



# STATE OF THE CITY

MAYOR BRAD CAVANAGH

FALL 2024



Thank you all for being here today for Dubuque's 2024 State of the City address. It is wonderful to see all of you, and it's an honor to be here with you to share Dubuque's successes, opportunities, and challenges.

Once again this year, I want to begin with some very important thank yous. First, let's take a moment to thank the Hotel Julien staff for their hospitality and service this morning.

Next, please join me in thanking the Dubuque Area Chamber of Commerce. Molly and everyone at the Chamber, thank you for your continuing partnership in making this event possible every year.

I want to thank the entire City of Dubuque staff for the work they do for all of us every day of the year. It takes a lot to keep an entire city running at full speed, but most of all it takes dedicated people who have chosen to answer the higher call of public service. Without these neighbors, friends and family members of ours doing this essential work, Dubuque would not be what it is today.

Alongside City staff, there are the folks who have chosen to serve on a City board or commission, and countless numbers of volunteers who serve the community in so many ways. Thank you to each of you, as well.

I always want to be sure to mention some particular City of Dubuque staff members who must endure working with me more often than others. This includes City Manager Mike Van Milligen, Assistant City Manager Cori Burbach, City Clerk Adrienne Breitfelder, Assistant City Clerk Trish Gleason, City Attorney Crenna Brumwell, Public Information Officer Randy Gehl, Technical Grant Analyst Justin Thiltgen, and Director of Strategic Partnerships Teri Goodmann. Thank you to each of you for helping me as I prepared these remarks, and for helping me serve to the best of my ability as Mayor.

Of course, there are my City Council colleagues, Ric Jones, David Resnick, Susan Farber, Laura Roussell, Danny Sprank, and Katy Wethal.

I keep saying this over and over, and I do that because it's the truth. Our City Council is one of the most dedicated, compassionate and professional groups of people one could ever hope for. Thank you each for your service to the Dubuque community.

I am also incredibly thankful for the continuing partnerships we share with our elected and appointed officials in Dubuque County Government, the State of Iowa, and in our capital in Washington, D.C. These partnerships are so essential to everything we do here in Dubuque and I am grateful to each of these individuals for their service.

Finally, thank you to my amazing wife Jennifer, our sons 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.

Well, here we are again. Another year is behind us and I have to tell you, we have so much to celebrate. I have never in my life been so excited to live in Dubuque. The state of our city is truly strong. You may recall that last year I actually managed to work the subject of physics into my state of the city speech, discussing how cities in motion remain in motion, along with the risks of letting a city's momentum come to rest.

I won't repeat this theme this year, but I will open with another brief physics reference. This one I'll credit to our acclaimed City Manager, Mike Van Milligen.

Throughout this past year, Mike has been fond of repeating a phrase that I think is a perfect precursor to my remarks today. It goes something like this, "Buckle up Dubuque, because we are about to reach escape velocity!"

I could not agree more. Today I am going outline the reasons why there has never been a more exciting time to live in Dubuque, Iowa. I

will share the many successes of this past year, and the projects, initiatives, and partnerships behind these successes.

I will also share the challenges that lie ahead. Because while we are in a period of growth and exciting change, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels in this moment. We must continue to push forward with all our might to create a thriving and vibrant future together.

I have to be honest with you about something. Sitting down to write this speech this year was a bit more daunting than usual because there is simply so much going on in our city.

In fact, our city manager recently pointed out that in his 31 years on this job, he has never seen so many projects and initiatives happening at the same time in Dubuque.

And you can see this, can't you? Drive down any street in our downtown right now and you can see the action. You can see cranes, fences, and work crews, and new buildings and new facades.

You can see freshly paved and freshly painted roads in all corners of the community.

Even better, you can feel the energy all around us. It's everywhere and it is very, very real.

Now stick with me for a bit because I am about to fire off a LONG list of measurable accomplishments in the past year. And I am going to illustrate how these successes directly impact our safety, security, and our quality of life.

## **SAFETY**

On the subject of our safety, the City Council and City of Dubuque staff have focused on public safety personnel, public safety programming, safe housing and community-wide roadway improvements.

