

2024 State of the City Address: The Bright Horizon Ahead

Welcome

What an incredible evening we have tonight. I want to extend a heartfelt welcome to each and every one of you, your presence speaks volumes about your dedication to our city. As we gather tonight, we do so as a unified community with shared aspirations.

Please join me in kicking this off with a round of applause to thank the Western DuPage Chamber of Commerce Board and staff for sponsoring tonight's Address.

They have done a fantastic job, on top of providing unwavering support for our business community.

As Mayor, it's an honor to stand before you reflecting on the past year and looking to the bright horizon ahead.

But I can't do this alone, our community's remarkable growth wouldn't have been possible without the devoted men and women of the West Chicago City Council. Together they answer the difficult call of leadership and service.

Julie, my lovely wife of almost 34 years. I cannot thank you enough for your support. Knowing I have you by my side makes any challenge surmountable.

I'd also like to recognize our hardworking city employees. From our dedicated public safety personnel to our skilled public works teams, and everyone in between – your passion and professionalism make a difference in the lives of our residents every single day.

Tonight's address is a testament to what we can achieve when we work together.

Traversing the Rocky Road

Last year, we laid the groundwork for West Chicago's future and called for investments into the next era of our city. Tonight, I'm pleased to highlight our progress and share exciting developments on the horizon.

In the fall, the City Council approved an innovative Community Park Master Plan to bring new life to the former Kerr McGee site. This phased plan will revitalize the area over several years, allowing for incremental improvements as we complete the final stages of cleanup.

I'm thankful for the steadfast support of Senator Karina Villa and Representative Maura Hirschauer, who championed legislation to enable the release of remediated portions of the property.

If approved, we could begin establishing a natural planting area as soon as this year.

While West Chicago was among the first to raise water and sewer rates to combat soaring infrastructure costs due to supply chain disruptions and inflation, nearly every other community has since either followed suit or is planning to do so. Additionally, the City faces financial challenges due to federal and state mandates, including the removal of phosphorus from wastewater discharge and the replacement of lead service lines, with costs totaling approximately \$15 million.

I'd also like to acknowledge that after a few years of retirements and turnover following the pandemic, we now have a rounded complement of experts and leaders amongst our staff.

And although we will of course feel the loss of institutional knowledge, our staff leadership team has the expertise and momentum to bring new perspectives and energy to our community.

While this has been a challenging road, I'm thrilled to see West Chicago turning the corner together.

Reinvestment

We are enjoying an era of reinvestment in our community, especially when it comes to our infrastructure. In 2023, the City allocated \$1.5 million to projects like replacing sidewalks and curbs, road resurfacing, and sanitary sewer line rehabilitation.

We also invested \$8 million towards several capital improvements, including:

- The replacement of a 50-year-old Lift Station and forcemain, which will mark the end of repairs to the aging infrastructure that was failing underneath the steps to the commuter station.
- Nearly completing the \$2 million renovation of 200 Main Street, which now boasts upgraded structural elements, modernized electrical systems, and revitalized interior spaces. This restoration not only honors our history but also prepares for future development along Main Street; soon our Gallery 200 will return to operate at this former Town Hall building.
- Lastly, the City completed the resurfacing of Technology Boulevard from Fabyan Parkway to Roosevelt Road. And our commitment towards maintaining industrial roadways doesn't end here.
- The City Council approved a 0.5% Home Rule Sales Tax increase that will cover the principal and interest payments for a bond issuance towards future industrial street projects.

You invested in us and in turn we are investing in our community and mapping our needs for the future ahead.

Results

One way we measure successful growth is through the City's Equalized Assessed Valuation, the estimated value of all taxable property in West Chicago. Our community property values have seen tremendous growth, more than doubling since 1996 and growing by \$54 million in 2023.

This exciting and important metric spotlights the economic health and vitality of our community and the growing demand for West Chicago real estate.

In 2023, we welcomed a new multi-family development featuring 24 units. This independent living facility for people with disabilities is the first multi-family downtown development in almost two decades and I believe it is a sign of the great possibilities to come.

And in the planning stages are several opportunities to welcome new neighbors into our community. A Senior development is planned at the southern end of the office park off Roosevelt Road; a Habitat for Humanity Subdivision west of the Main Park apartments, and an age restricted townhome development north of the Atlantic Drive/Route 64 intersection.

