



# STATE OF THE CITY



MAYOR BRAD CAVANAGH

FALL 2023



Thank you for joining me here today for Dubuque's 2023 State of the City address. It is an honor to be here with you.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to take a moment again this year to offer my thanks to some important people.

First, thank you to our entire City of Dubuque staff for their tireless efforts each and every day. I continue to admire your dedication to public service and your commitment to our city. Thank you, also, to all Dubuque residents who go above and beyond by serving on City of Dubuque boards and commissions.

I want to make sure I thank some key City of Dubuque staff members who have helped prepare these remarks, and with whom I work particularly closely as Mayor. Thank you to our Public Information Officer Randy Gehl, City Manager Mike Van Milligen, Assistant City Manager Cori Burbach, City Clerk Adrienne Breitfelder, Assistant City Clerk Trish Gleason, City Attorney Crenna Brumwell, Technical Grant Analyst Justin Thiltgen, and Director of Strategic Partnerships Teri Goodmann.

Thank you to my City Council colleagues, Ric Jones, David Resnick, Susan Farber, Laura Roussell, Danny Sprank, and Katy Wethal.

As I have said many times, I feel extremely fortunate to serve with such a dedicated, insightful, and professional group of public servants. Please join me in thanking them for their service.

I am also thankful for the strong partnerships we share with our elected officials in Dubuque County Government, our local State Legislators, and our elected officials serving us in our nation's capital. These partnerships are so essential to everything we do here in Dubuque and I am grateful to each of these individuals for their service.

And of course, I want to be sure to thank my wife Jennifer, my boys Sam and Andrew, my extended family and those I am lucky to call friends. Thank you for your unending support in this journey of service.

Finally, thank you to everyone joining us here today and all residents of Dubuque. You truly make this a wonderful place to call home and it is an honor to serve as your mayor.

I am very excited to be here with you today to celebrate another successful year in the great City of Dubuque and to explore what lies ahead.

As I have prepared for this address, a theme has repeatedly come to mind. Now, at first, this idea may seem unrelated. But stick with me, just for a moment, while I set the stage for our time together today.

My educational journey in the Dubuque Community School District and beyond never did lead me into a physics classroom. And though my professional background does not include the study of physics, per say, it does include the study of—and service to—individuals and

the communities in which they live.

There are some basic laws of physics that I have always found to be uniquely applicable to the nature of community and what people can—or cannot—accomplish together.

In the late 15th Century, Sir Isaac Newton introduced the world to the laws of motion, and in doing so revolutionized humans' understanding of their world.

Newton's first law of motion (stick with me now, and I did make sure to look this up for accuracy by the way)....The first law of motion states that "an object at rest remains at rest"....Inertia is the term for this...Conversely, an object in motion remains in motion.

Second, the acceleration of an object depends on its mass and the amount of force applied...force.

Finally, whenever an object exerts a force on another object, the second object exerts an equal and opposite force on the first...in other words, an object will remain in motion until is forced to change or stop...Action & Reaction.

As we step back and consider our history, where we are now, and what we want to become, I'm struck by the way these laws help to describe the nature of progress in a community.

As Iowa's oldest city, the identity of Dubuque has formed over centuries and generations. In our recent history, we have seen some changes to be sure, and change is always difficult. The familiar is comfortable. We have come to know our experiences and our surroundings over many years. A city at rest has a natural tendency to remain at rest.

As the laws of motion relate to communities, however, there is a universal truth. It is impossible to stand still.

The forces bearing down on us are simply too great and powerful. They come in so many forms—the rapid acceleration of technological advances, demographic realities of all types, economic and political winds shifting on national and international scales, changing local weather patterns, and so much more.

As we stand and face these forces, we are left with two choices. Our first choice is to stay at rest, stand in place, and attempt to remain right where we are.

In doing so, the harsh reality is that we would be choosing to allow the forces pushing against us to lead us on an inevitable march backward.

In time, we would turn back the decades-long economic progress we have made, our population would decline, and we would return to those dark days we all know too well, asking the last one in Dubuque to please turn out the lights.

Or...we can lean forward, look directly in the eyes of the forces working against our community's progress, and forge a path toward success.

So what have we chosen in this past year as a Dubuque community? Well...we have chosen to lean forward.

The list of our accomplishments in this past year is long. Sometimes though, it can be hard "to see the forest for the trees" as the saying goes. So let's take a moment to step back, survey the big picture, and list the many ways we have progressed forward this year.

Get ready. This list is long.

## FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

Let's first take a look at the City of Dubuque's financial track record. The City of Dubuque has continued to distinguish itself as a fiscally responsible city.