This past year, we have taken great strides to further improve the already stellar public safety services we enjoy in the City of

Dubuque. I'll begin with our work with the Police Department. Across the country, police departments are facing unprecedented challenges in hiring and retaining officers and Dubuque is no exception. In an effort to combat this situation, my City Council colleagues and I approved multi-year pay increases across the entire department, including among supervisory ranks within the department. We implemented similar multi-year pay increases within the Fire Department, as well.

Our Police Department has continued to modernize policing for today's needs, fully implementing a new Crisis Intervention Team to respond to community residents who need more than traditional police intervention. This approach involves active partnerships with many different community organizations and a holistic approach to crisis situations.

Our Fire Department is nearing the end of a comprehensive study of fire station locations and processes. Through this study, the department will identify the most efficient and effective ways to answer calls from our residents in need as quickly as possible.

And, with national accreditation for both our police and fire departments, and thanks to dedicated, compassionate public safety personnel in police, fire, and emergency communications, we continue to live in one of the safest cities of our size in all of the United States.

In the area of housing safety, residents spoke up this year with concerns about housing inspections within the City of Dubuque. They were concerned that too much time can lapse between inspections, and safety violations might go unreported for too long, leaving too many of our residents living in potentially unsafe environments.

Our Housing and Community Development Department took immediate action following these collaborative conversations with community members and brilliantly found a solution.

The City Council recently adopted a new inspection cycle that will allow every rental property in the city to undergo some form of inspection every two years. This is an incredible community-led improvement to living conditions in our city, and city staff and community members alike deserve credit for their excellent work on this effort.

Finally, our city Public Works and Engineering Departments have taken on massive improvements in the past two years to road resurfacing and remarking efforts.

Thanks to extra focus and funding from our City Council on roadway improvements and safety, we have been able to resurface and reconstruct several more miles of roadway than usual the past two years.

Thankfully, in the year ahead, the City Council has once again prioritized the street improvement program to keep this essential work progressing.

## **SECURITY**

As we have further improved on the safety of our community, we have carefully worked to guarantee our long-term security, through resiliency, sustainability, and critical infrastructure.

An essential component of any city's future security is the attraction, retention, and well-being of the City staff who serve the public every single day.

As the pandemic upended every aspect of the workplace throughout almost every industry, the City of Dubuque as an organization has been no exception.

The City Council made city workforce retention and attraction a priority last year. We have increased employee salaries to better attract workers in a highly competitive marketplace.

We continue to work through a thorough study of City wages to keep wages in line with comparable cities and industries, and the City

has embarked on an extensive emotional intelligence training program to ensure a workplace culture that is as effective as it can possibly be.

In making this a priority again this year, the City Council will remain focused on this important issue and keep working toward measurable results.

We have continued in our relentless pursuit of additional housing throughout our community. The City Council has passed even more housing incentives this year to do all we can to get housing built and occupied as soon as possible.

Since the time it was reported that Dubuque was 1100 housing units short of where it needs to be to keep and grow our population, we have added over 2400 units of housing now in some stage of development.

The City Council and City staff will continue to explore the best ways to ensure this housing gets built now that it is approved. We will do all we can to keep adding this essential community amenity. In the realm of physical infrastructure, the City has made continuous improvement on odor reduction efforts at the Water and Resource Recovery Plant. We have begun critical buildouts along the Catfish Creek Sanitary Sewer and several key sewer lift stations in the City.

We have finally reached the funding tipping point to move work forward on the Bee Branch Gates & Pumps project. This is a vital piece of the Bee Branch project that will pump excess water out past the floodwall from the Bee Branch detention basin, ensuring we continue to fight against the devastating flooding we have known all too well.

And, through successful advocacy and key partnerships with our Federal representatives, our city secured a highly competitive \$25 million RAISE grant to build a railroad overpass and complete street network at 14th Street and the 16th Street corridor.

Let's just say our Engineering Department is going to be a little busy for the next few years! And with that in mind, the City Council has continued to prioritize key infrastructure projects in the year ahead to keep the focus on our community's security.

Finally, I want to touch on the way Dubuque has taken a giant leap forward on securing what we could call our "human infrastructure".

