

# Headlines



## State of the City of Rock Island Address

**January 10, 2006**

As has been customary over the years that I have been privileged to serve as [Mayor](#), I've looked forward to the opportunity at the beginning of each year to review the State of our City of Rock Island. For reasons that I will go into today, I am pleased to report that the State of our City is sound.

### The Year in Review

1. [Economic Development](#). As in past years, I would like to begin with a review of some of the economic development progress made during the past year.

Economic development is more than a catch word or slogan. It is the engine by which we create opportunities for people to better their lives through new or preserved jobs and circumstances. In the process, we strengthen our community and give families the chance to experience the American dream.

Progress in this area may be noted in several different sections of the City:

On the east side of town, McLaughlin Body Company has nearly completed a \$10 million enhancement to portions of the Quad City Industrial Center, where they will be operating a 300,000 square foot paint operation. In addition, planning is moving forward at this site, redesignated as "Columbia Park", in contemplation of residential and commercial development, as well as compatible industrial use, like McLaughlin's operation, in years to come. Development of the Sylvan Slough Natural Area represents an important first step in these plans.

On the west side of the city in the Sunset Business Park, the former McMillan/Bloedell building was sold to Pak Source, which is now operating a new warehouse there.

In a combination of downtown and southwest area progress, one of the most important developments last year was the clearing of some final hurdles in the relocation of the [Casino Rock Island](#) from our downtown riverfront to the intersection of I-280 and the Rock Island Parkway. Final legislative authorization - shepherded through by State Representative Pat Verschoore and State Senator Mike Jacobs - then, in August, approval for the relocation by the Gaming Board, have now set the stage for this project to relocate off our Mississippi riverfront to a more convenient site at a key gateway to our southwest area. This will both open up the downtown for new, more appropriate riverfront development and should serve as a catalyst for further development projects in our southwest area.

Also in the southwest part of our City, [Thermo King](#) opened a 27,000 square foot service facility and [Steel Warehouse](#) announced plans for a 40,000 square foot expansion to its existing 80,000 square foot steel processing plant.

Finally in the area of [economic development](#), a key event last year was preventing the [Rock Island Arsenal](#) from being shuttered in the latest round of BRAC military base closings. Through close cooperation with our congressional delegation - on both sides of the political aisle and from both Illinois and Iowa - as well as some very hard work on the part of a whole team of folks locally, we saved about five-sixths of the Arsenal jobs and prevented this area's second largest employer from being shut down. Not only is the Arsenal an enormous boon to the Quad Cities economy - with \$32 million in direct federal spending with the new Defense Appropriations Bill - but it is also vital to our nation's defense; as the Arsenal represents a critical insurance policy for the military and our nation in a troubled world. In addition, through the latest BRAC process, we gained the headquarters of the [First Army](#), which will be relocating from Atlanta, Georgia, to the Rock Island Arsenal. This will give us our first three-star general at the Arsenal, add several other general officers, and bring approximately 300 more military personnel to the Quad Cities. As the First Army's responsibilities increase in years to come, this presents a growing opportunity for new employment and activity on Arsenal Island.

2. A second area of major achievement I'd like to talk about today concerns progress in [housing](#). Our population has been fairly static over the last decade and a half, after significant losses in the 1980s. As a result, the [City Council](#) has put a major effort in trying to attract more residents and quality housing to the City of Rock Island. These efforts are bearing fruit; again, in a variety of locations.

In the [downtown](#), the [Sala Flats](#) apartments were completed and all 33 units have been leased. [Voss Loft](#) apartments, located in the former Voss warehouse, will soon generate 35 more units of mixed income housing on the east side of downtown through a collaboration of the [Rock Island Housing Authority](#), City, and [Economic Growth Corporation](#). And other upper floor downtown units - 12 units total at scattered sites to date - have been undertaken by individual property owners to draw more residential population to our downtown. Thus the downtown is gradually becoming a [neighborhood](#), as well as a great place to work and to have fun.

Between the rivers, [Chippianock Trails](#) and [College Hills](#) are two outstanding new condominium/villa subdivisions undertaken by experienced, high quality private-sector developers with some assistance from the City. Chippianock Trails, off of 17th Street, and College Hills, just west of the [Augustana College](#) campus on 30th Street, will provide a range of fine market rate housing for a total of 108 families who choose to call Rock Island home.

