



# THE STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Presented by  
THE HONORABLE ANNABETH SURBAUGH  
Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners

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Tuesday, April 8, 2008  
12 o'clock noon  
The Ritz Charles  
9000 West 137th Street, Overland Park, Kansas 66221

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[Introduction by Greg Musil, for the Johnson County Chambers' Public Policy Council.]

*[Presentation of a Clear Air flag by Roderick Bremby, Secretary of the Kansas Department of Health & Environment, recognizing Johnson County as being the first county in the State of Kansas to enact restrictions on smoking in public places.]*

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Thank you, Secretary Bremby. I'm pleased to accept this "Clean Air" flag, which recognizes Johnson County for being the first county in Kansas to enact restrictions on smoking in public places. The County's actions are aimed at sustaining a healthy environment for our citizens by helping to reduce the health risks associated with second-hand smoke. Those smoking restrictions protecting personal health of our citizens reinforce the fact that sustainability and conservation are priorities of this community and its county government.

Sustainability is often interpreted as an environmental matter, and rightfully so; but, in its broadest meaning, sustainability is about creating and maintaining a better community for present and future generations. I'm proud to say that County Government has led by example in spearheading "green" initiatives. For example, our Sunset Drive Office Building is the very first LEED Gold certified facility in Johnson County. It's only the second LEED Gold building in the metro area and in the state of Kansas. This building has become a great source of pride, winning many awards and national recognition for its environmentally-friendly and energy-saving features. Other examples of the County's sustainable practices can be found in the program on the tables today. I believe a commitment to sustainability must underpin all of our decisions and actions. Sustainability must become the community's way of addressing both environmental concerns as well as a broad range of issues and challenges that face our county.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's my pleasure to welcome each of you to the 2008 State of the County Address. As in prior years, I'd also like to extend my thanks to the Johnson County Chambers' Public Policy Council for co-sponsoring this event. I am grateful, as always, for your assistance in helping to bring this message to the people of Johnson County. And thank you, Greg, for that kind introduction.

I'm also pleased to recognize the members of Johnson County's leadership team who are here today. If you'd please stand when I call your name: Sheriff Frank Denning; Chief Judge Stephen Tatum; Second District Commissioner John Segale; Third District Commissioner David Lindstrom; Fourth District Commissioner Ed Eilert; Fifth District Commissioner Doug Wood; and Sixth District Commissioner John Toplikar. Commissioner Ed Peterson could not be with us today.

I also would like to welcome two special guests in attendance today. They are our regional partners: Kansas City Mayor Mark Funkhouser and Jackson County Executive Mike Sanders. Your presence here today, gentlemen, reminds us that we're part of a regional community, and that we must think and act that way for the benefit of all of our citizens in the metropolitan area. Thank you, both, for joining us today.

Finally, I'd like to recognize County Manager Mike Press and the more than four thousand men and women of County Government for all of their dedication and combined efforts. Because of them, the County is able to fulfill its goal of providing the best mandatory and discretionary services that support the high quality of life our residents enjoy. In fact, the County's 2007 Citizen Survey indicated an overall satisfaction level of 92 percent, compared to a national average of just 77 percent. Johnson County continues to outpace the national ratings for several quality of life indicators for comparable communities across the nation.

The survey showed that 79 percent of respondents were satisfied with the quality of the County's services, as compared to the national average of 53 percent. Sixty-six percent of those surveyed were satisfied with the management of the County's growth and development, compared to the national average of 48 percent. And, 58 percent were satisfied with the value received for the tax dollar investments in Johnson County, as compared to a national average of 42 percent. In total, 96 percent of respondents stated they believed Johnson County was a "good" or "excellent" place to live and raise a family, with 89 percent indicating that Johnson County was a "good" or "excellent" place to work. Obviously, we're very pleased with these survey results. However, we are mindful that there is still much to do and always room for improvement.

Finally, as in other communities across our great nation, Johnson County has family members in harm's way overseas in the War on Terrorism. They include twenty-nine Johnson County employees who are serving or who have served in active duty—many of them serving multiple deployments. Since April 2003, nine members of the Kansas National Guard and thirteen Kansas residents have lost their lives while serving our country in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Four of the casualties were from Johnson County. Sadly, having to lower the flags each time a brave Kansas soldier is lost is the most heartbreaking of duties and one that we pray, each time, will be the last. At this time, I'd ask you to join me in a moment of silence for all those who have served and continue to serve their country far from their homes and loved ones.

*[Moment of Silence observed]*

Thank you.

In reporting the State of the County today, I take great pride in saying that our Community of Choice remains a great place to live, to work, and to raise our families. We have the finest schools, excellent libraries, a beautiful park system and open spaces, low crime rates, and safe neighborhoods. Johnson County Government continues to do its job quite well, providing real value for every dollar of our taxpayers' money. How do we know this? Well, in addition to the positive results from our recent Citizen Survey, we know this because the County was successful in lowering its operating budget this year by more than 4 percent—about a \$33 million savings for taxpayers. And, the County has held the line on property taxes. In fact, out of the 105 counties in Kansas, Johnson County has the lowest mill levy. And we've held that line even as the community has continued to grow and prosper by nearly 10,000 new residents every year. The County's conservative financial management has earned us the coveted AAA bond rating from both Moody's and Standard & Poor's credit rating services. The AAA rating means that Johnson County has the stability and the ability to weather tough economic times while also attracting leading businesses. It's not just about getting low interest rates on municipal bonds; it's about reinvesting in our community, just like a business watching its bottom line.

