



State of the Downtown

Mayor J. Michael Houston

January 25, 2012

Good evening everyone!

I want to thank Downtown Springfield, Inc. and Victoria Ringer for inviting me to give you my assessment of the state of our Central Business District.

A special welcome to Lt. Governor Shelia Simon and Congressman Aaron Schock, I appreciate both of you joining us this evening to celebrate our successes in revitalizing downtown Springfield and recognizing DSI members on their individual accomplishments.

I want to thank Congressman Schock for locating his Springfield office on a very visible corner at 6th & Monroe, and am extremely disappointed that the redistricting will force him to move that office out west into his new district which is out of the downtown due to the fact that he cannot legally have an office outside his district.

Let me begin by offering my congratulations to Jane Nicoletta for her service as President of DSI for the last 2 years.

She joins a long list of former presidents who have served with distinction, and I hope that she will continue the tradition established by other past presidents by staying very active with DSI.

I also want to extend my congratulations to Scott Troehler the new DSI board president and thank him for his commitment to our Central Business District and DSI.

DSI has an ambitious work plan for 2012 and it awaits your leadership.

Scott, please accept my best wishes and my commitment of support as we continue to make our downtown a great location to work, worship, live, and be entertained.

My perception of downtown Springfield is one of an urban core that is very much alive and vibrant, with the best yet to come!

While it will never be the retail center it once was retailing will always be an important part of downtown.

The Central Business District has been and needs to remain the center of activity and the employment and property tax base of our community.

The city center has weathered the recent economic downturn, having had to deal with the same challenges that other communities across our state and nation have endured.

In addition it has suffered from the reduction in the number of state employees and the impact that has had on downtown businesses.

Just looking at the delays of the State in paying its bills; we know that the financial challenges facing the state and its vendors are not over.

Yet downtown Springfield has stabilized itself and is strengthening its assets in a number of ways.

Today new shops and restaurants have opened where others have chosen to leave.

Tonight gives me the opportunity to examine where we are and how we got here.

Downtown Springfield has become a tourist hub for travelers interested in learning more about our 16th President.

No doubt the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum has drawn people from far and wide to Mr. Lincoln's Hometown.

People literally come from all over our nation as well as from all over the world.

When it opened, thousands of visitors flocked to it.

Today, it is still attracting large numbers of visitors, far greater than any other Presidential museum.

I believe that it is the crown jewel of presidential museums in the country because when you leave there you have an understanding of Mr. Lincoln the man, his principles and values, and how those principles and values lead him to be the greatest president in the history of our great country.

But the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum is just one of the assets that make downtown Springfield exciting.

We could have lost another downtown asset in the Hoogland Center for the Arts.

Thanks to the help and generosity of many of you and other civic minded residents, the Hoogland Center's fund drive was a huge success and proof positive of this city's dedication to the arts and creative classes.

That means downtown Springfield will continue to be a hub for the arts, providing a multitude of entertainment and cultural enrichment opportunities for many years to come.

More importantly the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum and the Hoagland Center for the Arts will continue to be the anchors of downtown Springfield on the north and south, and draw both residents and visitors to Mr. Lincoln's Hometown.

The City is doing its part to help bring people to Springfield, thanks to the efforts of the Convention and Visitors Bureau.

On January, 7th & 8th we hosted nearly a thousand wrestlers that participated in a national competition at the Prairie Capitol Convention Center along with just under 500 coaches and trainers plus fans that filled over 1200 room nights on what would be one of the deadest weekends of the year.

Those visitors ate and shopped in our downtown as well as other parts of our community.

We hope to sign a contract for the next 5 or 10 years with them, and based on their experience, I believe we have a good opportunity to do it.

This illustrates a new emphasis we are placing on visitors, that is, to aggressively pursue conventions as well as meetings and other types of events that fill hotel and motel rooms and generate true economic activity that benefits downtown businesses.

