

*Mayor Bill Schickel, State of the City, 7 p.m. 1-3-23:*

Members of the City Council, city officials, distinguished guests, friends, its a privilege to deliver my annual State of the City address:

Let me just start by wishing everyone a very Happy New Year. These are very exciting times in Mason City. There's so much going on it'll be hard to capture it all in this address, but I'll do my best.

From Pebble Creek to Rolling Acres, from Downtown to the North End, River City is blessed with 17 great neighborhoods.

I mention this because for every resident, the most important place in town is within 100 feet of their own home.

That's why flourishing neighborhoods are one of the immediate goals for the Mason City Council for the New Year.

It's something all of us can help with. It can be as simple as getting to know our neighbors and helping our neighbors in need. There's lots of lonely people out there who would love to get to know you. Partnering with police also makes for great neighborhoods. One of the best ways is to call our police dispatcher when you see something wrong or unusual.

There's plenty the city will be doing immediately to help make our neighborhoods sparkle. Our thriving downtown is looking more beautiful

than ever. Now is the time to bring a similar renaissance to every neighborhood by investing in each one, to make all of Mason City as vibrant as Central Downtown. An example of where this is already beginning is the West Downtown Neighborhood. The landmark Mason City YWCA is being transformed into state-of-the art housing, with an art gallery and community space. We owe a debt of gratitude to entrepreneurs Elisha Marin and Susanne Crane for their vision. By the way, you can help by Googling “Save The Mason City YWCA.” Let’s help them raise \$150,000 in donations by January 31, so they can be eligible for other grants.

Elsewhere in the same neighborhood, construction is moving quickly on the 100 unit River II Apartments, Frein Audio & Technology is sprucing up their building at 219 1st St. SW, and 43 North Iowa has immediate plans for upgrading their space. The city will be immediately matching these kinds of private investments with improvements to streets, trails, lighting, and other beautification.

In the New Year we will immediately be redoubling our efforts to get rid of blighted property. Abandoned houses have a terrible impact on neighborhoods. They hurt surrounding property values and pose safety

hazards. Since City Council set a goal three years ago, Mason City has addressed 48 blighted houses. They are either being demolished or rehabilitated. This compares to just one for the three prior years.

“The Empty Buildings of Mason City” was a jarring headline in a 2019 edition of the Globe Gazette. The buildings had been vacant for years. So far we’ve focused on vacant houses. In the New Year we will immediately begin tackling vacant commercial buildings as well.

In today’s world, quality high speed fiber is key to the success of every neighborhood. Last year, MetroNet made new internet options available to about 1,000 homes. The work to date required slower underground boring. Ninety percent of the underground work is now done. In the New Year, MetroNet will wire a larger area of the city in a much shorter time with aerial installation. MetroNet says the new service will be available to most of the city by the end of September. In a separate initiative, the city is making free Wi-fi available to all of downtown. It’s scheduled to be up and running by March.

Thriving schools equal thriving neighborhoods. Hats off to the Mason City School District. After years of declining enrollment, the Mason City School District celebrated a small increase in student enrollment. There's now 3,404 students attending Mason City Community Schools. The opening of the state-of-the-art fieldhouse and pool will only enhance Mason City's reputation as one of the finest school districts in Iowa.

Quality affordable housing makes for vibrant neighborhoods. Permits for multi-family housing skyrocketed last year. The one hundred permits issued represent an immediate investment of \$10 million in our neighborhoods. Permits for single family homes doubled.

Variety makes for exciting and vibrant neighborhoods. Think of the benefits of a neighborhood grocery store, like the new Quick Star on the Southside. Our Development Review Committee (DRC) assists developers looking at investing in Mason City. The DRC received 62 proposals last year, up from the previous years. Ten major site plans were approved, also an increase. One of the many exciting plans is the adaptive reuse of the old Shopko site for EV golf car assembly and its showroom.

Despite heroic life saving attempts, four children were lost in a tragic house fire. The scene that cold November morning was described by neighbor Bill Kammeyer. He told the Globe Gazette, “We have the most amazing fire department, police department and paramedics.” With flames flying out of the building, firefighters immediately went right in. Though most are certainly not this tragic, this was one of more than 6,000 calls our firefighters and paramedics responded to last year. Your police department responded to more than 18,000 calls for service last year. More than 1,300 arrests were made. Thank you to our public safety personnel and first responders.