Finally, Johnson County's reserves are a key factor in that excellent rating—a fact which also means that we are prepared to withstand storms on the horizon. Those storms include national issues outside of our control, but which have a very real and significant impact on our community. Rising fuel costs; an economic downturn; a housing slowdown and subprime mortgage industry meltdown; and higher unemployment are among the many concerns for our nation and for our local community. As the community's "safety net," Johnson County cannot avoid these issues. We know all too well that in tough economic times the need for County programs increases. It's when times are hardest that people need us the most. That's perhaps the best definition of sustainability for the County—sustaining the community.

The demands for public assistance from County Government are increasing. They are increasing for food; for clothing; and for money to pay utilities and rent. More and more, citizens in our community are struggling to find homes they can afford. The sad reality is that a growing percentage of our citizens are unable to “invest” in their community through home ownership. They are not able to achieve that most American of dreams—that of home ownership...at least not in Johnson County. That’s an ironic twist for a premiere community that has enjoyed a strong local economy and increasing property values.

Providing affordable housing options is critically important to sustaining our quality of life and smart, sustainable growth. It’s time that we get serious about this issue; it’s something we all know must be addressed. In fact, the issue of affordable housing was identified at our leadership summits over the past two years. But as Will Rogers once said: “Even if you’re on the right track, you’ll get run over if you just sit there.”

That’s why I convened a task force this past year to study and make recommendations on how we can address affordable housing as a community. I’m pleased to report today that the Affordable Housing Task Force has concluded its work and has submitted its final report and recommendations. The report soon will be presented to the Board of County Commissioners and then to the cities for their review and consideration. The focus of that report is about getting Johnson County on track to offer residents what they need most with respect to housing: choices.

*[Video about affordable housing]*

Thanks to Gary Anderson and Paul Robben for co-chairing the Affordable Housing Task Force, and to the more than 100 volunteers who participated in the process this past year.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the focus of my address today is the proposed renewal of the quarter-cent sales tax for public safety. After all, sustaining our community includes ensuring a “safe” community. So, while I have you as a captive audience, allow me to explain what the County is proposing through its ballot question on the sales tax.

On August 5th, voters will be asked to decide if the existing sales tax should be renewed as a dedicated funding source for public safety services and operations that will benefit our entire community. This tax has been in place since 2002 and is scheduled to end this December. For six years now, the County has deferred its share of the revenue from this quarter-cent sales tax to provide grants totaling more than \$102 million to our local public school districts. This sales tax is the last remaining sales tax authority available to the County.

Renewing this existing sales tax is simply the best—the very best—solution to sustaining public safety.

More than half of the inmates in the county jail are not Johnson County residents. They’re in our jail simply because they committed crimes in Johnson County. As I tell people, they do the time where they do the crime. And, as a result, they’re doing their time on our taxpayers’ dime.

The fact is that roughly one-third of all sales tax revenue collected is from visitors to Johnson County. That’s why I support using this existing quarter-cent sales tax to fund public safety programs—because it ensures the growing financial burden of public safety services doesn’t fall just on the backs of Johnson County’s taxpayers. It distributes that burden over both residents and visitors alike. And, using a sales tax has the further advantage of helping to keep property taxes for those who live here in check; which is another reason that I support using this sales tax for our community’s public safety needs.

Public safety services and operations are main elements in the County’s annual budget. That impact has increased steadily—and dramatically—over the past decade, and continues to increase each year. Just four years ago, public safety accounted for 22 percent of the total budget, which amounted to about \$122 million. This year, public safety accounts for 24 percent of the total budget, with a bottom-line impact that now stands at \$178 million. One of the primary factors driving those budgetary increases is the significant increase in the County’s daily inmate population. During the past two decades, the County’s population has almost doubled. But in that same time period, the inmate population in our jails has more than tripled.

These are the real facts behind why we have placed the sales tax question to a countywide vote in August.

I am often asked if the sales tax for public safety has a sunset date. The answer is no. Why? Because public safety doesn’t have a sunset. It’s the top responsibility of local government, and one of the highest priorities of

our citizens. And, as already demonstrated, public safety accounts for one of the most significant budgetary items which has increased substantially over the past 20 years, and which will continue to increase as our community continues to grow. Public safety operations encompass more than the facilities in which those programs and activities take place. Constructing a new crime lab, building a new complex for juvenile justice, or expanding the county jail is the easy part. The cost of the brick and mortar is expensive, but it eventually goes away when the construction bonds are paid off. However, there is no end—no sunset, if you will—to the operating costs that are associated with the services and programs that are provided through these public safety facilities.