We know that tourists make up the majority of visitors, but conventioners, and people attending meeting and multi day events that stay overnight such as the upcoming Great Lakes Valley Conference Championship Tournament in early March are the people who really spend money while they are in Mr. Lincoln's Hometown.

Our new initiative also includes marketing our hotel space differently.

We are now packaging the downtown as a place that can handle large conventions by combining the available hotel rooms at the Hilton and the President Lincoln Hotel along with the Prairie Capitol Convention Center and marketing it as one destination.

Last Friday we pitched an organization that would use 3500 room nights over a 5 day period in 2016.

I want to specifically commend Downtown Springfield, Inc. for its successes this past year.

Truly the Blues and Bar-B-Q event was taken to a new level and was an overwhelming success.

Your Taste of Downtown was exceedingly well received.

The downtown Christmas Walks and First Friday activities had a strong level of participation as well.

These initiatives not only attract residents of Springfield, but they serve as a strong magnet for attracting visitors from outside the city as well.

People that we hope will continue to visit the downtown and patronize our businesses.

We recently completed a \$750,000 remodeling project using TIF funds at the Amtrak Station so that visitors to Mr. Lincoln's Hometown by train will have a positive first impression when they arrive and depart.

While we want to make a good first impression for our visitors, we also want local residents to be comfortable when they use Amtrak.

We overlaid a pothole filled parking lot and changed the traffic direction, added trackside green space, and made the facility and restrooms accessible to people with disabilities.

We successfully repainted the nearby Third Street railroad overpass on Capitol Avenue, after decades of rust and dirt that made it dingy and unappealing.

We installed curb-side plantings and benches to create a pocket park at 6th & Adams Streets as a new vista to the Old State Capitol.

The state reopened the Dana Thomas House to visitors this year after it having undergone a massive restoration project.

We are so very fortunate to have Horace Mann headquartered here.

They are our largest private sector employer downtown and the biggest contributor of property tax dollars to the TIF fund.

As we speak, the Horace Mann complex is getting an exterior facelift that also includes rehabilitating the gorgeous garden area and making the facility more accessible.

All of which means enhancing the overall attractiveness of the downtown area for their employees and those folks smart enough to take advantage of the beautiful surroundings.

There are many residents and visitors that regularly take advantage of their grounds, and Horace Mann has made a major investment in their building and grounds with this renovation.

The City is pleased to have assisted with downtown TIF funds.

Right across the street is another project that is being supported by TIF funds.

A multi-million dollar upgrade to the Prairie Capitol Convention Center is underway, which will make it much more user friendly and a destination where we want to host more conventions, meetings, and events in the future.

But, downtown Springfield needs to become more than just a visitor and entertainment destination or a place for overnight stays and little else.

We need to focus our attention on making it an attractive place to live, where our residents can be proud to call it home and where they have easy access to all the goods and services they need.

To that end, several things are on the horizon that will help us reach that goal.

For as long as I can remember we have attempted to attract a grocery store to the downtown area.

While it is located at the edge of the Tax Increment District, the addition of Neiman Foods at Second and Carpenter will fill a downtown void that has existed for too many years.

This store is strategically located to not only serve the downtown area; it will provide a convenient location for near north side residents and employees at our two hospitals and the SIU School of Medicine as well as the other employees who work in the medical community.

It will also include several other services and features, and shops that will even make it attractive to those who may need to make a quick stop before heading home from work.

The City is happy to have helped provide support for the new County Market grocery store through the use of TIF funds.

Speaking of places to live, I want to commend some individuals and organizations, such as the Springfield Housing Authority for the new "Genesis Place" development just east of downtown between 12th and 13th Streets and Jefferson and Washington.

If you have noticed the corner of Second and Adams, Larry Quenette has done a fantastic job on that building and creating new housing units.

The first floor will house his architectural firm, and he is putting 13 luxury apartments on the second and third floors.

Again, the City is happy to have participated in the project through the use of TIF funds.

These are two recent examples of how and why, downtown is a desirable place to reside.

