

State of the County Address
April 15th 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Stephenson County Board, elected officials, citizens, and friends; tonight, in keeping with an annual tradition I began in 2003, I would like to take a few minutes to provide you with a perspective on our activities of the past year and some vision toward the challenges and opportunities we can expect on our journey forward.

Many of you have served with me on this Board for a number of years and have become familiar with my forward-looking attitude and passion for progress. Those of you relatively new to this Board should now know that your presence and opinions are very welcome as we meet the continuous challenges of county government. I want you to know that I will continue to work with all my energy and with all of you to provide information, perspective, and options as you consider the decisions and investments required to maintain services, provide security, and cultivate a healthy economy.

In each of the past years there have been unique challenges. This last year has been no exception. We have dealt with floods, blizzards, a shortage of road salt, a faltering world and national economy, and the impeachment of a sitting governor, just to name a few. We have been able to deal with and control our challenges because we have developed a great group of leaders within our department heads and employees. It is amazing that with all the rules, policies, procedures, mandates, laws, and the scrutiny of the public that we are able to get the job done.

I wish to thank everyone for your continued public service. From the drivers, operators, and mechanics at the Highway Department; Deputies, Corrections Officers, and Dispatchers in the Sheriff's Office; the nurses, CNAs, and caregivers at the Nursing Center; along with health inspectors, storm watchers, jurors, election judges, attorneys, bailiffs, volunteer firemen, township commissioners,; and everyone else that works for or volunteers time on behalf of Stephenson County. We are a diverse yet cohesive team of public servants and your service is greatly appreciated.

Each year I continue to place a high value on leadership. Leadership is not something imbedded in everyone, but is learned and developed from the substance that forms each individual person. Leadership is a result of action, decision, success, failure, experience, and compassion. It is wise to take every opportunity to expose yourself to an environment of positive leadership.

Beginning next week, County Clerk Vici Otte, Treasurer Adrienne Becker, Board Member Alvin Wire, and I will begin a 6-month leadership program sponsored by UCCI and conducted by the University of Illinois. I hope that in October the four of us can join County Administrator Russ Mulnix as graduates of this academic leadership experience.

Last year I presented the first annual Chairman's Leadership Award. That award went to Chief County Assessment Officer, Ron Kane. Picking an annual recipient for this award is not easy since we have such a great group of capable people to choose from. The 2009 recipient of the Chairman's Leadership Award is Terry Groves.

Mr. Groves has served Stephenson County for almost (18) years. He serves as Zoning Officer, emergency management director, as well as a member of the Jane Addams Trail and Pecatonica Prairie Path commissions. He works to train and coordinate storm spotters and coordinate NIMS Training. He works with the LEPC, Unified Command, and the Sheriff's Reserve Unit. He has worked through the zoning and permitting of wind power in our county. He has been consistent, fair, and diligent in his leadership on behalf of Stephenson County. Also, in his free time he serves as a member of the Freeport School Board. Please congratulate Terry Groves on receiving this leadership award.

Much of our attention today is aimed at the condition of the world and national economies. Over the past few months we have seen federal bailouts involving trillions of dollars. New words like "stimulus" and "shovel-ready" as well as acronyms like "TARP" have become part of our daily conversation. Our economy is depressed, unemployment at all-time highs, and mortgage foreclosures are at record levels in parts of our nation.

The banking, credit, and mortgage crisis is the tornado that is loose in our economy. Poisoned investments are staggering the nation's credit, insurance, and stock markets. Part of our insecurity and fear comes from not understanding the inner working of the capital markets in a free enterprise system. It is hard to keep up with policies and actions of the Treasury Department, the Federal Reserve, FDIC, Fannie Mae, AIG, Citibank, and all the other players in our Gross National Product.

Thomas Jefferson did not like banks. He once wrote, "I believe banking institutions are more dangerous to our liberties than standing armies. If the American people ever allow private banks to control the issue of their currency, first by inflation, then by deflation, the banks and corporations that will grow up around will deprive the people of all property until their children wake up homeless on the continent their fathers conquered." I think Thomas Jefferson would be absolutely amazed at the complex banking system of today.