Through painstaking, innovative, and steadfast collaboration between the public and private sectors, Dubuque has found a real way forward in providing childcare to Dubuque families.

At the Bright Minds Campus on Chavenelle Road, the City of Dubuque, Dubuque County, the Dubuque Community School District, the State of Iowa, the Greater Dubuque Development Corporation and Dubuque Initiatives have joined forces to increase childcare availability in such a unique way, that it has caught the immediate attention of other communities in the Midwest.

In fact, next month GDDC will welcome the Greater Des Moines Partnership to this campus to see how we managed to pull this off, and how they might make this work in their community.

And today, I want to be sure to welcome special guests accompanying GDDC to this presentation. Please join me in welcoming representatives from the City of Freeport, Illinois and the Greater Freeport Partnership.

They are visiting our community today to learn about this childcare initiative and other projects, while also sharing their best practices with us. We sincerely appreciate your presence here today and your continuing partnership.

One more note on childcare, because the good news does not stop there. We are also seeing expansion in childcare availability through Cottingham & Butler and their new facility, along with a new childcare project in Dyersville, our neighbors right down the road.

With all this expansion, GDDC has secured key partnerships with regional businesses to fund an expansion of the childcare workforce, further ensuring this essential community service for years to come.

## QUALITY OF LIFE

On the Central Avenue corridor, we continue to prioritize housing, streetscape beautification, and business attraction to breathe new life into one of our community's true historical gems.

We are moving forward with a major renovation of the Five Flags Civic Center.

We have seen an expansion and re-energizing of neighborhood associations across the city, giving residents new opportunities to get involved and take ownership and pride in projects happening right in their own backyards.

We have brand new bike lanes downtown with the intention to expand to other streets in the years ahead.

The City Council has prioritized park maintenance and improvement in the coming year to keep our parks attractive and welcoming for all.

And where do I even start on Chaplain Schmitt Island? A new hotel with a rooftop restaurant, a renovated casino, and brand new family fun zone opening soon, new amenities to enjoy the natural beauty of the island and the surrounding Mississippi River, a new biking and walking trail, a brand new amphitheater coming very soon, and so, so many more possibilities.

This new expansion of beauty and excitement along our riverfront will make us the true Gateway to Iowa.

Speaking of tourism, we have even more to add to our already enviable list of local attractions like the National Mississippi River Museum and Aquarium and the constant parade of riverboats that now grace our shoreline.

For the first time in a long time, hotel developers have Dubuque on their radar, looking to play a role in the exciting tourism industry we now foster.

And a huge part of that excitement for visitors and residents alike stems from newly energized private developments led by dedicated partners across our region. From breathtaking expansion plans at the Dubuque Museum of Art, to passion projects like the 897 Central park just opened by Dubuque Forward, and of course, the Field of Dreams, which now has new life thanks to our friends at Dyersville Events.

Everything I just mentioned leads to a better quality of life for all of us living here now, and everyone we will welcome as new Dubuquers in the future.

And everything I just mentioned is even more possible today than it was two weeks ago thanks to one subject I still need to cover—the return of daily commercial air service.

## AIR SERVICE

So far this morning, I have taken you on a pretty wild ride filled with many successes from this past year. For the next few minutes, I want to stick with this one subject, because I believe it is one of the most important in the year ahead.

Since we lost daily air service to a major hub in 2022, community leaders and I have been working non-stop to get this service back. Returning daily air service to a major hub has always been the number one goal and that has never changed.

Following on the hard work done for years by the Chamber Air Service Task Force, we formed the Commercial Air Service Team (CAST) in early 2023. Since that time, a dedicated group of community leaders from various public and private entities have met every week to get service back at the Dubuque Regional Airport.

This year, we formed an official non-profit organization called

DBQ Air, whose sole mission is to restore, maintain, and increase daily commercial air service at our airport.

I want to take a moment now to thank these individuals specifically for their laser-focused dedication to this monumental task.

