

THE STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

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

* * *

Tuesday, April 11, 2006
 12 o'clock noon
 The Ritz Charles
 9000 West 137th Street, Overland Park, Kansas 66221

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. And thank you, Jim (Allen), for your kind introduction. Once again, I have the privilege of reporting to you on the State of Johnson County, a place we call home; a community of many communities; a "Community of Choice" that is recognized locally, regionally, and nationally as one of the best places in this great nation.

Before I begin my prepared remarks, I would like to thank the Johnson County Chambers' Public Policy Council for once again co-sponsoring this event. As always, your help in bringing this message to the people of Johnson County is very much appreciated.

At this time, I'm pleased to introduce the other members of the County Government's elected leadership team: District Attorney Paul Morrison; Sheriff Frank Denning; Chief Judge Stephen Tatum; First District Commissioner C. Edward Peterson; Second District Commissioner John P. Segale; Fourth District Commissioner Dolores Furtado; Fifth District Commissioner Douglas E. Wood; and Sixth District Commissioner John Toplikar. To each of you: your professionalism, your hard work, and your passion have been an inspiration and have made a positive impact on our community. Thanks for all you do.

During the past four years, I've had the privilege to serve as the Chief Elected Official for Johnson County Government. Because of my position, I'm often credited with all the good things that the County Government does on a daily basis to help make this a "Community of Choice." Frequently, I am asked what single factor has contributed most to Johnson County's success. Without hesitation, I point to our employees.

Every year I say it, but every year it bears repeating: the employees who work for Johnson County Government are the best in the world, hands down. And, they've demonstrated that their commitment, their compassion, and their concern isn't restricted just to Johnson County. In the wake of the most devastating hurricane season on record, our employees answered the call for help from our sister cities, parishes and counties in the Gulf Coast region.

More than sixty employees from fifteen different departments were deployed as volunteers in the County's response to the disaster, serving on sixty-two assigned missions mostly to cities in Mississippi. As I'm speaking, the names of these men and women are being displayed on the screens to my right and left. These County employees contributed a total of 868 work days—which is more than two years collectively!—providing disaster relief services.

In addition, County employees here at home raised more than \$33,000 in donations matched dollar-for-dollar by Kansas City Power and Light for the American Red Cross Hurricane Relief Fund.

Because of our employees' efforts, Johnson County Government was there, responding to emergency and public safety needs, offering compassion, and helping restore order in the Gulf Coast communities.

[---Break for video on Johnson County's response to Gulf Coast Disaster---]

I'm incredibly proud of the Johnson County men and women who volunteered to leave their homes and families to help those in need. Many of them are with us today as our special guests. All of you did an incredible job, and we take great pride in your commitment to the true spirit of public service. Would you all please stand to be recognized?

As I reported to you over the past two years, one of the primary objectives for the Board of County Commissioners has been the creation of a multi-year strategic plan to define the County's priorities and provide benchmarks to help measure our success along the way. The creation of this strategic plan was spurred on by the fact that the County Government had accomplished the future vision provided for us by our Citizens' Visioning Committee. Not only did we complete their list of assignments, we did it ahead of schedule—by fifteen years!

Now, we're building upon that original citizens' vision and expanding it for the future. At the highest level, our strategic plan focuses on four key goals. Those are:

1. To be responsible stewards of our taxpayers' money;
2. To provide the best possible mandatory and discretionary services;
3. To build a "Community of Choice" – a place where people want to live and work; and
4. To advance a positive environment that empowers employee innovation and productivity.

At the root of each of these goals are the concepts of PUBLIC SERVICE, PUBLIC VALUE, and PUBLIC LEADERSHIP.

During the past four years, Johnson County Government has enjoyed many successes which have reflected these goals. As a result, we're continuing to provide excellent service that adds value to this community and demonstrates innovation in meeting and—in many cases—exceeding the expectations of our citizens.

One example that I'd like to specifically highlight involves the Johnson County Library.

A valued community asset, the Library has a national reputation for being one of the best in the industry. It's already received numerous accolades, awards, and honors. Yet, earlier this year, Johnson County Library received an Oscar award of sorts when it was selected as one of only three recipients of the 2005 National Award for Museum and Library Services.

This award is the nation's highest honor for extraordinary public service provided by a library or museum, and was presented during a special ceremony at the White House.

[---Break for video on Library receiving the 2005 National Award for Museum and Library Services ---]

Another significant achievement of the past year has been the successful transfer of the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant.

