

Urban Planning, Transportation, Energy & The Environment

We must recognize that we are one city, though we have many parts. Rockford can be a great, united City, but if we are to succeed, we must make those parts a whole. Unfortunately, if you look around Rockford today, you will see many parts, but not a whole City. In fact, we have in many respects two cities – “New Rockford” where the investment and jobs seem to be going; and “Old Rockford” where we find clustered most of the violent crime, poverty, and lack of investment. That dichotomy is due in large part to decades of poor land-use and transportation planning and poor investment strategies. This has resulted in increased social, environmental, and financial burdens to all of our citizens as we waste energy, damage our environment, and “sprawl” out of control.

While a simple drive around this City proves Rockford’s dramatically different economic climates, the objective data also supports the conclusion that our current policies have failed. In a 2004 study commissioned by the City of Rockford, our housing stock was identified as stagnant or declining in roughly three quarters of our City. Our older commercial districts are struggling to hang on. We had an increase of over 33% in vacant homes in Rockford with over 4,000 total vacant housing units. When our City’s neighborhoods suffers in this way, we are ripe for crime, unattractive to residents, unattractive to businesses, and we suffer losses to our tax base.

We can and we will achieve greatness throughout this City. We must start with smart and aggressive action. To improve, we must start giving teeth to the many good ideas that have been initiated but not enacted. We have a *City 2020 Plan*, a *Green Communities Study*, and the *County Balanced Growth Initiative*. Since the early 1990's there has also been a plan for creating an inter-modal passenger center at our Rockford Airport connecting passenger rail service to our

airport. There are great strategies for stopping sprawl, for investing in better public transportation, for making Rockford more beautiful, and for making Rockford a hub for manufacturing alternative energy technologies. But such plans mean nothing if we do not have the courage to ACT. **We are a City that has been planned, studied, and task-forced to death.** Good talk means nothing if it does not impact decisions when it comes time to spend the money.

To change these outcomes, we must require, at a minimum, that the City's yearly capital improvement budgets are evaluated against the City's official planning documents. We must also cooperate with and push politically for similar actions by Winnebago County and other local governments. We must also raise the profile of our existing regional planning organization, RATS (the Rockford Area Transportation Study), to join this process.

Our regional transportation and land-use planning has not followed any pattern of "smart-growth" and the current administration simply has not acted on its words. For example, while the current mayor talks about bike paths and bike lanes, not a single dedicated bike lane exists in the City. Furthermore, while over 40 miles of pathways have or are being planned all over the edges of the City and from Pecatonica to Rockford, there is no plan to build a complete, connected pathway along our Rock River in the City of Rockford.

While small, locally owned businesses suffer from crumbling infrastructure in the core of our City, this administration has continued to give large subsidies to developers and businesses to promote sprawl development. Our sprawling east-side commercial development has resulted in large areas without sidewalks or cross walks without connections to neighboring residential subdivisions. There is a better way. Communities across the country are adopting new land-use and zoning ordinances that are making those communities more attractive places to live. We must do

the same.

Efficient planning strategies should allow people to walk or bike or take public transportation to work, school, or recreation. Efficiency must be part of our everyday dialogue. Not only must we encourage individual buildings to be energy efficient, we must design our City to be efficient.

We can and must design our community so owning an automobile is a luxury instead of a necessity. Today, however, despite all the talk of “regionalism”, the RMTD still does not have busses that drop off at CherryVale Mall; and the City still gives incentives to businesses to build far away from where their workers live.

While this administration also pushes for rail service to Belvidere and has not insisted on bringing rail to our airport. This administration abandoned plans developed long ago to link passenger rail to our airport. During the recent State of the State Address, the Governor prioritized funding for a new airport at Peotone and failed completely to mention Rockford’s airport as a transportation priority. Following that lead, Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. is pushing state and federal government to build TWO separate train lines to the NON-EXISTENT Peotone airport at an initial estimated cost of \$300 Million. Our Mayor did not publicly criticize or question this Governor over that decision. Our Mayor’s friendship with the Governor has failed us.

There is broad based support for such smart growth and investment decisions in Rockford and Winnebago County, but we must act now. In a recent survey Winnebago County residents supported the development of vacant city land before extending development into the Countryside. (*See Rock River Valley Green Communities Survey, 2004*). In the same survey,

68.6% of Winnebago County residents agreed that a priority of public investment should be to revitalize downtown business districts, existing commercial corridors, and existing residential neighborhoods. We must take advantage of this support and start making decisions that will make us more attractive to both residents and businesses.