- Global Flight Solutions consultant, Matt Skinner
- DBQ Regional Airport Director Todd Dalsing
- DBQ Regional Airport Commission Co-Chair, Mariann Kurtz-Weber
- DBQ Area Chamber President and CEO, Molly Grover
- Chair of the DBQ County Supervisors, Harley Pothoff
- President and CEO of the GDDC, Rick Dickinson
- Vice President of Business Services at GDDC, Jason White
- President and CEO of the Q Casino and DRA, Alex Dixon
- Travel DBQ President and CEO, Keith Rahe
- Tavel DBQ Vice President of Community Engagement, Carrie Koelker
- Vice President of Government & External Affairs at the DBQ Area Chamber, Clare Gill
- Executive Assistant & Office Administrator at the DBQ Area Chamber, Melissa Coakley
- DBQ City Manager, Mike Van Milligen
- City of DBQ Dir. Of Strategic Partnerships, Teri Goodmann
- and City of DBQ Public Information Officer, Randy Gehl.

Beginning on November 4th, we will once again have service to a major hub, first at 6 days per week, and very soon, every single day. And this team of people deserves a standing ovation for making this happen!

With this great news has come many questions. I want to take the time this morning to answer some of the questions I have heard most since we announced this great news two short weeks ago.

## WHY THIS AIRLINE?

First, why this airline? Have we talked to other airlines to see if they can offer flights?

Yes, community leaders, working with our air service consultant, have spoken with dozens of airlines that fly all over the country. We have had these conversations with airlines almost weekly since losing service in 2022.

We have learned that the airline industry has gone through a period of great disruption. In many ways, this disruption began all the way back with the tragedies of 9/11, and really intensified following the pandemic of 2020. Dubuque is not unique in facing disruption, but we are definitely unique in losing all of our air service.

As we have spoken with many, many airlines, quite a few have shown some interest in beginning service in Dubuque someday. Just as we have done over the past two years, we will continue to speak as often as possible with every airline we can.

Recently, it was one of these airlines, a smaller, regional powerhouse out of Colorado called Denver Air Connection, that has jumped at the chance to be the first out of the gate in returning daily service to our airport.

With Denver Air, we will fly once again to Chicago O'Hare and connect to everywhere in the world. Denver Air is as excited as we are to join forces. With a high-quality 50-seat jet, a dedicated gate at O'Hare, and (best of all) interline agreements with United, American and soon to be Delta, we can book one ticket, drive 10 minutes to OUR airport, park for free, check our bags one time here in Dubuque, and go through security one time, right here in Dubuque, and simply catch our connection upon arrival at O'Hare and be on our way.

I could not have imagined such a great situation for our first flight as we return commercial service to a major hub from Dubuque.



## WHY THIS FLIGHT TIME?

The next question I hear about our new service is “Why do we have this flight time?” Why don’t we have a morning flight or a flight some other time of the day?

Keep in mind Denver Air is adding us to their already existing schedule. In doing so, they submitted several later afternoon flight times for us to choose from for the one daily flight. DBQ Air, working directly with Todd Dalsing and airport staff, chose the flight time with the most possible connections once we land at O’Hare.

Our reasoning went like this. If we are only able to get one flight per day right now, then let’s maximize everyone’s ability to connect to the most destinations possible.

Trust me, we all miss those multiple flights per day and especially that morning flight. As it stands at this very moment, however, this is the best possible flight time we had to choose from.

## DO WE HAVE TO PAY FOR THIS?

Another question I’ve heard is whether or not we are offering a minimum revenue guarantee to Denver Air for this flight.

We are, and we are doing so with a grant the airport has received from the FAA called the Small Community Air Service Development (SCASD) grant.

In fact, the reason we have this SCASD grant totaling nearly \$2.1 million dollars with matching funds, is because of the tireless advocacy of DBQ Air and other community leaders.

Thanks to this advocacy, our federal partners at the FAA agreed to increase the amount of money in this grant so we could offer an amount to an airline that would actually allow us to restart flights.

Paying a minimum revenue guarantee was always the plan with this SCASD grant. And please, keep in mind that the more people FlyDBQ and use this flight, the

longer this minimum revenue guarantee will last us.

## THIS FLIGHT IS MORE EXPENSIVE

One more thing I have heard people mention is that our new flight is far more expensive than comparable flights at other airports.