Roughly one-third of the total property at Sunflower has known areas of contaminated soil; there are more than one hundred old buildings on the property which were probably painted with lead-based paint; and there are literally miles upon miles of pipes that are insulated with asbestos or saturated with explosive residues. All of which will require time-consuming corrective actions.

The good news? Approximately two-thirds of the property has no known hazardous substances, which means that those acres will not require any remedial action. But I have even better news to report. Large-scale environmental remediation and cleanup efforts are scheduled to begin in the next few months—by mid-summer. The goal is to complete the work in seven years at a total clean-up cost estimated at approximately \$200 million.

The remediation schedule will focus first on cleaning the nearly 3,000 acres earmarked for public benefit transfers. That includes about 2,000 acres for the Johnson County Park and Recreation District as well as bio-science research land for the University of Kansas and Kansas State University as well as property for the city of De Soto and its school district. That's all phase one.

Phase two includes the remediation of roughly 6,000 acres to be developed by Sunflower Redevelopment. That will not begin until later this decade or by the beginning of the next decade.

Because of the County's strong commitment to our taxpayers, the best news of all is the fact that the costs for property transfer, remediation, and future redevelopment will not be borne by our taxpayers. In fact, any potential responsibility or liability for the remediation and future development of the property has been removed from County Government. And now, that process of returning more than 9,000 acres of land to productive use is on the fast track and moving in high gear.

[---Break for video on the redevelopment of the Sunflower Army Ammunition Plant property---]

Last year, Johnson County conducted a citizen survey as part of our strategic planning process. The survey results showed that our citizens rank our services and programs very high. In fact, in several categories Johnson County exceeds national benchmarks; including citizen perception of the quality of life in this community; the overall image of the county; the quality of county services; and the value received for tax dollars invested in the county government. At this time, some key successes from the past year are being highlighted on the screens. As you can see, the County has been very busy making progress on all fronts to better serve our citizens.

Last year, I announced the formation of a new committee-type structure of Future Focused Task Forces that were created to enable the Board—as elected policy-makers—to focus on important, future-oriented policy issues and to work with and include the community to identify and develop various alternatives on those issues. I'm pleased to report that we've made headway on both short-term and long-term initiatives because of these task forces.

For example: Commissioner Furtado has achieved tremendous success in coordinating efforts with cities on a proposed ban on smoking in public places. Her Health of the Public and Wellness Task Force has been addressing a critical public health issue, and they've already achieved great success. To date, four cities have adopted ordinances restricting smoking in public places. More cities have expressed interest in a similar measure for their jurisdictions.

Commissioner Peterson's task force has submitted a report with findings and recommendations related to the improvement of air quality. While the Board has yet to take up that report, I'm anxious to move forward in considering those recommendations and taking official action.

Commissioner Segale's Transportation Task Force is set to submit its report this coming Thursday afternoon. Of course, transportation is one issue we all agree is a challenge and a priority for this community. We need a plan to move people easily, safely, and conveniently through the community.

On the long-term side, Commissioner Lindstrom has led a review of a proposed soccer complex which has generated substantial public interest. That obviously has community-wide impact, and we'll continue to monitor that issue as it develops.

In addition, Commissioner Wood and Commissioner Toplikar are working on their assigned tasks—workforce development and economic development—which have significant impact on the quality of life in our community.

While these accomplishments are impressive—and we are very proud of them—we must continue to focus our efforts on doing better. I remember a Nike ad from a few years ago that ran the slogan: “There is No Finish Line.” And that reminds me of the job before us—there really is no finish line. The needs of our citizens do not go away simply because we are meeting today's demands. The necessity to better manage our resources doesn't diminish over time. We have to be looking critically at everything we do. Long-established policies, practices, and habits of mind have to be challenged. Our task is not to accept change, but to shape it, to manage it, and to lead it.

As these slides have demonstrated, Johnson County is actively engaged in reaching out to our community to meet and—wherever possible—exceed the expectations of our citizens. That's why today, ladies and gentlemen, I come before you to report that the state of Johnson County is strong ... but it is vulnerable.

Let me state from the start that there are no simple solutions to the challenges that we face. That's why—just ten days ago—I was pleased to convene a Leadership Summit of all elected city and county leaders so that we could talk, plan, and dream together.

[---Break for video on the first-ever Johnson County Leadership Summit ---]

It was the first time we came together to focus on the future of our community. At the end of the day, there was a consensus that the Leadership Summit was a good beginning toward better interlocal cooperation, communication, and collaboration. The overwhelming consensus was that this was a great experience, and should become an annual event.

