy of a diversity of residents bringing your ideas, your talents, and your hearts to our community.

I am committed to continuing to change the paradigm of government. To face the challenges we see here in Bloomington head on, and to stay laser focused on those issues alone.

Beyond building our team, I have begun to implement new processes and safeguards to make sure our city government is operating at full power, and with a newfound commitment to customer service.

On my first day in office, I ordered an independent audit of the city's finances, and I look forward to sharing the findings with you as soon as they become available.

We also conducted a review of all of the city's ongoing litigation, our human resources practices and procedures, and constituent response times.

These and other analyses will bring changes and improvements to city government and I am excited to partner with my teammates at city hall and on the council to continue raising the bar of excellence and to make Bloomington's government work for its people.

We've dismissed cases, and taken a more collaborative approach to pending cases- working for wins for our community, not just for "our side". We're rapidly catching up on tardy State Board of Accounts audits, with one submitted and another nearly complete.

A central part of my campaign platform was making our government even more transparent and accessible. I'm pleased to report we've already made significant progress there.

I post videos on social media with key updates because it's important for a mayor to talk directly to her community.

I'm conducting a series of Traveling Town Halls, held throughout the city, to bring government directly to those we serve.

I want to thank Council President Piedmont Smith for participating in the first town hall, and I look forward to sharing the spotlight . . . and the public pressure . . . with all other councilmembers soon!

We also promised to improve and enhance the publication of reports and studies on our website so that residents and the press have timely and comprehensive access to the workings of city government.

The public posting of the employee compensation study, for example, was part of a concerted effort to ensure residents have access to the same information their decision-makers do.

And, tonight I am pleased to announce that former Mayor Mark Kruzan will lead a new Resident Advisory Panel on Open Government with a mission of continuing this new era of openness in city operations.

This team will work to identify how city government can be more transparent and responsive. Immediate steps will be to:

Conduct a public information audit to assess current practices and identify better ways of doing the public's business.

Draft a plan of action that leads to a more nimble turnaround of public information requests.

And, assess the city's various information portals including, most importantly, our website

We've also created several other resident-driven advisory committees, which add unique and important perspectives on major projects like Showers West, Hopewell, and others.

I look forward to the recommendations of these teams, on new and innovative ways in which to engage our residents and accomplish great things together.

At my core, I am a community builder.

I believe in the power of information sharing. Of Transparency.
Of Convening people to have open conversations to co-create solutions to the difficult challenges we face.

And, we have NO bigger challenge than our housing crisis.

There are too few affordable places to live in Bloomington and too many unhoused neighbors. This cannot continue. And it will not. Period.

To address this, I have tasked our team at the Department of Housing and Neighborhood Development with analyzing and implementing the recommendations of the 2020 and 2023 Housing studies to craft a comprehensive, city-wide housing plan.

It's 2024 and we're just now implementing a 2020 study. That tells you a lot about how we got here with regard to housing and homelessness in Bloomington. Studies do no good on a shelf. Plans inform action.

It is impacting every resident and every neighborhood in our city.

We must address it head on.

We can wait no longer.

We will wait no longer.

We must act.

And we will act.

I've directed staff to find every way to eliminate red tape, streamline our processes, and identify barriers the city may have put up unintentionally over the years, resulting in this piecemeal approach to housing.

And now that we have permanent leadership in the housing and planning departments, we will soon launch a vital task force to uncover even more ways to improve our housing ecosystem, align our city's policies with our values, and hold builders, developers, and owners accountable for the promises they make around affordability.

And make no mistake, we will welcome these builders and developers with tools and incentives that help them provide the housing we need for people who work in Bloomington.

There are new homes going up around our community and new developments like the Summit District are being worked through.

The plan commission has approved this development, with 4200 new units planned for our southwest side.

As this project moves forward to the city council, it has my full support— this is housing for people who work here.

Close to some of our largest employers, as well as some of our best amenities.

The Hopewell Neighborhood project is progressing, and this fall Bloomington's newest park, Hopewell Commons, will open and serve as an anchor and common space for the neighborhood with places to explore, play, and connect.

At the same time, we must help our unhoused neighbors find safe, reliable shelter.

Street homelessness is not simply the loss of a job, frequently it involves multiple challenges. And in nearly all cases, it involves abuse, neglect, and worse traumas— life events that stay with you— and often complicate one's ability to thrive.

This is me, hugging Rob on my 4th day in office. I knew there would be hard days as mayor, but I didn't know how they would literally leave me speechless.

Rob was camped out near Patterson Drive, he'd endured a fire in his tent just weeks before this day— Rob was sleeping when that fire broke out, and his dog Scooby woke him up and saved his life.

Rob lost everything in that fire— everything except for Scooby. Understandably, Rob doesn't want to go anywhere without his companion now— which means he can not go to a shelter.

There is no dignity in living in a tent, and there is little dignity in a community that believes we can do no better. We can do better. We are Bloomington.

Working together, we will co-create a plan of compassion, safety, and dignity for all involved.

Since taking office, I have assisted with the removal of two different encampments due to critical safety issues at the sites.

Those were necessary acts...and they were exceedingly tough days... for everyone involved, but none more so than our neighbors..
living without shelter.

Next month, we will be moving another camp which has created safety issues. We are working now with the residents of that camp to find paths to housing.

It's not as simple as ordaining a place to camp or simply putting some sleeping mats on a floor. We need supportive case workers, mental health care, and help for those who are in crisis levels of substance use.