Well, it’s not. Currently at \$129 for a direct flight to O’Hare from Dubuque, the cost is directly in line with the cost for a flight from other airports near our region at the same time of day as our flight.

We know we must remain competitive in price for comparable flights, and we will continue to do all we can to make that happen.

## WILL WE GET MORE FLIGHTS?

Finally, I have been asked this question, “Will we get more flights?”

Here is my confident answer to that question. YES....If we FlyDBQ now. We have to show our new partners at Denver Air and all other airlines that Dubuque needs and wants increased air service and we want it...right...now.

We can absolutely make this work, but we have to make it work together. That means you. Each and every one of you.

Get on these flights when it’s time for you to fly again. Tell your boss to make it a company-wide policy to FlyDBQ first. Tell your parents to take those trips to Florida by flying DBQ. Tell every friend you have in Dubuque to FlyDBQ when they go anywhere and tell every friend outside of Dubuque it’s time to visit you right now by flying DBQ.

You are the difference maker in all of this. Together, we can make this first new daily flight successful, and then together we can add that morning flight, add another flight, and then bring on even more flights and more airlines to even more destinations all over the world.

We can do this. You can do this. I know it.

While there is excitement surrounding the return of daily commercial air service to Dubuque, I have heard some nervousness about making it successful. This is understandable given our past challenges.

I want to encourage you to keep asking questions and keep getting information so you know all the facts. Don’t hesitate to call me or anyone from DBQ Air to get those questions answered. It’s okay to be nervous and have questions.

However...I have also heard in the midst of this discussion from some people who think that Dubuque should simply stop trying to have commercial air service at our airport. Instead, we should just get used to driving to the nearest regional airports to fly, or just drive to Chicago when we need to get on a plane.

Statements like this indicate an alarming threat coming from within our own community. The danger with a statement like this, is that this is a losing attitude.

This attitude is a trap, and if we fall into it, the outcomes cascade into a full-on disaster for our city. Let me illustrate what I mean by this.

If this is your opinion, then you are also stating there are many other community benefits that we should simply give up.

You are saying we really shouldn’t have colleges in our city. Bringing young people into our community to learn new skills and become new community members and part of our workforce doesn’t really benefit Dubuque.

You are saying we don’t want any corporate headquarters here. In fact, we should just have fewer businesses in general. Let’s just let our economy shrink to a size we can manage better without air service.

You are saying this includes long-time Dubuque-based businesses in all sectors—manufacturing, industry, finance, service and others. Why would we want these in our city anyway?

Since we are okay with shrinking our economy and moving these businesses elsewhere, we can go ahead and let buildings throughout our downtown and other parts of the city sit vacant for the next few decades. There will be no need to worry about historic preservation anymore, or the upkeep of these vacant and abandoned shells.

And tourism? Let's just forget about that. We don't need people visiting our beautiful city. If they really want to visit, we can just let them know they are going to have to work extra hard to get here. Driving that extra hour and a half (at the least) is just part of the charm of the trip.

And if this is your attitude, you are saying that we are totally fine with losing population and losing visitors every year. And, without all these people around, we simply won't need to worry about things like restaurants, stores and small businesses, parks, or entertainment. We can stop spending so much time on these things and just let our city shrink.

80 miles.

80 miles.

That is how far we have to drive right now to get on an airplane that will connect us to the rest of the United States.

80 miles is how far someone needs to drive if they want to get to Dubuque for business, for education, for travel, or to visit family and friends.

This. Is. Unacceptable.

To say that the people of Dubuque should just be fine with losing is unacceptable. And we will not stand for it.

As of today, there is only one other metropolitan statistical area in the whole United States where a person has to drive as far as a Dubuquer does to get on a plane, and that's in the Air Force town of Del Rio, Texas.

I'll repeat that. Dubuque is one of TWO PLACES in the United States that is in this position.

80 miles is unacceptable and we are done with being second-class citizens in this country.

Everyone, we do have a daunting task ahead of us. To get back to the full service airport that we need, want and deserve, we have to work together. I know we can do it, because I know that you have what it takes. All the successes I have mentioned throughout this speech are a perfect example of our ability to get things done together.

Even beyond air service, there is no shortage of challenges in the way of our success.

