

State of the Village 2025 - February 24, 2025

Introduction

Good evening.

Thank you for joining me for our annual State of the Village presentation. I continue to be honored to serve as your Village President, and am thrilled to share updates on our progress in making River Forest the best place it can be to live, work, raise a family, to support our businesses and enjoy recreation and entertainment.

This Saturday, I was reminded of the many reasons why I am so proud and honored to be your President. I first spent my morning with nearly thirty residents during a Casual Conversation, listening to important concerns that residents have about our town. The discussion was civil, productive, and we received a lot of great ideas to help move River Forest forward.

Then right after, I attended a ribbon cutting ceremony for a brand new coffee shop in town, Black Fodder Coffee, at the corner of Ashland and Hawthorne. This beautiful space is a reminder of the potential for business in River Forest. Proving the demand for such gathering spaces. Neighbors have flocked to the shop, each with a smile on their face as they enjoyed a delicious cup of coffee.

Days like that wouldn't be possible without a great team.

I first want to thank our dedicated group of resident volunteers who serve on our advisory commissions and committees, as well as on our Village Board. These selfless residents answer the call to attend monthly meetings, and spend considerable time researching important topics, to thoughtfully deliberate on the best decisions to move our community forward. Their commitment and input is extremely valuable, and we should all be grateful for their service!

Due to the hard work and effort of the Village Board, our Commissions, and our Village Staff we balanced our budget for our 2025 fiscal year. The Village continued to provide excellent customer service and make investments to improve the quality of life for residents. We were once again awarded the Distinguished Budget Presentation award by the Government Finance Officers Association.

I also want everyone to know that we continue to work toward ways to strengthen engagement opportunities with our community members. Your thoughts, ideas, opinions and questions are always invited and extremely valuable as our Boards, commissions and committees consider initiatives to continually grow and strengthen this community....**so to that end, I would like to now overview our accomplishments for 2024 - I want to make you are aware of the many ways we have been, and continue to achieve this goal:**

We've Provided Multimedia Community Engagement: Our communications to, and with, the community have expanded to different platforms and overall engagement - meaning more e-newsletter subscribers and increased activity on our social media pages. Throughout 2024, we have added in-person opportunities to stay connected - such as our Neighborhood Dialogues and the quarterly Casual Conversation event where myself and our Village staff members attend to provide an informal way to connect. We have also started to put out videos to ensure we are reaching as many community members as possible with news and information. We are looking at community polling, AI to analyze data to create even stronger connections, so that we can learn about your thoughts and suggestions on planning for the future of River Forest. Input from our residents and businesses through two-way dialogue is extremely valuable to us as we look to the future.

We're Consistently Improving Customer Service Through Technology: We work every day to improve all areas relating to customer service, and one way that was accomplished over the last year is by streamlining access to a variety of service requests. We launched our new Service Request Portal that shortens response times to these requests by routing them directly to the correct department - through the use of technology.

Some recent comments we received about the Service Request platform included - and I quote:

- *"It's easy to use, and I appreciate the goal to help residents target the right individuals at the Village to get help faster!"*
- *"I like how you can just log on and let the Village know if something is wrong and needs fixing, and you get an update when it's taken care of. Thank you!"*
- *"I found this link on the postcard the Village sent out and got right on it! It's a great idea!"*

Another addition was the WaterSmart portal. This portal allows our water customers to gauge daily consumption and monitor usage to detect any leaks that can lead to rising bills. Some comments we have heard are.

"You have saved me thousands of dollars in water bills, thank you"

"I now can view my daily water usage"

"I am addicted to this portal because it has a direct effect on saving my family money, thank you"

We've Created Partnerships to Improve the Look of Our Community: One persistent nuisance and eyesore was the long-standing unused, rusting water tower owned by the CTA in Forest Park, which was very visible in parts of our community. For years, our Village worked with the leaders of Oak Park and Forest Park to motivate the CTA to demolish the tower. Thanks to the support and leadership from Forest Park Mayor Rory Hoskins, the water tower was finally removed last fall which positively impacts the look of that area, and creates a much better view!

A Group of Committed Residents Helped to Ignite Positive Change: Last year, residents living near the Union Pacific tracks were forced to endure extended periods of idling freight trains, which disrupted this otherwise peaceful neighborhood, and also released emissions that could present health risks. Thanks to a group of our committed residents whose voices were

heard loud and clear and, pressure was put onto Union Pacific to work with the Village to identify operational improvements, including changes to their typical idling in town. We will continue to keep the lines of communication open with Union Pacific to ensure this situation does not happen again, and continually improves.