This year, Moody's Investors Service upgraded the City of Dubuque's issuer rating and outstanding general obligation unlimited tax bonds from Aa3 to Aa2, the third-highest rating possible. The improved rating will assist the City in securing the best terms for financial products like loans, which can provide substantial savings for the City and taxpayers.

Moody's reported they made this upgrade because "the City has strong financial operations and ample revenue-raising flexibility, which has resulted in steadily improved available fund balance and cash. The city serves as a regional economic center and its regional economic growth rate has outpaced the nation over the past five years. The city's local economy is likely to remain strong because of its mix of commercial and industrial industries, stable population and steady tax base growth."

The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) of the United States and Canada awarded the City of Dubuque a Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting for the City's comprehensive annual financial report (CAFR). This is the 34th consecutive year the City of Dubuque has received this recognition.

The Certificate of Achievement is the highest form of recognition in the area of governmental accounting and financial reporting, and its attainment represents a significant accomplishment by a government and its management.

And once again, the City of Dubuque has found a way to fund our budget with the lowest property tax rate and the 5th lowest debt burden of any major city in the State of Iowa.

## CITY STAFFING

Multiple City Council goals and priorities last year centered on retaining and attracting an excellent City of Dubuque workforce, and we have made progress. Let's take a look at some of that progress.

After a disappointing year where we were only able to open one pool for the summer, the Leisure Services Department went above and beyond to hire an incredible summer workforce this past year, and the community enjoyed a full slate of summer recreational activities, with both pools open and packed in the summer heat.

The City also began a pay in class study with the goal of bringing the salaries of our dedicated public servants in line with similar pay scales in our state and region.

The Dubuque Fire Department received the American Heart Association's 2022 Mission: Lifeline® EMS Gold Plus Award for implementing quality improvement measures for the treatment of patients who experience severe heart attacks.

Finally, the City of Dubuque was recently recognized by Gallagher's as a Best-in-Class employer for providing innovative solutions to create organizational structures, workplace policies, and total rewards, which inclusively engage and motivate its employees. The City of Dubuque scored in the top 12.5% of the more than 4,000 large and mid-size employers.

## SUSTAINABILITY

Dubuque also continues to distinguish itself as a model for sustainability.

Dubuque was one of 24 cities selected...ON THE WHOLE CONTINENT to participate in the Cities Forward program. This is a collaborative initiative between the U.S. Department of State and various non-government partners to help cities in North America create sustainable, inclusive, and resilient futures through project consultation, co-design, and knowledge sharing.

The United States Forest Service awarded the City of Dubuque an Urban and Community Forestry Grant totaling just under \$1.5 million dollars, which will provide funding for the planting of 6,600 new trees in the community over the next five years.

And, the Initiative for Sustainable Communities (IISC) at the University of Iowa selected the City of Dubuque as one of two community partners in the state for this academic year. More than 100 U of I faculty and students will collaborate with Dubuque officials

to complete 15 community projects, ranging from alternative transportation plans to a new public art sculpture.

#### AMENITIES & QUALITY OF LIFE

We have also made strides toward further improving the quality of life and the addition of amenities for city residents.

We are pushing forward with our community-driven Central Avenue Revitalization plan. With the help of public-private partnerships, housing is being created and improved along Central, businesses are moving in, streetscape beautification is happening as we speak and we are making critical infrastructure improvements in the corridor.

After many years of planning and community discussion, we have identified a viable path forward with our Five Flags Civic Center. The \$25 million dollar improvement project that lies ahead will modernize Five Flags to keep this essential city amenity performing strongly in the decades ahead.

We are taking leaps forward on Dubuque's Gateway to the City, Schmitt Island. Through a reinvigorated, imaginative and successful partnership with the DRA and Q Casino, we are embarking on an ambitious transformation to turn the island into one of the premier entertainment and recreation destinations in the Midwest.

And, of course, we can't forget our brand new and very brightly colored renovations at Comiskey Park! It brings a smile to my face every time I pass by and see our city's families enjoying this beautiful place.

For all these efforts and more we were recognized by several national organizations.

Through America In Bloom's Growing Vibrant Communities program, we received top honors including the Over 35,000 Population Category Award and an All-America Selections Showcase Garden Award. Dubuque received a \$25,000 EcoConnexions From the Ground Up grant for the Re-Imagine Comiskey Park Redevelopment Project to be used for trees, native forbs, grass seed, shrubs, and flowers.

Dubuque is one of 10 communities in the United States selected for the Economic Mobility and Opportunity Cohort. The City of Dubuque and Greater Dubuque Development Corporation will participate in a series of learning and training opportunities on boosting upward economic mobility, gaining best practices, tools, and technical assistance to implement the City's Equitable Poverty Prevention and Reduction Plan.