Also between the rivers, this last year witnessed the demolition of [Valley Homes](#) by the [Rock Island Housing Authority](#). This project was fraught with problems almost from its start 35 years ago. Now, on the cleared site, the Housing Authority plans to build 25 units of mixed affordable and market rate housing, with the area renamed as [Creekwood Park](#).

Likewise between the rivers, the [City Council](#) recently approved City donation of the small, underutilized Jaycee's Park on our west side to [Habitat for Humanity](#). Here Habitat will

construct seven homes for new homeowners - the largest concentration of housing at a single site Habitat has ever undertaken in the Quad Cities.

The [Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation](#), under the skillful leadership of Brian Hollenback and with broad public and private sector backing, recently celebrated assisting over 272 families with buying homes in Rock Island. These efforts represent over \$42 million in new investment for housing in our community.

[Habitat](#), the [Rock Island Economic Growth Corporation](#), private-sector developers, and our City [Community Economic Development Department](#), are collectively creating wonderful new home ownership opportunities for many new people. This is vital to community-building, as home ownership not only allows people to experience one of the key aspects of the American Dream; but for cities, it provides a critical component to building and strengthening [neighborhoods](#).

3. Another major area of development during the last year concerned transportation. Transportation is, after all, how we get to and from work, how we get products to market, and how our economy moves. Two major developments are particularly worth noting last year: First, the Centennial Bridge was finally turned over to the States of Illinois and Iowa for their future joint operation. This bridge - now arguably the best maintained and most attractive in the area - offers handsome gateways to both Rock Island and Davenport. Its condition and frequent use as the icon or symbol of our area, give silent tribute to a job well done by City leaders and our former Centennial Bridge Commission and staff over the last 65 years.

In addition, the widening of Blackhawk Road, west to Black Hawk State Historic Site and the completion of the West Rock River bridge over the next year will allow for much improved traffic flow on our City's south side. This improved flow will benefit travel both along the Blackhawk Road corridor and to our southwest area. We look forward to more retail and commercial opportunities, as well as more residential development, in Rock Island from these transportation improvements.

4. Finally in terms of looking back at the year just ended, I would like to mention a few quality of life issues. Long the crossroads of America - beginning with the site of the very first railroad bridge across the Mississippi River - during the last year Rock Island once again became a crossing point; this time of The American Discovery Trails - the major east/west bike and hike trail across America - and the Mississippi River Trail - a trail paralleling the "Father of Waters" running north and south. This new crossroads will be a boon to tourism as well as a great new recreational opportunity for those of us who call the Quad Cities home.

Also during the last year the City's efforts in the arts won us the prestigious [President Arts Award](#) from the Illinois Arts Association. This award, for which we were graciously nominated by Quad City Arts, was given to Rock Island in the large city category, with a competition that saw us prevailing over some 21 other communities, many of them in the Chicago metro region. It recognizes our City's efforts to promote the arts, as an important part of our quality of life. Also, an [historic preservation video](#) featuring the City of Rock Island won an award at the Three CMA Convention in August of 2005. This video focuses on the importance of historic structures as part of the fabric of our life in Rock Island.

Meanwhile, our [Public Works Department](#) was hard at work last year. Plans for implementing a new automated solid waste collection system beginning next month; institution of a voluntary water service repair program; and expansion of our popular rain garden program all moved forward. The [rain garden program](#) gained statewide recognition as a recent cover story in the [Illinois Municipal League](#) magazine.

It is worth noting that during the last year [CNN Money](#) ranked Rock Island among the top ten most affordable communities in America where one's paycheck goes the furthest.

And the City maintained A-1 bond rating from Moody's Investor Services, an affirmation of the sound management practices followed by the City of Rock Island.

All of these recognitions and awards demonstrate aspects of the outstanding [quality of life](#) we enjoy here in Rock Island that others outside our immediate area recognize. During the last year, [community marketing efforts](#), ably directed by Jennifer Fowler, have promoted this fine quality of life to those within our area through high profile ads in area newspapers and other media.