The credit crisis has also shed light on the health of many of our largest and oldest companies such as GM, Ford, and Chrysler. It is mind boggling that these giant companies are now looking at federal bailouts and are creeping to the precipice of bankruptcy. Who would believe that the President of the United States would be firing the CEO of a major corporation. The atmosphere of greed, perks, and bonuses that surrounds some of our largest companies has sickened the American worker, investor, and tax payer. Back in 1912 there was a similar climate of corporate greed and President Teddy Roosevelt said, "A man who has never gone to school may steal from a boxcar, but if he has a university education, he can steal the whole railroad." The ability of the federal government to catch the thieves will be thoroughly tested in the months to come.

The State of Illinois was not prepared for the meltdown of the national economy. The deficits and shrinking revenues during relatively good economic times put our State in a super-vulnerable financial position entering this downturn. Then, when we needed action the most, we became distracted when Governor Blagojevich lost the trust of the legislature and the people. His impeachment and indictment cost us valuable time, energy, and goodwill. We even have a cloud of doubt over one of our Senate seats in Washington.

Governor Quinn has an almost hopeless job to reform our State government while working to improve the financial strength and economic environment of Illinois. The new governor has proposed a reform agenda and a budget that could begin the process of fixing Illinois, but if you think there is any solution without pain, you are sadly mistaken.

On first blush, the Governor's budget proposal is built on the largest tax increase in the State's history – 50% on personal income and 50% on employers. This tax on employers comes when Illinois has lost more than 175,000 jobs in the last year. We are one of five states that have fewer jobs now than we did 10 years ago. There is a planned underfunding of the state's retirement accounts. It is proposed to short the worst funded pension system in the nation by an additional \$3.2 billion. The Governor and the Legislature have a great deal of work to do in the next few months.

As Lincoln once said, "If this is coffee please bring me some tea. If this is tea please bring me some coffee." No matter what you call it, the economic condition of this State tastes bad.

A few weeks ago, the State did pass a mini capital plan funded with lottery and gambling proceeds. Locally, we can expect to see some road repairs begin shortly. We shall receive just over \$19 million in funds to resurface about 16 miles of US20 and IL26. This is a drop in the bucket, but a start. The State now has to generate a full capital plan that will be a significant challenge without a new and bondable revenue source. The four-lane US20 project is definitely on the top of our infrastructure list and we are part of a regional effort from Rockford to Dubuque to finally get this project done. Tonight you will consider a resolution of support for this project as well as a request to help fund the educational process to insure our legislators and the governor are keenly aware of the need. The current highway is unsafe and unsupportive of the needs of Illinois and the country.

We also find the introduction of high-speed rail in our region as a necessary component in the growth of our economic corridor. Activities are gearing up to insure Amtrak moves forward with plans to introduce passenger rail service to NW Illinois. Our local concern should focus on the potential ridership and the necessary passenger infrastructure that local communities will have to build if they want access to the train. I strongly suggest that the City of Freeport begin work with an Amtrak-approved architect to formulate a budget for building a station. We will certainly work with the City and support access to the train.

Our local economy is obviously feeling the pressure from the national and state levels. We have seen a rise in unemployment and a continued effort by some of our major employers to move jobs to China and Mexico. However, while our unemployment rate rose to 12.1% in January 2009 it dropped to 10.8% in February. The average unemployment level in the counties surrounding us is 11.3%. It's too early to call this a positive trend, especially with recent business announcements, but we have a glimmer of hope. The March 2009 unemployment numbers come out in a few days. Remember, Warren Buffet said, "It's a recession if you lose your job and a depression if I lose mine." It is a terrible life event to lose a job and we will continue to do everything we can to provide opportunity in this otherwise bleak economic environment.

The State of Illinois now ranks ninth in the nation in the rate of foreclosures with more than half the 12,700 foreclosed homes in Cook County. We currently have approximately 20 homes currently facing foreclosure in Stephenson County. This rate is higher than normal, but nowhere near the levels in other parts of the state and nation.

In the past few weeks we have seen a dramatic increase in activity in our zoning department. Last week there were 3 new building permits issued for new single-family homes. In the last 40 days the requests for zoning designations for appraisal purposes has tripled and the requests for well and septic permits are on the increase. This activity is usually a precursor to renewed economic activity in the real estate sector of our local economy.