I've already learned so much from working directly with caring professionals in the nonprofit and social service arena to help in these situations and to implement the Heading Home plan and to work towards crafting a broader, more comprehensive system to assist the unhoused population.

I am proud to announce that thanks to this partnership - we now have an emergency shelter for the medically fragile at the First Christian and First United Methodist Churches - thanks to the work of our faith community and other partners. There is much more to do, and much more to come.

On a related front, we will continue to focus on public safety in Bloomington

Everyone in our city should be safe and should feel safe. That is my commitment and that is our goal.

To do that, we must ensure our police department is working at its best, that we hire enough officers to account for upcoming retirements, and that their pay and benefits reflect their skilled and difficult work.

Like with so many other issues, Bloomington is not alone in needing to find creative ways to attract public safety staff...

In the coming months, we will find new and creative ways to attract and retain police, fire, and other safety personnel in our community, including looking at pay, benefits, and other incentives.

Just 2 weeks ago, I announced a new take-home vehicle policy for police. A policy most other jurisdictions already had, and one aimed at attracting and retaining the highest level of sworn officers. This policy also ensures they are able to respond to calls efficiently, and when necessary, even when they are off duty. A week ago, we had off- duty officers able to respond quickly to a shooting while en-route to work because they already had their vehicles with them.

We will continue to support our downtown resource officers appropriately and leverage programs where nurses and social workers can help address non-emergency situations.

We will continue to invest in the equipment first responders need to do their jobs safely. That's why we are securing a logistics center and rebuilding fire stations 1 and 3.

It's also why I support Monroe County's new jail, and applaud the efforts of Sheriff Rueben Marte and our commissioners to help people heal while they are incarcerated in our current jail.

Public safety is about so much more than fire and police though. It is about working upstream before traumas happen. And that's why in the coming year we will create a comprehensive public safety program, including a viable plan for our police facilities, active partnerships with our schools, early childhood centers, community foundation, and other nonprofit organizations.

I want to acknowledge Bloomington Police Chief Mike Diekoff and Bloomington Fire Chief Roger Kerr for working together so closely and collaboratively in these past months. This is a welcome change and it is already making public safety more efficient, and our community more safe.

This is an example of the spirit of collaboration that is newly blossoming throughout our community.

We are making investments in bike trails, parks, roads, bridges, and flood mitigation as well as public art throughout the community.

The new South Shore Trail at Griffy opened at the start of the year. Combined with improvements to the Griffy Dam and Headley Road Causeway, we've made major improvements to outdoor recreation at the nature preserve and are actively looking at how to extend these improvements to the north shore.

We continue to make progress on bringing open-access high-speed fiber internet to every corner of our city. There are currently more than 150 miles of conduit installed and more than 1,000 active GigabitNow customers on the network and we expect to finish the project by the end of 2025.

The Trades District continues to harness the incredible energy of Bloomington entrepreneurship. The Kiln building is framed out and will soon be home to new storefronts.

And, the tech center, known as the Forge, will soon bring jobs, innovation, and new opportunities to our city and create a real science-tech corridor for our region.

We are also moving forward with the new and expanded convention center, another opportunity to create jobs, bring in more meetings and visitors and provide a high-quality civic space to be used by organizations throughout the city and county.

And just like yesterday brought a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, these challenges and opportunities present all of us the opportunity to change the trajectory of this community for generations to come.

You know, in thinking about the venue in which I wanted to present my first State of the City, I did a little bit of study about this place. This magnificent building.

This place. The Buskirk-Chumley Theater . . . remembered by many as the Indiana Theater . . . only recently turned 100 years old.

It's part of the fabric of the community and of beloved Downtown and, of course, the Court House Historic District.

It's history mirrors the story of our city.

This is a place where residents gathered as part of a community.

This is a place where, sadly, discrimination against black and brown people was actively practiced.

This is a place where our arts and culture thrive.

This is a place we nearly lost to neglect and disrepair.

In other words, this is a place where challenges have been faced and overcome because it's a place we cherish.

So, too, is Bloomington a place we cherish -- but also one we must never take for granted.

An important question is posed at that website: "How will the third decade of the 21st Century be remembered?"

As is written there, the 1920s were marked by a thirst for renewal.

That's precisely how I feel about Bloomington in the 2020s.

We can build a better Bloomington.

We can build a Bloomington that is safe.

We can build a Bloomington that has housing for all.

We can build a Bloomington that is Environmentally resilient.

We can build a Bloomington that is Creative, with a thriving arts scene.

We can build a Bloomington that has a strong and dynamic business climate.

We can build a Bloomington that has an educated and diverse workforce.

We can build a Bloomington that is one of the most unique communities on the planet.

And we WILL build it.

But not alone.

Only by joining forces with our friends at the county, at the state, in the private sector, in the nonprofit world, at IU, and in our very own neighborhoods can we harness our city's potential in new ways and make real, lasting progress.

We can do it, but we must stay focused. We are a community at the precipice of tremendous things, and we have so much to focus on right here at home. We must not let politics divide us – I am a public servant committed to serving you– and staying laser-focused on our city and its needs.

Tonight, I am proud to report to you that the state of our city is strong...and about to get stronger. Because of you...our unique, passionate and amazing Bloomington community...tomorrow and each tomorrow after, we will be better..

We have more work to do and more history to make. Now, let's get back to it.

Thank you for joining us. BEAT will return to the stage and dance us out, and then we welcome you to join us for sweets and a cash bar to close out the evening.

State of the City