We expect to see much more residential development in the near future.

Private investment is driving other projects, too, such as Obed and Isaac's Microbrewery and Eatery, near the Lincoln home site at 7th and Jackson Streets.

We welcome this unique and exciting venue to our growing hospitality and entertainment family.

St. John's Hospital is in the middle of the first phase of a \$180 million expansion project that will greatly improve the delivery of health care services to those who need them.

I commend them both for their investment and commitment to our Central Business District as it would have been easy to move to the edge of our community.

The Salvation Army's Ninth Street building will soon be in the remodeling phase as they turn it into a state of the art facility that will provide vital services to individuals who are most in need of them.

Again the City is happy to be able to participate with the Salvation Army through TIF funds to make this project happen.

We continue to work on the Capitol Avenue project having extended it east to Martin Luther King Drive last year.

We even included a unique roundabout to control traffic without stop signs or traffic lights.

Hopefully, we will be able to attract another grant or state assistance to finish the project between Fifth and Second Streets, bringing it right up to the steps of the state Capital.

Thanks to the City's Bicycle Advisory Council's recommendation, we will begin making our downtown more bicycle friendly this spring by installing more than two dozen bicycle racks.

Utilizing a Lincoln Penny theme, these racks will allow bicyclists to take advantage of shopping, eating and working in the city center, while securing their bicycles safely.

Plus it's good exercise and cuts down on our carbon footprint.

As mayor I consider where we put the train tracks for high speed rail to be the major issue facing our community right now.

The reason I consider it to be the major issue facing our community is that if it goes down the 3rd Street tracks, 50 or 100 years from now we will still have 3 sets of tracks running through Springfield.

If those trains go down the 10th Street corridor, there will still be the possibility of moving the 19th Street tracks to the 10th Street corridor at sometime in the future.

But if the 3rd Street tracks are used, there simply is not enough room to ever increase the number of tracks on 3rd Street.

Railroad relocation is an issue that will come to a head very soon.

DSI and the city have worked together to establish the ground work to move all train traffic from the Third Street corridor to Tenth Street.

I suspect that vast majority of us here tonight are in agreement that increasing the frequency and speed of trains on Third Street would create major problems for downtown Springfield.

It would clog our roadways, make pedestrian movement much less safe, and create an insurmountable road block to any additional downtown development, especially near Third Street and the Medical District.

It's difficult to even contemplate this scenario.

We hope to hear a preliminary report from the Federal Railroad Administration sometime in May when another public hearing will be held.

It may give us insight into which route or routes that are still under consideration.

One thing is sure; we cannot let up on our resolve to move trains, tracks and all, to Tenth Street.

We need to remain vigilant and continue to press for railroad relocation, because we all will have to live for many, many years with whatever final decision is made.

I would remind you that in the 1970's and early 1980's our community had an opportunity to consolidate the tracks running through Springfield.

But we failed to speak with one voice, and today we still have 3 sets of tracks running through our community.

If we do not speak with one voice again, 100 years from now we will still have 3 sets of tracks running through our community.

There are other issues and other projects that time does not allow me to address right now.

DSI & the city are both involved in the SDAT study and the study of the downtown being done jointly by the CLUE Group and the Springfield Sangamon County Regional Plan Commission, but we can discuss those projects along with Springfield Green's project to upgrade our gateway entrance from Clear Lake at next year's State of the City.

Suffice it to say however, that the reason I know downtown Springfield is vibrant and alive, is because you have all been working tirelessly to continue to make it even better.

What has been done in the past is merely the ground work for much greater things in the future.

By working together as we have in the past, we will continue the progress that has been made.

DSI has been an excellent partner and advocate for the downtown and deserves much of the credit for the progress that has been made.

I look forward to continuing our working relationship.

Thank you.

Now, it is my honor to introduce someone who needs no introduction to this audience, and who has demonstrated his strong support of downtown Springfield by placing an office in the heart of it ... my Congressman, Aaron Schock.