We Continued to Make Public Safety a #1 Priority: Protecting our community is a paramount and consistent Village goal and objective. I want to thank Police Chief Jim O'Shea and Fire Chief Tom Gaertner for their leadership of our public safety departments.

Our Police Department Continues Outreach and Increases Information Sharing through technology and training: Our police department is fully staffed. Our Department has a passion and commitment to community outreach, evidenced by our ongoing, quarterly community safety meetings where all are invited to learn about crime prevention and other public safety topics - and ask any questions. Additionally, police personnel attended over 110 events in 2024 to further strengthen connections with our community. The Department also increased the availability of its weekly incident reports of notable criminal activity and arrests. Residents interested in accessing this information can now find these regular updates on our website.

Our Fire Department Continued to Excel Through Life Saving Trainings: The Department's partnership with Concordia University, led by Deputy Chief Dave Bochenek has created access to advanced training labs for our paramedics, while providing ongoing CPR training for Concordia's growing nursing program. This creative arrangement was recognized as award winning at the International Meeting on Simulation in Healthcare last month.

Our Work for Public Safety isn't Limited to our Police and Fire Departments: Improving community safety includes, but also goes beyond the work of our emergency responders. We are so fortunate to have a beautiful community and an active population that enjoys walking and biking through town. Due to this, we must ensure our pedestrians and commuters are safe in our roadways. Public Works continues to upgrade our sidewalk and intersections, bringing dozens of intersections into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. In partnership with D90, we have implemented many of the recommendations of our "Safe Walking Routes to School" program, installing over 90 stop signs and blinking signs.

Now I will share with you what we have planned for the year ahead as we continually reinvest in this great community. This includes making safety a top priority, continuing to strengthen our property values through quality of life initiatives, and doing everything we can to stabilize property taxes. Those guiding principles are what our community services are really all about...

Strong Financial Outlook: Planning for the future begins with our finances. Our Village has passed a balanced budget for 12 consecutive years. A balanced budget sends a strong

message to our community that we do not spend beyond our means, and focus on our critical priorities. In addition to our property tax and sales tax revenue to fund operations, we continue to pursue grants and other state funding partnerships...working side by side with our State Rep Speaker Chris Welch and Senate President Don Harmon, our State Senator.

Funding allows us to invest in the capital projects that our residents count on every day.

Our Public Works Improved Safety Through Implementing Study Recommendations: Led by Public Works Director Jack Bielak, the department has taken steps to implement the recommendations from our Village Wide traffic study - which provides a toolbox to help our Village align with a national campaign called Vision Zero - that aims to eliminate accidents involving pedestrians, bicyclists and vehicles. The Traffic Calming Toolbox prescribes a process for collecting data on average vehicle speeds, accident history and traffic count and recommends various tools including raised crosswalks, pedestrian islands and bump outs.

The plan is already in action. Last summer, Public Works installed plastic bollards along Washington Boulevard to simulate curb extensions and narrow the street, an effective tool already in place along Chicago Avenue. *With the bollards in place, the average speed on Washington decreased by 7 miles per hour!*

The Village is now turning its focus to address other challenging pedestrian crossings in town. Our capital plan includes proposed projects along Lake Street and Thatcher Avenue, and our Traffic & Safety Commission will continue to evaluate data and resident concerns.

We are Planning for the Unexpected: While we have not seen extreme flooding in recent years, we have taken steps to prepare for the future in the case of unexpected rainfall. To this end, our Capital Improvement Plan includes funding for the design of large scale projects to increase our stormwater capacity in the central and southern sections of town. Our Public Works team is working to tailor plans that fit with the larger region's flood mitigation needs. This planning will help us as we seek grant funding to bring these generational projects to reality.

We're Ensuring Our Water Delivery System is Top Notch: Managing stormwater is one part of our ever-important water system. The Village continues to invest in upgrading our systems to ensure the community has strong water pressure and quality water delivered throughout town.

We're Assisting with the Cost of Replacing Lead Service Lines: Our Public Works Department recently notified more than 600 Village residences their water service lines are made of lead - and through a state mandate - this must be addressed. To help with replacement costs, the Village Board approved a subsidy program in May of 2021, which provides partial funding for eligible properties to replace these lines.