And finally, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) awarded Dubuque a score of 95 out of 100 on their most recent Municipal Equality Index. Since 2012, the HRC has issued this annual index. This ranks cities' non-discrimination laws, the municipality as an employer, municipal services, law enforcement, and the City leadership's public position on equality. Out of 506 cities, Dubuque's score of 95 is significantly higher than the national city average of 69 points.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF HOUSING

One more area where we have had tremendous success is in development AND housing.

In August of last year, my City Council colleagues and I called for new and improved incentives to encourage housing development. A study from the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation had shown our city needed at least 1100 housing units to meet the housing demand for our residents.

Within one month, our excellent City staff brought forth a proposal for new development incentives that the City Council approved and put in motion.

I am very excited and proud to report, in just one year, the City of Dubuque has gone from needing 1100 units to having over 2200 units approved and on the path toward construction.

These units include housing in all areas of our city and across all parts of the socio-economic spectrum.

Our housing efforts have shown incredible success, and I want to thank our City Council, City staff, local developers and all our partners for working together to make this a reality.

This success goes hand in hand with the great success we have seen in both residential and commercial development

in the Dubuque region in this past year. Since July of 2022, the City of Dubuque and Dubuque County have seen over \$338 Million dollars in residential and commercial construction.

All of these efforts led to Dubuque being named to the inaugural group of Iowa Thriving Communities, a new program from the Iowa Finance Authority and Iowa Economic Development Authority that recognizes cities around the state that utilize innovative solutions to enhance their housing offerings to residents of all income levels.

This designation will further incentivize development through use of the Federal Housing Tax Credits or the Workforce Housing Tax Credit program.

The evidence is clear—property development is alive and well in the City of Dubuque.

#### PARTNERSHIPS AND GRANTS

None of the successes we have had as a city would be possible without strong and healthy partnerships with our federal and state governmental partners.

At a time when political fights have become the unfortunate norm, the City of Dubuque stands apart as an example of what is possible when we focus on forming real relationships across political boundaries for the good of our community.

With the help of our partners in the Biden Administration, our Iowa Congressional Delegation (including Congresswoman Ashley Hinson, Sen. Chuck Grassley, and Sen. Joni Ernst), our State of Iowa partners, and of course our partners right here in Dubuque County, the City of Dubuque has secured tens of millions of dollars in grants to ensure our continued progress on major projects throughout the city.

This list is also long, but it's well worth the reminder of just how much we have accomplished together in this past year.

#### TRANSPORTATION

We have received over \$5 million dollars to help us design and implement critical transportation projects throughout the city.

This includes:

A Dept. Of Transportation (DOT) RAISE planning grant for a 14th street overpass and complete streets project on the Elm St. corridor. This particular project earned Dubuque a personal visit from Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg, earlier this year.

A Dept. Of Transportation (DOT) Safe Streets for All (SS4A) – partnership with the East Central Intergovernmental Association (ECIA)

Another US Dept. Of Transportation (USDOT) Low- or No-Emissions Bus Program grant to move toward bus electrification

AND a US Dept. Of Transportation (USDOT) Areas of Persistent Poverty grant for bus route optimization

## INFRASTRUCTURE

We have received over \$8.5 million dollars toward major infrastructure projects, including:

Community Project Funding for the Granger Creek Lift Station

And just last week it was announced we received an Economic Development Administration grant to complete one of the critical final pieces of the Bee Branch Gates and Pumps Project.

## AMENITIES AND QUALITY OF LIFE

As we work to further enhance the quality of life for Dubuque residents, the City of Dubuque, in collaboration with key community partners, has received over \$20 million dollars in grants toward a broad spectrum of significant community projects. These grants include:

A \$500,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant to provide funds to Local Arts Agencies. An award of this amount is almost unheard of for a community our size. This is an incredible achievement!

A Dept. Of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services Hiring Grant to expand services for modern policing

Community Project Funding for the Chaplain Schmitt Island Trail Connector

A National Endowment for the Arts Our Town grant to support events, projects,

and community building on Central Ave. with our partners at VOICES.

A United States Dept. Of Agriculture Urban & Community Forestry Grant for tree planting in our most disadvantaged census tracts

Child Care Business Incentive Grants for both Dubuque Initiatives and Cottingham & Butler to expand much-needed childcare services in our community.

A Non-Profit Innovation grant in partnership with Hills & Dales to Construct a new Center for Autism Services

A Destination Iowa grant for a future Chaplain Schmitt Island Amphitheater

And an additional Destination Iowa grant toward a brand new and reimagined Dubuque Museum of Art

## AIR SERVICE

And finally, with the help of our Federal and State partners, we have received major grants to help with one of our community's most critical needs in the months and years ahead – the return of daily commercial air service at the Dubuque Regional Airport. These include:

An Iowa Dept. Of Transportation & Federal Aviation Administration grant for a Solar Panel Array & Terminal & Airfield Improvements.