By nearly every metric Mason City saw substantial improvement in 2022. Music Man Square saw record attendance with 2,000 visitors for Christmas alone, contributing to a \$100 million tourism industry in Mason City. Construction of a new airport terminal is underway. We are putting the river back in River City with huge improvements to our rivers and adjoining trails. Sculptures on Parade has grown to more than 80 downtown statues.

We have more than 50 initiatives and projects in progress. They include once in a generation upgrades to two of our major gateways,

South Federal Avenue and Highway 122 West. Police and fire facility

improvements. Reducing utility costs with solar energy conversion.

The Legacy Golf Course and Development at the old country club location.

A first time ever joint comprehensive plan with Clear Lake and Cerro Gordo

County. Just to name a few. Details can be viewed in Mason City's

2023-2024 Strategic Plan. A copy is being mailed to every Mason City

resident, enclosed with your utility statement. The plan is also available at

**[masoncity.net](http://masoncity.net).**

With so many great projects on the table, we have three immediate goals for the New Year: Execution. Execution. Execution.

The downtown hotel is the elephant in the room. While Mason City saw a record number of projects and improvements last year, it's of course disappointing that construction isn't underway.

Here's where things stand: The US Department of Agriculture has a Rural Development Loan Guarantee program. It encourages private investment in areas where it might not otherwise occur. The USDA has approve a bank loan guarantee for the hotel.

The early skywalk work was essential. It saved substantially on construction costs and prevented interference with the hotel construction.

Remember, our original River City Renaissance is two-thirds done with tremendous spinoff already.

Remember, restoration of the landmark Historic Park Inn also faced biting criticism and took longer than planned. Today it stands as the most significant historic restoration projects in the Midwest. Mason City's Hyatt Place Hotel and Music Man Square Conference Center and Southbridge Mall repurposing will be among the most significant in the state when complete.

In just over two weeks you will be hearing the annual State of North Iowa Report. It'll be at 8 a.m. on Thursday, January 19, at the vacant Younkers store. You will get an update on plans for Mason City's bike park and riverwalk. It'll rival the famous Railyard Bike Park in Northern Arkansas, which draws a thousand cyclists a week. You'll also hear how Clear Lake's Reimagined Surf District could become the Nashville of the North. Main Street Capital Partners will be giving an update on the hotel and mall repurposing. These undertakings are game changers for the area.

People are taking notice.

Debi Durham is the director of the Iowa Economic Development Authority. She noted during a recent visit to Mason City that the adaptive

reuse of mall areas is difficult no matter the size of the community. She said communities like Mason City “are leading the way on how to make these spaces work for today.”

“You’ve got a really good team,” she added. “Private, public partnerships that continue to work together. Successful communities have this. And you and Clear Lake and this entire region have really done a great job doing that.”

A headline in the Des Moines Register asked, “Who will step up for Rural Iowa?” Well, Des Moines Register, Mason City is leading the way.

Indeed, we’re blessed to have a highly functioning city council, city administration and more than 200 dedicated city workers. More than 100 volunteers serve on key boards and commissions. We have dozens of exciting and successful partnerships. The not so secret key to success is listening to each other. The philosopher, JS Mills, had it right a century ago. He said if we only understand our side of the story, we understand little. By listening to and understanding the other side, we find truth and solutions in the middle. It’s easy to name the problems. The difficult, but rewarding challenge is finding solutions. In Mason City, we’re all about finding solutions.

Before I conclude, let's remember that there are 160 soldiers from Mason City's 1133rd Army National Guard Transportation Company that aren't with us this evening. They've arrived at their destination in Poland. It's my understanding from family members that their spirits are good. These great Iowa soldiers are transporting equipment and supplies in support of US and NATO allies in Europe. It's worth noting, that when duty calls the ranks of the brave have historically drawn heavily from the Midwest. Let us all do our part to extend our appreciation and support to their families who are taking care of the home front. We all look forward to this time next year when they will be returning to a joyous homecoming.

As we look to the New Year, let us remember the greats on whose shoulders we're standing. People like Meredith Willson, Frank Lloyd Wright and Carrie Chapman Catt. Most importantly, the good people of Mason City quietly doing their part. They had a dream that this River City we love would stand as a shining beacon light in a sometimes dark world. Thank for making that dream come alive once again in the New Year!

Our very best days are ahead of us, Mason City.

Happy New Year.