As a result of the summit, we've agreed to look at creating a shared legislative platform between the county and cities so that we can better lobby our federal and state governments for needs here at home.

While we must always hope for the best, we must also be ever vigilant in our fight against the unfunded mandate madness. Together, we must send a clear message that we CANNOT tolerate any additional mandates without adequate funds to carry out the tasks being passed down to us. We don't mind that the buck stops with us; we just want to be sure that the federal and state governments give us the bucks to go with it! Speaking in a united voice will help make a difference.

One key theme of the summit was the concept of partnerships—the idea that we rise or fall together; that we are interdependent. We learned that day to speak—not of “city” or “county”—but of “community.”

[---Break for video of Chris Tatham, ETC Institute, regarding common challenges for the community---]

For years, the County Government has been the silent partner that has contributed to and supported the growth and prosperity of this great community. We're the backbone upon which much of our community's successes have been built. That's why, when our public schools were threatened by state funding cuts, the County Government laid aside its interests to ensure the well-being of our schools. Setting aside County priorities for school funding came at a heavy price, delaying much needed County infrastructure projects. It's now time to focus on funding critical infrastructure projects essential to the future of this community.

For two years now, I have stated that the County Government must identify a dedicated, long-term funding source for infrastructure requirements. Our infrastructure needs have not gone away. In fact, the list of County infrastructure projects through the next decade now surpasses \$1 billion and increases more each year. Meeting the challenge of funding necessary infrastructure investments will not be easy. There aren't a lot of funding options, and we cannot put that burden on the property taxes alone.

A few years ago, our Infrastructure Advisory Committee studied our needs and the options of how best to fund them, and they recommended that we utilize a dedicated sales tax. Using the existing sales tax is not a good option, because the County's existing one-cent general sales tax authority is used and needed for other purposes. In fact, as the slide on the screens now illustrates, the revenue from the County's general sales tax last year generated nearly \$63 million for our cities. The County received a total of about \$52 million. Clearly, the distribution of that revenue benefits our cities, and we are committed to preserving that shared distribution formula as it is.

For that reason, the County Government has proposed a separate, dedicated sales tax authority to meet our growing infrastructure needs, and we are pursuing legislation this session to get that authority. That sales tax authority would be separate from and would not affect the existing general sales tax and its shared distribution formula. Receiving the total revenue from this proposed, separate sales tax could fund the County's essential infrastructure needs in the shortest period of time with the least burden on our taxpayers.

The need for the separate tax and the dedicated revenue are very real. On the screens now is a listing of the County's major community projects that must be commenced within the next five years. These projects include an expansion to the existing jail, a new courthouse, a new emergency communications center, a new crime lab, and a new juvenile services building. I maintain that the best funding source for these essential projects is a dedicated infrastructure sales tax.

The price tag on these projects exceeds \$309 million. But that's not all. We have a Capital Improvement Plan with additional costs that exceed \$500 million over the next five years. That list includes additional parkland acquisition, construction of new libraries, roads, and other projects, most of which will need to be funded from other revenue sources.

I hope you noticed a common denominator in our immediate infrastructure needs. It is public safety. Another thing I've repeated each time I've come before you to report on the State of the County is that public safety is job one—our top priority.

These projects—while attached to County Government—actually serve the entire community. Our courts, jails, crime lab, and juvenile justice programs serve all Johnson Countians—regardless of where they live. Public safety is a community responsibility, and these projects will benefit the entire community. The County is reaching out to the community, asking for support from our partners. We know and appreciate that money is tight for everyone—the County's been feeling the pinch for some time now. But, we're asking you to stand with us, not against us, in getting legislation for a dedicated sales tax approved, so that our citizens can have the chance to speak on these weighty matters.

Now is the time for us to work together so that we can achieve those results. Any delay only increases the difficulty we have in funding essential projects and increases the burden placed on our taxpayers. The County understands the concerns that city representatives have about the impact of the separate tax. We want to work with all of our community partners to ensure the cities' interests are not adversely impacted by this proposed sales tax.

As Chairman, I am committed to working with the cities to develop a ballot proposal that meets the critical infrastructure needs of the county and the cities by providing an avenue to fund these projects to benefit the whole community. We ask the cities to join us in this effort.

And while we seek to secure adequate investments in our community's infrastructure, we must not forget that the number of residents struggling to make ends meet is increasing.