We're Taking Steps to Better Serve Our Senior Citizens: The Village released an Age Friendly Report in 2024, with recommendations to help improve overall quality of life for our seniors. These included establishing community engagement made up of seniors to advise the

Village Board on any issues or needs this important part of the community may have, as well as providing more social opportunities. The Village will be seeking out partnerships with other public organizations that serve seniors in River Forest to create more events tailored to seniors such as a summer picnic. Those plans are in the works and will be shared through the Village's communication channels in the coming weeks.

We're Supporting Ongoing Efforts Toward Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: We are looking forward to a forthcoming report from our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, which was established several years ago, that will provide recommendations on how our Village can be as welcoming as possible to everyone.

Sustainable Efforts Continue to Move Forward: Our Sustainability Commission has much to look forward to in 2025, including the continued implementation of the Village's Climate Action Plan, completed in Spring 2024 in partnership with the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the coming months, we will be presenting restrictions for gas-powered leaf blowers, reviewing tree preservation regulations, and growing our compost participation. We also are excited to expand our public electric vehicle charging stations, addressing the exponential growth in EVs owned in River Forest. The Commission has conducted a Village-wide survey, recommended by the plan, to better understand the concerns and interest of residents in these areas. In October, the Village was recognized by the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District at their 12th Annual Sustainability Summit for Excellence in Promoting Green Infrastructure. This award was in recognition of the Village's green alley project, which tied directly to the Climate Action Plan recommendation of building climate resilience through the use of permeable pavers.

We're Leveraging Signs of Business Growth: I am proud to share that the River Forest Town Center is fully leased at this time, with new additions CAVA and J Crew Factory and the expansion of Whole Foods, which is a real sign of economic vibrancy. And as I mentioned, we are also excited to welcome Black Fodder, a new coffee shop, at the corner of Ashland and Hawthorne. We are setting our sights on building off this momentum with new developments, along with programs to assist our small businesses.

Speaking of Ways to Support Our Small Businesses: The Village wants to ensure we are a business friendly community. Our Economic Development Commission is now designing a small business incentive program for those located in our TIF districts. It will allow businesses to invest in their storefronts, and property owners to make their properties more attractive for potential tenants. We are also looking at our building permit processes to determine if there are ways to utilize technology to make them easier to access by streamlining those processes.. This aim will not only help our businesses looking to expand or improve through build outs and other improvements, but also for our residents who have home improvement projects.

Beyond improving our existing businesses and storefronts, there is a call to action to focus on attracting new development to our commercial corridors...

Our guiding document is our Comprehensive Plan, unanimously voted on by the Village Board in 2019, directs us to consider strategic development on our corridors to increase the vitality of our neighborhoods, while growing our tax base and improving the community's appearance. For years, we have discussed the potential for our commercial properties, and have received extensive feedback at economic development commission meetings, zoning board meetings and most recently, through our Neighborhood Dialogue series.

While we acknowledge the very legitimate concerns about how development will affect our traffic, our schools and our community's look and feel, I also know there are many residents interested in seeing progress. This includes creating more walkable neighborhoods, with access to restaurants, shops and services that we currently see in our neighboring towns. I encourage residents to continue sharing your ideas and speaking up about what you want to see in the future of River Forest by engaging with one of our many communication channels.

We've Hired a Brokerage Firm to Assist with Future Development on Madison Street: To find the best use for our property, we need to cast the widest net possible for potential builders. This month, the Village Board approved working with a large real estate brokerage firm to assist us in our effort to bring progress to Madison Street. The broker will help us compare proposals and choose a project that minimizes or removes any potential adverse impacts.

Let me address Lake and Lathrop development. We are committed to moving this project along and we are working with Wintrust Bank, and its receiver to find a suitable solution. I am very pleased to report that last week, a Judge ruled in favor of the Village and dismissed a lawsuit from Lake Lathrop Partners LLC. that requested it be granted a new building permit for the Lake & Lathrop property. This decision reaffirms that the Village Board took the appropriate steps, through various extensions, to hold this developer accountable for its lack of progress without interfering with their development. This paves the way for Wintrust Bank to ultimately work with a new developer to plan for this important commercial property. We believe there will be progress this year.

In Conclusion: The State of our Village is very strong. Our Financial Outlook is very strong and stable. We continue to utilize technology to improve service delivery, and provide more opportunities for community engagement and direct dialogue with our residents and businesses as we plan for the future. As stated –our ongoing emphasis continues to center around safety and security, continually improving quality of life to strengthen our property values, and taking all steps we can to stabilize our property taxes.

I am excited about our future and the many initiatives we are about to embark on.

Thank you so much for listening to the State of the Village

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