An Iowa Airport Improvement Program grant toward apron reconstruction

And, just last week, we received the very welcome news that we have been awarded a Small Community Air Service Development Program grant. I cannot overstate the importance of this particular grant in helping us work directly with major and regional air carriers in returning full air service to the Dubuque region.

Clearly, we are NOT a community at rest. We are NOT standing still. We are pushing forward with full force.

## CHALLENGES

There are, of course, many challenges ahead.

These challenges are economic, as

we navigate a new and ever-changing landscape of highs, lows, and economic changes unforeseen.

Challenges surround us in maintaining and improving infrastructure—some of which is the oldest in our state.

As a city government organization, we are challenged to identify the best ways to attract and retain a fully-staffed city workforce.

We must find ways to endure challenges wrought by our natural environment, as a rapidly changing climate forces us to adapt to new and often unpredictable weather patterns.

Challenges in the social landscape on the local, national and world stage contribute to unsettling and new circumstances in our interactions with one another.

And the political environment in our country continues to tear at the very fabric of our democracy.

On this note I must pause and take a moment to specifically address the hyper-political rhetoric and behavior that is causing great division among us, particularly at the federal and state levels.

It seems once again we have avoided a shut-down within our federal government. As I have already mentioned, our partnerships with our federal elected and appointed officials are essential to our well-being as a city.

For this reason, as Mayor of the City of Dubuque, I implore our federal officials to please do all you can to fight against the urge to wage political battles with one another, remember your core commitment to public service, and rededicate yourselves to serving the best interests of Dubuque and every city, town and household in the United States.

And to our honorable Governor Reynolds, our State legislators, and esteemed state officials. I fear our state is heading down a dangerous path of Big Government that is forgetting the essential right of local freedom. We, as residents of the cities and towns of Iowa, must have the freedom to choose what is best for ourselves and our communities.

As our state motto reminds us, "Our liberties we prize and our rights we will maintain." I urge our State of Iowa partners to turn away from unfunded mandates and pre-emptive local laws dictated from Des Moines, and recommit yourselves to the local freedom enshrined in our state constitution. Let us continue to trust one another to do what is best for the people of Iowa wherever Iowans choose to live.

## OPPORTUNITY

To address these challenges, one of the greatest opportunities we have is the strength of our community itself.

In this past year, I have seen more community engagement than I have seen in all my years as a Dubuquer.

Engaged residents from across our community have spoken up and spoken out to collaboratively work toward real and lasting progress in the City of Dubuque.

Long-standing community leaders have continued the exemplary leadership that has guided us through decades of progress. New leaders have emerged to lead us in new and innovative directions and teach us to think outside the box.

We have heard from advocates for housing, sustainability, and resiliency. Conservationists, developers, business owners, reengaged neighborhood associations and neighborhood advocates.

We have partnered with the other cities in our region to multiply our strength and take on even more ambitious projects.

This energy, excitement, and heartfelt engagement in making Dubuque the best place it can be is our number one most important asset.

All of us who are truly and honestly committed to making Dubuque the best it can be are sharing new ideas, boldly entering into difficult conversations, and forging a path ahead with unmistakable force.

None of this is easy. It requires genuine listening. It requires critical thought. It requires the discomfort that comes with stepping outside our own ideas and environment to sincerely try to understand the perspectives of others.

It requires compromise. It requires respect. And it requires trust.

Through these efforts, we are molding the Imagine Dubuque vision that we created together into a reality for ourselves and the generations to come.

And now is the perfect time for strong community engagement like this. Based on our progress over the past few years, I firmly believe we are embarking on some of the most exciting years we have ever experienced in Dubuque.

As the new Field of Dreams stadium and youth baseball complex comes online in the next two years, the eyes of the world will once again focus directly on our region. The riverboats that have returned to our shore will arrive even more frequently. Tourism will flourish, businesses will multiply, abundant housing will establish Dubuque as a model for others to follow... and we WILL return full, daily air service to the Dubuque Regional Airport...

All of this will bring even more plentiful recreational activities and other amenities that will make Dubuque an ever more vibrant and thriving place to call home.

Our path ahead is clear. We are a city on the move. We are a region on the move. We refuse to stand in place. We refuse to submit to the forces that relentlessly try to push us backward. Let us commit, here and now, to work together toward innovation, growth, and progress; to achieve true greatness as a community and realize our dream of building a sustainable and resilient city, and an inclusive and equitable Masterpiece on the Mississippi where ALL are welcome.

This is our commitment to each other today, tomorrow, and every day that we have the great fortune to call Dubuque, OUR city, and OUR home.

Thank you all for being here today, thank you for your continued dedication to Dubuque, and thank you for all you will do in the year ahead for our great City.