

Williamson County, Illinois
2008 State of the County
January 31, 2008

One year ago, I delivered my first State of the County address in the Marion High School auditorium. So, it is quite appropriate that my second speech is here at the Carterville High School, where I graduated in 1979.

The purpose of this speech is to provide taxpayers of Williamson County an honest assessment of our county over the past year and looking into the future.

Transparency is a word I use a lot in regards to government, but I feel it is critical to let taxpayers see and know how their government is working for them.

Elected officials are employees of the taxpayers, and we should work together toward common goals. As chairman, my job relies heavily on having a good board.

Working with my fellow county commissioners, Tracey Glenn and Bob Barnett, we have made great strides in 2007 and see nothing but good things ahead in 2008.

Commissioner Glenn, Commissioner Barnett and I understand the importance of setting politics aside and doing what is best for the county.

For years, there were barriers between some offices, but this past year, I have seen people putting their differences aside and working as a team.

Together, we have been able to work through county labor contracts without using attorneys, which in turn saved taxpayer dollars.

Our county board also works well with the local municipalities. If any of our city leaders calls upon us, we will do whatever we can to help them.

Recently, we have been working with Herrin Mayor Vic Ritter and folks with the city of Herrin, in an effort to bring jobs back to their city.

All county commissioners sit on the Regional Economic Development Corporation board, and it is our job to work with fellow REDCO board members to bring economic development and jobs to our county.

Celeste Sollers is our economic development director. She works hard every day to try to secure grants for our county.

Williamson County has received two economic development grants from the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunities totaling \$850,000, which we call our Revolving Loan Account.

Williamson County loaned these funds to two companies to expand their operations into the county creating employment opportunities for our residents.

These funds will be a continued source of opportunity for the county in efforts to promote business expansion and job creation.

As these funds are repaid to our county over the loan terms, they will then become available to loan to another project.

The bottom line is this: it doesn't matter whether you're a Republican, Democrat or Independent. When you work together, good things will happen.

Now, I need to mention a serious problem we've had to resolve within county government. For many years there has been a need to clean up our hiring practices.

A new "anti-nepotism" policy, passed by our county board just this month, will ensure that all citizens have a fair and equal chance when they apply for a job.

Previous hiring practices did not ensure that individuals were hired based on their ability and qualifications. However, the county's new hiring practice will assure an interview process and complete background check.

I also believe that hiring or appointing family members has no place in any level of government, especially when taxpayer dollars are being used. Those who choose to run for public office should run for the right reasons.

I am not saying that a person who applies for work at the same place as a family member is not qualified for the job. But in most cases, nepotism creates problems in the workplace, especially if relatives supervise one another.

In 2007, we were successful in ending the nepotism and corruption at the Williamson County Housing Authority. We now have board members at the housing authority who will never forget that taking care of low-income families is their first priority.

Another important step we took in 2007 was to offer, for the first time, retirement health insurance for our county employees. We were able to offer this by a wage disparity of employees, setting all funds back into a designated account.

We are excited to offer our county employees a way to retire with health coverage, as many of them work just for the health benefits.

For example, as I was discussing this plan with courthouse employees, I talked to Louise Valco, a lady in her mid-70s who told me there was no way she could retire because she had to stay on the county's health care plan.

To be honest with you, that broke my heart to see her in this situation. We are proud to say that Louise was the first employee to take advantage of this plan in December of 2007 and we wish her the best on her well-deserved retirement.

I am sure that there will be many more employees who will follow in Louise's footsteps by taking advantage of the county's new retirement health care program.

I encourage other types of government offices and businesses to look into similar plans that would enable their employees to retire with health benefits.

This past year, I worked hard to revive interest in our county's crime watch program. We want to see residents protecting and looking out for one another.

As I traveled throughout the county, I talked to residents and encouraged them to become a part of the county "crime watch" program, which involves far more than just putting up a sign.

Residents must network among their neighbors and, most importantly, look out for our most vulnerable our children and senior citizens.

Those are just a few of the issues we tackled in 2007. The past year has been a year of tremendous growth and progress. Looking at the year ahead of us, we are certain 2008 will be more of the same.

According to our Supervisor of Assessments Jeffrey Robinson, our county's total assessed valuation of property in the county has grown from \$447 million in 1996 to more than \$989 million in 2006.

At this rate, we are on pace to go over \$1 billion in 2007. Over the past five years, we have had an average growth of roughly 8-percent per year. At this point, we feel the county's future is bright.

This year's 2008 general budget is more than \$900,000 over 2007's budget. Our total balanced budget this year is \$10.9 million.

During budget talks it took a lot of time, patience and great cooperation with office holders to make this budget possible and we appreciate them for making our job easier.

So, as you can see the growth of the county is continuing at a rapid pace and as we grow, our needs will grow. Now, let me explain what has caused this increase. There has been a severe bottleneck in our judicial system.