We are also in early discussions with a regionally known developer for a townhome development at High Street and Center Street.

While these projects are still in the planning phases, nearing completion is our annexation of Trillium Farms which will add more than 80 homes to our community by the end of this year.

I'm also excited to announce that the majority of the City's major vacant buildings are now occupied with new tenants, including:

- Cocoa Notes, who is serving delicious baked goods out of the former Wiant House. If you haven't tried them already, their quiches are fantastic.
- Tropical Smoothie Café with a revitalization of the old State Bank
- the former PNC Bank is now a dental office; and
- the empty Shell Station at Dayton Avenue and Route 59 will be redeveloped as a more modern gas station with commercial space and a drive-thru.

Furthermore, I'm thrilled to share that the Mosaic Crossing Shopping Center is at full occupancy for the first time in almost 20 years!

In 2023, we welcomed 72 new businesses that will eventually employ over 400 individuals.

With all the interest and investment in West Chicago real estate, it's no wonder the City was a finalist for the Illinois Real Estate Journal's City of the Year Award.

In addition to welcoming all of these new developments, our existing businesses are experiencing remarkable growth as well. Fifteen of our businesses are expanding their operations, contributing to over \$10 million in investment within our community.

And on top of that impressive figure, Jel Sert recently announced its own \$10 million expansion that will create 50 additional full-time jobs. We're proud to have The Jel Sert Company as part of our vibrant industrial landscape, and I'd like to congratulate them for reaching this significant milestone.

The commercial and industrial landscape of our City is indeed flourishing, and I am proud to announce that currently, 95 acres of the DuPage Business Center are under contract for development, with an additional 34 acres receiving offers for development.

This is an astounding feat for West Chicago and the region as a whole.

Where We Get to Go Next

As I close out spotlighting the amazing growth in private development, I'd like to draw attention to a few exciting public investments starting with a recently completed Space Needs Analysis.

This important study outlines our organizational needs while also identifying how to meet the expanding service requirements of our residents. The analysis is the first step towards creating a new municipal campus along Washington Street and preparing our current City Hall for redevelopment.

These actions will serve as catalysts to revitalize our downtown and offer a City Hall that welcomes public engagement.

During the next year, we'll refine design discussions and, most importantly, review financing options for this community invigorating project.

Other significant public investments on the horizon include three grant funded initiatives that recently received state approval thanks to the advocacy of Senator Villa. With the funding agreements now in place, we can proceed and be reimbursed almost \$2 million.

- First, as you may have already seen, crews are rehabilitating the Fremont Street Water Tower. This iconic structure, built in 1952, is the City's oldest water tower and serves as a focal point of our downtown.

After several years of waiting on the documents from the staff at the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, a grant agreement is finally in place.

- The City Council authorized work to begin in April, with an anticipated completion date this July. As part of this project, the tower will receive maintenance, safety upgrades, and a fresh coat of paint.
- Next, in 2022, the City conducted several studies for installing a new traffic signal at IL-38 and Technology Boulevard. After extensive coordination with IDOT and the DuPage Airport Authority, I'm pleased to report that the City has the *green light*, along with the glorious *green of state funding*, to move forward with this important traffic signal in the fall.

Lastly, earlier this evening, I mentioned a desire to develop the property along Washington Street.

- There are many steps to get this done, beginning with environmental remediation due to the sites' previous use as a storage yard and fueling station. As part of the efforts to get the project underway, the City commissioned a report from its consultant that will provide remediation options and costs. With this guidance, and financial support from a long-awaited Grant Agreement, the City will have the direction and funding needed to set the stage for the property's future development.

These are all extremely exciting items to be celebrated as each required significant time, effort, and advocacy from our many supporters. Guiding the maintenance of our infrastructure is a big part of what we do as elected officials, and it is work we are honored to see through.

That being said, not just as a Mayor, but as simply a resident, I am so grateful to see these highly visible and long-awaited projects come to fruition for our community.

How we can get there together

As a City Council, we show our support for the community in numerous ways, such as approving a formal Veterans' Day Banner Program that celebrates our local heroes each year. This new Program removes barriers to how many honorees can participate and streamlines the nomination process. It's our commitment to ensuring that the sacrifices of our veterans are forever honored within our community.

In addition, we have strengthened our support for our senior residents. I'm proud to announce that the City Council increased the City's contribution to the DuPage Senior Citizens Council from \$10,000 to \$24,000.