Many of these challenges come to us from outside the boundaries of our city. While some of these external factors are more difficult for us to control, we can have influence on them by continuing to build strong partnerships outside of Dubuque.

Before I close today, I want to take a moment to explore this further.

## STATE

One example of this is the importance of our partnership with our State Legislature and our State of Iowa government.

As I mentioned last year, I fear our State government is heading down a dangerous path of Big Government where laws that infringe upon local freedom are dictated from Des Moines to the residents of cities and towns across our state. This goes directly against our state constitution, where local freedom is enshrined and for good reason.

The people of Iowa are the experts on their local communities. They know best how to build responsible local budgets and spend their public tax money in fiscally responsible ways. We also build local consensus to identify what we want where we live.

If our State Legislature continues to take a one-size-fits-all approach through pre-emptive local laws, unfunded mandates, and arbitrary

caps on local public revenue sources, they will be running directly counter to the value of freedom that we hold dear as Iowans.

The people of Dubuque know that we must strike a delicate financial balance with public money and keep the tax burden in our community as low as we possibly can.

The City Council that represents the people of Dubuque knows this, too, and we have demonstrated a successful track record of responsible budgeting, responsible spending, and responsible use of debt for years, and we will do so again in the year to come.

At the same time, if we want to build a truly vibrant city, a truly resilient city, and a strong, thriving and successful city, we must invest in this place we love.

I call on all of our local legislators, their legislative colleagues across the state, and our Governor to keep working closely with us to maintain our local freedom. As the experts on our community, Dubuquers are your partners. I know we can find common ground with you that will allow us to live and work freely in our community.

## FEDERAL

Another important and lasting partnership is with our Federal Government in Washington, D.C. The greatest modern challenge stemming from our nation's capital for a community our size is the sheer level of uncertainty of today's political environment.

Will there be a government shut down or will there not? Will Congress be able to find consensus and pass more than 27 laws in a single year? Who will be our next president come January? Because the difference in administrations will be starkly different depending on the outcome.

In an environment swimming with this much uncertainty, true partnerships built on respect, honesty, and real collaboration are essential for Dubuque's continued success.

It is our role at the local level to build professional relationships with our Federal partners that keep them in touch with the realities of people living in our community, and then yield real results that benefit all of us.

And at this, Dubuque has excelled. This is evident in the list of Federal grants we have received in just the past two years.

- \$16 million from the Economic Development Administration and FEMA for the Bee Branch Gates and Pumps project
- \$1 million from the Environmental Protection Agency for the Granger Creek Lift Station.
- Over \$5 million in ARPA funding for the Bright Minds Campus and Schmitt Island Amphitheater
- \$100,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts for VOICES and the Dubuque Museum of Art.
- \$1.5 million urban forestry grant from the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture to plant 5,000 trees in the next 5 years with our friends at Dubuque Trees Forever
- \$200,000 from the U.S. Dept of Justice to hire two mental health officers.
- \$2.6 million from the US Dept of Transportation for Jule bus route optimization and low/no emission EV buses.
- \$4.5 million from the FAA for or SCASD grant and solar and runway projects
- \$2 million for a SMART transportation grant for our STREETS project to optimize traffic flow in the city
- And of course, that \$27 million I already mentioned for the RAISE grant to build the 14th street overpass and 16th street corridor improvements.

You see, even when presented with challenges on a national scale, we find ways in Dubuque to get the job done.

This is what gives me so much hope and excitement for our city's future.

I am convinced that we have reached a decisive moment in our history. What we all choose to do next in our city will dramatically shape the next 20 years.

When we work together. When we remain united in our cause to build a sustainable, resilient city and inclusive and equitable community where ALL are welcome.

When we enter into honest, healthy and respectful discussion where we truly listen to one another to reach understanding.

When we Imagine the Dubuque we want to create together, and dedicate ourselves to making that vision a reality.

That is how we will create our true Masterpiece on the Mississippi.

You can do it. We can do it. Together.

Thank you for joining me here today. Thank you for your commitment to our great community. And thank you for joining with me to make Dubuque even better in the years to come. May God bless you, and may God bless our great city.

Thank you.