In 2006, our circuit clerk's office processed 17,836 tickets. In 2007, the number of tickets processed was up more than 21 percent, at 22,689 tickets.

As a result, we were forced to hire additional staff for the circuit clerk, state's attorney and public defender to process the influx of cases.

The increased revenues from property, income, sales and personal property tax that attributed to the county's growth were allocated to several areas.

Rising fuel costs forced us to increase the fuel budget for the Sheriff's Department and Animal Control. Some funds were set aside for the county's participation in future economic development and growth and building projects.

In an effort to keep the level of service equal for all county citizens, some departments received an increase to cover the increased cost of doing business.

These are just some things that have stretched our county's budget. This leads us up to a serious issue. We are simply out of room at the courthouse.

There is no more office space, no more storage for files, and with a jail on the top floor of the building, our problems are many.

Our county jail is truly an eyesore. Inmates have intentionally caused plumbing problems that have flooded county offices on the floors below, ruining office furnishings and files.

More importantly, our dilapidated jail has become a dangerous environment for county correctional officers. For more than a decade there has been talk about building a new jail. I say, enough of the talk, let's make it become a reality.

At every yearly inspection, we are advised to renovate our jail or build a new one. If our jail would ever be shut down, the cost to transport and house inmates to another facility would be far more expensive in the long run than building a new jail.

Building a new jail is, perhaps, the biggest issue we'll face in the years to come. It is absolutely critical for the safety and well-being of our residents.

Sheriff Tom Cundiff and I established a team to look at our options for building a new facility. This past summer we attended an all-expense paid trip by the National Institute of Corrections.

We came away from that week-long class in Colorado very optimistic. The Williamson County Board recently gave the Durrant Corporation the green light to move forward with our master plan for a new jail.

We have been very consistent that our intention was for the county to build a new jail without sending it to a referendum to raise taxes. At this point, I truly believe this is still achievable and funding will come from different areas.

We believe we could break ground for the jail in 2010, and right now we are on schedule to do just that on the county property located just northeast of the courthouse.

The county board has also worked out an agreement with the Public Building Commission to build a new administration complex north of the courthouse.

This complex would house all non-judicial offices such as county clerk, treasurer, assessor and county commissioners, just to name a few.

In my opinion, it is totally unacceptable for a county such as ours to be reduced to such cramped conditions as we have at the courthouse.

I do want to make it very clear that the jail project and the administration complex I have discussed are two separate projects and will be funded differently.

Our intention is to start the administration complex by this summer if everything falls into place. This building project, as well as our jail project, will put people back to work and provide jobs for our local labor and boost our local economy.

I have been talking about these projects for a couple of years now and am looking forward to finally seeing them become a reality.

Our highway department is making great strides in improving our roads for the safety of our citizens. Our county engineer, Jim Webb, has been very successful in getting grants for Williamson County roads.

His department has received a \$2 million dollar grant from IDOT, as well as federal funds that will allow safety improvements for two of our more dangerous roads – South Market St. and Spillway Road. This project should be complete by summer.

The Lake of Egypt Road project began in the summer of 2007 and will exceed 4 million dollars. Construction on that project is expected to be complete in 2009.

Safety is a primary focus at our highway department. Our county highway department receives safety training through John A. Logan College, which in turn reduces workman's comp costs and most importantly keeps employees safe.

As you can tell, county business is a big business. Hopefully, the information I've given you today may help you understand where taxpayer money goes and how it is used.

To the students here today; many of you are at a crossroads in your life, deciding on your future college or job. This is a very important time for you.

Some of you may want to be a doctor, a teacher, a fireman, a lawyer, or any number of other occupations. Some of you may even choose politics.

Let me tell you this. You can do anything you want in life if you put your mind to it. Try hard in school and choose an occupation you have a real passion for, and you will succeed. After all, you are our future.

As your challenges lie ahead of you, don't be afraid of making mistakes and trying new things. We all make mistakes, but you have to learn from them and move ahead.

One thing you can do to change your future is to make your voice heard by choosing the best candidate to represent you in your local, state and federal government.

When you're 18 years old, and some of you already are, accept the privilege and exercise your right to vote in the electoral process.

I would like to thank the students, county residents and media who are here today. Thank you all for supporting your county board as we make decisions that we believe to be in the best interest for our county's present and future.

As you can tell, there have been some changes in how our county government operates. Change is not always popular, but is often necessary.

In closing, we all should be proud to live in Williamson County. We are very blessed to live in such a wonderful area. I have lived here all of my life and I'm very proud of our county and the people I represent.

Commissioner Glenn, Commissioner Barnett and I will do everything in our power to do what's right and what's best for our county. I appreciate you taking the time to be with us today and I hope you have a great 2008. Thank you and God bless you.

-presented by Brent Gentry, Williamson County Board Chairman