SPECIFIC PLANS & PRIORITIES NEEDED

Rockford needs jobs. To get those jobs we must have land use and transportation plans and economic development plans that make us energy efficient, attractive, and environmentally responsible. We must set the right priorities and organize our staff to get the job done. We will be politically active in the region to encourage smart growth and discourage sprawl. We must design and build a stronger, smarter community through acting on the right priorities, which include:

1) REASONABLE INVESTMENTS IN CORE INFRASTRUCTURE.

- A. We will focus on making existing roadways more attractive and more bicycle and pedestrian friendly and not simply sprawling out into the countryside;
- B. We will bring passenger rail service to Rockford with a realistic goal of having that in place within five years and we will demand that any rail connection to our area include, at a minimum, a direct stop at the Rockford Airport.
- C. We will design and build a connected Rock River Riverwalk that will connect existing assets along our river and provide opportunities for new private development along our river.

D. We must require that our proposed capital expenditures must be reviewed against our adopted plans and not be made in isolation. Winnebago County can have a *Balanced Growth Initiative* and the City of Rockford can have a *2020 Plan*, but those mean nothing if capital investment budgets are created totally outside those plans.

2) CHANGES IN ZONING AND PLANNING.

These changes will include the creation of new zoning standards that will encourage smart growth. These changes will also include the adoption of new landscaping and beautification standards for public roads and right-of-ways.

3) APPROPRIATELY ORGANIZING AND STAFFING OUR CITY STAFF.

To achieve action on these goals, we will reorganize many things we do at City Hall. One specific change will be that a specific staff member is assigned as “Director of Energy & Environment”, to work jointly in several areas traditionally handled public works, planning, and economic development offices. This position will specifically work to:

- (A) increase energy efficiency in municipal facilities;
- (B) increase efficiency of overall City design and public transportation;
- (C) promote conservation and beautification; and
- (D) promote the area as a hub for manufacturing renewable energy technologies.

We will also outreach to other local governmental agencies, volunteers, and non-profit groups to coordinate local efforts in this area.

This plan I am promoting is very different from the current administration’s efforts. The “Green Communities Coordinator” recently announced by the current administration, for

example, is vague and poorly defined. From what has been stated publicly about this “Green Communities Coordinator,” it appears that there will be at least two bosses of the position since it is partly going to be paid by the City and partly by the Park District. That position will have no apparent authority to create and demand new standards for landscaping and beautification. It has all the makings of yet another “public relations” position since it will have no real power within City Hall. A “green community” is a standard, not a job. Once we have enacted the new standards, which I am calling for, all of our staff at public works must embrace those high standards of excellence in designing and maintaining a more efficient and attractive community.

The proposed position of “Director of Energy & the Environment” is very different. This position will take advantage of work already being done at the City in areas of economic development, environmental protection, and urban and transportation planning to ensure that we are achieving efficiencies as well as creating a high quality of life. This position will have real power to make sure the standards we set are being promoted and enforced.

CONCLUSION

I’ve got good news and bad news. First, the bad news: The Governor and the State Legislature cannot save us. They can’t do the work we need to do for us. Neither the Governor nor even our U.S. Senators are responsible for our poor land use planning in this City. They simply cannot change that for us. The good news is, we can do it ourselves. Unfortunately, today, we have leadership that seems to be hoping that someone, somewhere will save us. That mentality has infected our people with a sense of passive desperation and despair.

Instead of taking action and being in charge of our destiny, we appear to be begging for salvation from somewhere else, as though some magic bullet like a convention center or

gambling boat will save us. The current administration has set this community up for failure by repeatedly invoking connections with the Governor or a U.S. Senator as though those connections were the primary means for our salvation. And while the current administration has put us in a position where we must wait to be saved by others, we are missing out on our ability to save ourselves by working on the things we can change right here, right now like changing local land use and transportation plans.

I am optimistic that we can dramatically improve our community. We can create jobs and economic opportunity by acting on these land-use, environmental, and transportation efforts. These are issues directly within the areas that our local community can control to improve our everyday lives. We must do them for ourselves. We must have the courage to change current development patterns for Rockford to remain strong and relevant to the region. If we stop “talking” smart-growth and start “acting” it, we will increase investment opportunities and provide a stronger tax base for our schools and public safety needs, and we will increase job opportunities.

While I agree with the administration that having “political connections” is critical, my main focus is to work every day on our *local political connections*. The City of Rockford must, for example, start to show up politically at the County or Park District to make sure that our needs are being met by those other jurisdictions that also receive tax money from City of Rockford residents. Our fates are tied together. Through great planning and great community building we will make a stronger, connected community. I want our roads and our pathways and our public transportation to connect us to one another. I want Rockford to be strong by being independent, yet interconnected. If we plan together, and act together, and connect together, we

will succeed together.