This boost will ensure that the services provided by the County will meet the growing needs of our senior residents.

Furthermore, we take pride in celebrating West Chicago through the cultivation of City events. From the lively Blooming Fest this past weekend to the tantalizing Food Festival scheduled for August 24th, Halloween Festivities on October 26th, and Frosty Fest on December 7th; I relish sharing these celebrations with you.

Plus, new for 2024, in partnership with Healthy West Chicago, the City will host a Fit 4 Fall 5K on September 21st. This new event provides participants the opportunity to enjoy a collective walk or run along the Illinois Prairie Path in Reed-Kepler Park, embracing the beauty of the season.

As we move forward, we recognize the invaluable contributions of our community partners, who play a pivotal role in making West Chicago the vibrant city it is.

However, I must share with a heavy heart the departure of Carly Smitherman, Healthy West Chicago's Program Administrator, after over seven years of dedicated service.

Carly was instrumental in setting up many of the organization's initiatives, including cooking classes with the West Chicago Public Library District and Family Wellness Nights with District 33.

Additionally, she coordinated events such as the Move the Mayor initiative, Yoga in the Park, and the 5K Fun Run.

Outside of initiating these cherished community programs, Carly also supported the installation of bike repair stations along the Illinois Prairie Path.

Her diligent work earned Healthy West Chicago national recognition with a Public Policy Award from the National Forum for Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention.

We're all going to miss Carly; she championed amazing progress within her role. The City and the community wish her and her family all the best in their future endeavors.

Although this departure is an unfortunate loss, the City and its community supporters will continue to champion the Healthy West Chicago program and are currently in the search for a new Program Administrator.

I think this is a good moment to reflect on our many dedicated community partners and recognize that their efforts are a large reason why West Chicago was ranked the 9th "Best Place to Live for Families in the U.S." in 2022 by Fortune Magazine.

Our community partners continue to provide opportunities for us to come together and celebrate, including:

- Railroad Days from June 27th through June 30th, which will once again be expertly organized by our partners at the Western DuPage Chamber of Commerce;
- Taco and Art Festival will be held on July 20th by our friends at the West Chicago Park District, promising a feast for the senses; and

- Lastly, the Mexican Cultural Center DuPage is planning to host the Mexican Independence Day festival this September, welcoming people from across the region to West Chicago to celebrate an important day for Mexican heritage and culture.

Moreover, I'm thrilled to announce the upcoming Olmec Trails public art exhibition, featuring works by 33 artists on large Olmec head sculptures, thanks to the Mexican Cultural Center DuPage.

As a Municipal Hub Sponsor, the City will exhibit four sculptures in West Chicago and we are already hosting several participating artists within Gallery 200 where you can connect with the artistic process. Initiatives like this showcase our commitment to the culture of West Chicago.

This Exhibit is sure to follow in the highly successful footsteps of their *Alebrijes: Creatures of a Dream World* exhibition from 2022, and the City is extremely proud to be a supporter and partner of this wonderful new initiative.

Additionally, thanks to a grant from the DuPage Foundation, we'll soon embark on a downtown public mural program, adding color and vibrancy to our community's heart.

Our tapestry of events, community partnerships, and art initiatives continue to showcase the City Council's investment in a unique and attractive place to visit while still offering a special place to call home.

Conclusion

2023 marked a tremendous year, and as we step into the future with 2024, the promise of continued success shines brightly.

I know that with the people in this room and our partners City-wide, we can take on any challenge.

Even with the State of Illinois government threatening to remove the grocery tax, draining more than \$400,000 from our budget and its continued attempts to pre-empt our home rule authority and exacerbate public safety pension funding.

With your help and advocacy, we can lobby for our fair share of the State-shared income tax dollars, known as the Local Government Distributive Fund or LGDF, to balance out this financial loss and address new state mandates. With your assistance we can not only continue essential services but take on the necessary work to grow into the best version our community can be.

This year, as we celebrate the City of West Chicago's 175th anniversary milestone, our ongoing achievements stand as a testament to our journey from humble beginnings to the vibrant community we are today.

Reflecting on the current landscape of our city while envisioning the bright horizon ahead, I am more excited than ever for the future of West Chicago and I am filled with immense pride to call this City my home.

Thank you again for joining me tonight.

May God bless you all, may God bless West Chicago, and may God bless the United States of America.