### Goals and Challenges of the Year Ahead

Turning to the year ahead, we have a number of issues facing us - some old and some new.

One of the first things that we look forward to is successfully integrating and utilizing the transportation improvements that will become available as a result of the completion of the [West Rock River bridge](#) and [Blackhawk Road](#). Given the design of the West Rock River bridge in Rock Island, the approaches are not as straightforward as many of us would have liked. However, I'm confident the public will adapt to these design challenges; and the benefit we will realize through improved traffic flow to our southwest area will serve as a major catalyst for development of this area in Rock Island's expansion. In addition, the widening of Blackhawk Road west to Black Hawk State Historic Site will allow for the traffic to move in a more efficient manner than is presently the case. We look forward to working with developers along Blackhawk Road in creating new retail, commercial, and residential opportunities along this corridor. Naturally, these improvements all anticipate retaining and protecting [Black Hawk State Historic Site](#) as the priceless and unique jewel it is in our City's midst.

A second challenge will be to deal with the costly and growing [unfunded mandates](#) being sent our way by the federal and state governments. Undoubtedly the largest of these mandates is a \$66 million-plus mandate to modify of our [combined sewer overflow system](#) being forced on us by the U. S. E. P. A. The cost and magnitude of required changes fly in the face of what the Illinois E. P. A. thought necessary; and seem like an instance of federal overkill for limited environmental benefit. Nonetheless, this is a process we are being compelled to undertake; and we must seek to minimize the burden on our utility users while working with our federal and state legislators to seek some relief through financial assistance to pay the huge cost of the proposed mandate. As it stands, our ratepayers could face a 104 percent increase in their sewer rates over the next nine years to fund the changes. We will work hard to minimize these increases.

Other mandates, including increasing costs of pensions, as well as health insurance, utility, and other expenses, all make operating local government and holding the line on rate and tax increases ever more challenging. Nonetheless, we are continuing to do our best. As a result, although City utility rates are expected to increase, our [City Council](#) recently approved a modest decrease in property tax rates in the proposed budget for 2006 - 2007 submitted by our staff. This is made possible largely through the rising value of properties throughout Rock Island that comes from economic development and tight financial management.

Work on our riverfront will be another challenge for the year to come. We are now meeting with our friends in Davenport in the [RiverVision](#) process to develop joint projects between the two sides of the river, including renewal of ferry boat service between our two downtowns after a four decade interruption. With the relocation of the Casino Rock Island off our riverfront and the proposed move of the gaming boat upstream in Davenport, sites for landing a ferry boat will once again become available. We're working with [MetroLink](#) and our Congressmen and Senators to make this a reality. Other exciting projects could include lighting Lock and Dam 15, as well as possible installation of a fountain or other lighted features in the river. In Rock Island, we will work collaboratively with Modern Woodman to develop a green space in the area east of their headquarters; and we need to make some decisions as to the future of the former Rock Island Armory.

[RiverVision](#) is nothing short of an effort to make downtowns Rock Island and Davenport the urban heart of the Quad City region. Such a revitalized urban center can have terrific benefit to the entire Quad Cities, as it can serve as a center of culture to attract people to our area - not only tourists, but also young professionals and others interested in living in a community with a strong and vital metropolitan center possessing a rich cultural life.

Concluding on a more personal note, this last year reminds us of the inevitability of change. As we've seen transitions on our City Council and personnel in recent years, last year my good friend and one of our real urban visionaries, Dan Carmody, took a new position in Fort Wayne, Indiana. His departure leaves a gap in our leadership team; yet, as he would be first to point out, it also creates opportunities for a new perspective. Change is inevitable and is often a truly healthy thing: it forces us to grow and to think and act anew in striving to create a better and more just community and world. To be sure, it can be challenging. Yet, as we have so often seen, challenge and opportunity are really reverse sides of the same coin.

And so, as I have said so many times before, we in Rock Island - with a combination of energy, vision, and pluck in the face of adversity - will take the challenges we are given and turn them into opportunities.

May we together continue to move forward with a strong and steadfast faith.

*Mayor Mark W. Schwiebert*