*[Video about the County Jail]*

As the video demonstrates, our community's growth and prosperity comes with the negative price of increased criminal activity. And that has a significant impact on the County Government. Another factor is the need of policy-makers at all levels to appear tough on crime. The Kansas Legislature has steadily toughened penalties and enacted mandatory minimum sentences that increase the number of people put in the County jail. Johnson County's prosecutors and judges are duty-bound to put criminals away as the law dictates.

No one – absolutely no one – wants to be seen as being soft on crime. But we can't afford the politics that have driven our incarceration rates and costs sky-high at the local level. Simply booking crooks isn't getting the job done. It costs far more to house an inmate than it does to offer an alternative to incarceration. Inmates in the jail receive little in the way of counseling, training, or other self-improvement services that prepare them to transition back into society as productive individuals.

It costs considerably less to place an offender in the County's Corrections program. Those in Corrections receive comprehensive counseling, life and job skills training—and, they are able to pay their debt to society while keeping their jobs, earning wages, paying taxes, and supporting their families. Plus, they actually pay a portion of the costs to participate in the Corrections program. Community Corrections collected almost \$1.25 million last year from offenders in its programs as alternatives to help cover the costs of their rehabilitation or re-entry back into the community after their punishment is done. They paid \$224,000 in income taxes, almost \$18,500 in restitution, about \$541,000 in offender per diem for their lodging and food, and more than \$434,000 in fees. For many offenders, the alternatives offered through the Corrections programs provided by County Government are—in a very real way—a second chance to turn their lives around. One such person is Tony Taylor.

*[Video about Tony Taylor and the Department of Corrections]*

Tony, thank you for being with us today. Please stand to be recognized.

We've also learned that intervention programs—particularly those that target at-risk youth—are an effective means of breaking the endless cycle of incarceration, preventing kids from getting trapped in an escalating pattern of delinquency, violence, and crime. Our commitment to the young people of this community is the reason we are dedicated to construct a new Juvenile Services Complex. This Complex will be a centralized location for critical services that will help to redirect and support troubled youths—and their families—who are at a crossroads. The Complex will offer family-friendly access to comprehensive counseling, substance abuse services, and corrective programs.

*[Video about Juvenile Corrections Programs]*

The Juvenile Services Complex is an investment in our youth and in our community. It's an investment that makes sense. The need for this facility is very real and long overdue. And Commissioner Wood has never let me forget that. Thanks, Doug, for being such a vocal advocate over the years on this important project.

And finally, another important public safety project—a new Crime Lab—has topped the County's capital improvement list for years. The county's Crime Lab is far from Hollywood, but it does share many things in common with CSI. For example, the scientists at the Crime Lab perform a wide range of duties, including DNA, firearms, and fingerprint analysis, and crime scene investigations. However, unlike CSI, the County does not provide our scientists with Hummers to drive.

Seriously, though, unlike the CSI television series, the scientists and technicians at our Crime Lab conduct their detailed work in a facility that's lacking in both space and design. That's where Hollywood's version ends and Johnson County's reality begins. The popularity of CSI has increased the recognition—in fact, the demand—for

Crime Lab services. More and more, juries expect a scientific analysis of evidence to help determine the possible guilt or innocence of those accused of crimes; judges also demand the scientific evidence the Crime Lab provides; and prosecutors rely on the details provided by the Crime Lab's technicians to put together their cases with the goal for a successful conviction.

Finally, Johnson County's Crime Lab also has a reputation of being the best.

*[Video about the Crime Lab]*

Clearly, there are many challenges—and many opportunities—facing our community. But, County Government cannot, and should not, do it alone. Recently, the Board of Commissioners acted upon my recommendation to establish a Criminal Justice Advisory Council. That advisory council will identify alternatives to incarceration without compromising public safety. It will be a cooperative endeavor that brings together gatekeepers—such as the Sheriff, the D.A., judges and court officers, and corrections personnel—as well as stakeholders representing the general public. Involving our citizens in addressing these challenges will be key to our long-term success.

Good local government requires this kind of cooperation and collaboration, an open partnership with all segments of our community—the nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, the faith-based institutions, the businesses in our private sector, our schools, and citizen volunteers. Indeed, our success begins there. That's the message I want Johnson County voters to remember when they go to the polls in August.

Our community is fortunate to have four outstanding community leaders who have stepped up to lead support for the renewal of our quarter-cent sales tax. I'm pleased to introduce this group of citizen volunteers today. Scheduling conflicts prevented three of the four from being here today; however, I am pleased to recognize Ron Wimmer. Ron, would you please stand? The other members of the leadership team include: Larry Winn; Fred Logan; and Bob Regnier. I'd like to thank Ron and the other gentlemen for taking on this important task. The four of you have always been generous with your time and talents for our community. Your leadership of this important effort demonstrates your ongoing commitment to making this community the very best that it can be.

As I've said before: Excellence is not a chance, it's a choice. In all our plans, we must be mindful that we are working to improve and sustain our shared community so that we leave it a better place than when we found it. It is a commitment we must make together as a community. It is a legacy we leave our children and our children's children—it's our "Community of Choice," a safe place where people choose to live, to work, and to raise a family.

May God continue to bless our great nation and our great home, Johnson County.

Thank you.

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