



Mayor takes aim at improving local health

Greg Goodnight cites personal health as chief reason for improving city infrastructure

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For the City of Firsts, 2017 seems to be the year of public health.

For the bulk of Monday night's State of the City Address, Mayor Greg Goodnight took a different take on addressing the health and safety of Kokomo's citizenry. To combat issues such as death by heart disease, diabetes, and car crashes, the mayor aims to continue improving the city's infrastructure to promote a safe, walkable environment.

"Most people's first thoughts about public safety probably go to police and fire," said Goodnight. "Some may also think about traffic signals or snow removal. These are all important pieces to the puzzle. But the reality is public safety goes well beyond the number of police officers on our streets or how many fire trucks are parked at the stations. Public safety is also about the health and well-being of our citizens."

To this end, the mayor examines the numbers. Goodnight cited CATO Institute statistics, which indicate American citizens are 70 times more likely to die of diabetes and heart disease than they are from violent crime. Americans, he said, are also 20 times more likely to die in a traffic accident than in a fire.

In the same vein, Goodnight said CATO Institute numbers indicate that the chance of dying at the hands of a foreign terrorist are one in 46 million, but one out of every 113 Americans will die in a traffic accident. Meanwhile, one out of every 53 Americans die from diabetes, and one out of seven Americans succumb to heart disease.

But locally, said the mayor, the statistics are more concerning. Citing the 2015 America's Health Rankings, Goodnight claimed Indiana ranks in the bottom 10 states in overall health, and Howard County ranks in the bottom half of Indiana's 92 counties.

“These are the real risks,” said Goodnight. “Traffic accidents also are the leading cause of death among teens and young adults. So much so, that our young people are three times more likely to die in a traffic accident than they are from cancer. Now, most of us, if we could, would move mountains to prevent cancer in children. Yet, when it comes to redesigning streets to make them safer for our young people, unfortunately through misinformation and misplaced priorities, it is often fought every step of the way. It is this that gets in the way of actually improving the health, safety, and lives of our citizens.”

To this end, the mayor said 2017 will bring continual changes that promote healthy lifestyle choices. Just as in recent years pedestrian refuge islands have been installed on South Washington Street and curb extensions have been built around downtime to promote walkability, this work will continue. After all, said Goodnight, a study from Harvard University showed that walking reduced the risk of cardiovascular events by 31 percent.

“Smart streets are safer,” said Goodnight. “After hundreds of studies, the data has shown that narrowing lanes, adding medians, building curb extensions, and planting trees along the street will, together, result in fewer accidents. And the few accidents that do occur will be much less severe.”

And the next target for renovation, according to Goodnight, is a stretch of Markland Avenue between Washington Street and Apperson Way. The goal he said will be to improve the portion of roadway for pedestrian use.

“This section of road already has sidewalks, but you see few pedestrians or minimal business investment,” said Goodnight. “It can be difficult to cross the four lanes of fast-moving traffic. If people do not feel safe they just won’t walk. If people do not enjoy the walk, they will choose to drive instead. We all know the less we walk, the less healthy we will be.”

While Goodnight looked forward with his address, he also looked back.

Last year brought disaster for the city in August in the form of the tornadoes that forever changed portions of the city. But, said the mayor, in the disaster’s aftermath Kokomo showed its resilience.

“In the days following the storms, we witnessed the true humanity of our community, and we discovered that in times of need, we can count on our friends, family, and neighbors, both locally and around the state,” said Goodnight.

But more than that, Goodnight brought home a worldwide issue in speaking about last year’s twisters.

“This was the second major tornado in just 32 months, and it brings home the real threat of climate change ... Tornado season now seems to be January to December with no reprieve. Climate change, for us, is about the dozens of families who lost their homes, some for the second time in less than three years. It is about the 100-year flood that now seems to happen every 10.”

With the effects of climate change knocking at the door of the City of Firsts, the mayor called for the issue to be taken seriously because of the “destruction, instability, and expense it is already causing here in Kokomo.”