[---Break for video on increasing demand for social services in Johnson County ---]

These are painful facts. Like it or not, we have to face up to the fact that Johnson County has growing pockets of citizens who are unable to achieve the good life, who struggle—day in and day out—to make ends meet, and who cannot achieve the American dream of owning their own home.

A significant percentage of people working in Johnson County today earn incomes that are insufficient to pay the rent on an average two-bedroom apartment in this community, much less purchase a home. This includes retail sales workers, school teachers, nurses, police officers, service industry workers, blue collar workers, and administrative staff. These are men and women who are employed in this county, yet cannot afford to call Johnson County their home.

Rising property values also have increased tax bills and placed added burden on our seniors and others who live on limited and fixed incomes. And, those numbers are increasing steadily as our baby-boomers retire or prepare to retire.

As a region, we need to find solutions to provide basic housing that's affordable, that's fair, and that keep residents with limited means in their homes while maintaining their dignity.

I'm glad affordable housing and similar issues were identified at our Leadership Summit as top concerns to be addressed in the near term. I believe that all our community stakeholders—from the public and private sectors, to the nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, to the faith-based community—can get involved and make a difference. To get the ball rolling, I'll be calling for representatives from all our community stakeholders to join me in opening a dialogue about what we can do—working together—to begin addressing this challenge. To that end, I will convene an affordable housing task force to study and develop recommendations for our community. This was a priority issue that was identified at our Leadership Summit, and I believe it's important to carry forward on the momentum we built together.

But that's not all.

The quality of the air we breathe and the water we use needs to be improved. As we all know that a clean environment isn't an unlimited resource. That's why I'm also going to be calling on our community partners to join me in talking about what we can and should do to preserve our natural resources and ensure appropriate environmental safeguards.

We all agree that transportation is a priority. The best, affordable transportation system will connect residents with the metro's central business district, shopping meccas, neighborhoods, jobs, and other destination points and attractions. We know that connectivity drives economic development, and it has proven effective in other communities. And again, this was an issue mutually identified as a key challenge to the future of our shared community at our Leadership Summit. That's why I'm eager to see the ideas and recommendations that Commissioner Segale's report contains, and to move quickly on any formal action that may be required. Let's not limit our questions as to why we can't proceed together; let's open our eyes to see how we can work together toward progress.

Finally, a key to sustaining our strong local economy is the strength of our educational institutions. There is a synergy between attracting businesses, increasing the availability of jobs, and the quality of education found in a community. Education is a key ingredient for building a future workforce that develops the skills required for tomorrow's jobs. And while we may not have a direct responsibility for education, we've already proven that we are fully committed to upholding the quality of our educational institutions. That commitment must not waver.

Add to that list coordinated economic development, sustained growth, and consolidation of services to eliminate duplication, and we have an aggressive agenda. The County Government cannot do it alone. Gone are the days when city and county can stand alone. Our challenges are too intertwined and our resources are far too few. Plus, governing is a team sport—a point reiterated to all of us at our Leadership Summit.

So there it is: our future goals laid out. This is, obviously, not an exhaustive list. To be successful, we need the input of all our community partners and stakeholders. And that, my friends, is the next step in our ongoing pursuit of effective partnerships.

[--Break for video on enhancing local and regional partnerships --]

Again, the importance of partnerships. Not just within Johnson County, but throughout the entire metro area. I'm proud to say that partnerships have been a major focus during my first four years in this office. I've been reaching out to our partners across county lines and across the state line, trying to minimize the division caused by our jurisdictional boundaries. Here at home, we must continue to work to strengthen our own partnerships. To that end, I'd like to offer a challenge to all of us. Let's make this year that we begin to break down our barriers. Let's be willing to test the limits. Let's be willing to trust one another. We've done it in the past, and I know we can do it again. Let's treasure what's good and let's work together to improve what needs improving. Our shared vision must be bold, far-reaching, and focus on the future horizon.

In closing, allow me to express my deepest thanks for allowing me to serve this community in this office during the past four years. It has been my greatest privilege to serve each and every day. I am humbled by the people of Johnson County, whose faith, perseverance, and values continue to demonstrate why this is a wonderful place to live, work, and raise a family.

There's a Native American proverb which says: "We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." Again, excellence is not a chance, it's a choice. In all our plans, we must be mindful that we are working to improve this community, to leave it a better place than when we found it.

Thank you for joining me today. May God bless our great nation, and may God continue to bless our great home, Johnson County.

* * * * *