Our sales tax revenues are still tracking ahead of last year's numbers which is a sign of continued strong cash flow in the local economy. This strength in sales tax revenue is offsetting the weakness in the income tax revenue that comes from the statewide pool.

Our costs and revenues thru the first quarter of our fiscal year remain on target. We continue to work with our department heads to control their expenses in order to provide an additional buffer to meet the undetermined fiscal challenges we will see in 2010.

With the loss of jobs in some sectors of our local economy we are working to train for and fill other job sectors. Our Local Workforce Investment Board has been very busy dealing with the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 that recently passed Congress. Our region will receive an additional \$1.9 million of funding to support adult, dislocated worker, and youth training programs. It is planned that these programs will assist almost 600 people in the region. The Summer Youth Program is gearing up and will be serving 250-300 low-income youth in our 5-county area. Over 275 youth have responded in the first 5 days of the program and range in ages from 18-24 years. These youth will be available to work from June thru August and will be paid \$8/hr. by the program. There is no cost or liability to the business. I would like to request that we look at hiring at least 3 of these youth for summer work in Stephenson County. Shortly, the program will open up to the private sector. If any business in the county could use this temporary, no cost help this summer, please contact my office.

Our economic development activities over this past year have continued at an intense level and have resulted in a dampening of the effects from the economy as a whole. We were able to generate more than \$10 million of extra wages paid into the local economy just thru the construction of wind towers in Ecogrove. These wages have churned thru our local economy and purchased food, services, and goods from our local businesses. A fact justified by our strong sales tax revenue.

Ecogrove, along with proposed future wind developments, is predicted to generate another \$60 million in direct wages over the next 3 years. Wind towers could generate more than \$80 million in property taxes for local government over the next 20 years without any pressure on services. We anticipate an investment of more than \$750 million will be made in our county over the next few years due to wind power. This is an economic benefit that can carry us through the necessary transformation of our local economy.

Our partnership with the Northwest Illinois Development Alliance, or NIDA, will be very important as we retool our local economy. NIDA can provide the private component in the very valuable public-private partnership required for successful economic development. NIDA has set 3-year goals of a.) increasing employment by 300 net jobs, b.) complete \$100 million of new construction, and c.) target wage for new jobs of \$14.75/hr.

In order to meet these goals, NIDA will operate 4 working committees:

- 1.) Business Retention and Expansion
- 2.) Targeted Marketing and Recruitment
- 3.) Infrastructure and
- 4.) Workforce Development.

Stephenson County will be most served by the Targeted Marketing and Expansion Committee. This committee will provide the format for strategic marketing that will develop solid market potential for our growth in the areas of renewable energy and specialized manufacturing. Our marketing effort will now take on a proactive strategy that will generate real investment in economic sectors in which we have strengths and resources. This approach will be most valuable as we continue to develop Mill Race Crossing and the Mill Race Industrial Park.

NIDA has served Stephenson County this past year as the agent for the Mill Race Industrial Park as well as the contractee with GVA Worldwide. They provide coordination of the local CEDS committee and serve on the Workforce Investment Board. They also coordinate the work of our Mill Race Project team that will work out the development agreements for projects in Mill Race Crossing.

One of the development agreements that is reaching the final stages is the one for Project Cat. I had hoped that we could make an announcement concerning this project this evening, but I have been informed the principals of this project will be here on April 27 and 28, 2009 to make an important and positive announcement concerning their proposed renewable energy facility.

NIDA has worked very hard over the past few months in securing the abatement approvals for wind power developments. As of today, we have secured abatement authorizations in 11 of the 14 taxing districts associated with Ecogrove. I appreciate the work done by Cheryl Kneubuehl and Ron Kane, along with representatives of Acciona in working through this complicated process.

The coordinated efforts of NIDA are critical to our county in maintaining a consistent and stable development effort. When you consider continued funding of this partnership, I ask that you look into all of the activities and efforts that comprise their scope of work. It consists of a wide variety of planning and executions that are complex and highly variable. The best defense in times of economic downturn is a well directed offense. Continued investment and development will drive our local economy thru this current economic downturn.

Partnerships are increasingly important as we work to improve the quality of life in our county. In addition to the partnership with NIDA we have been involved in a number of other growing alliances. We are working with our city, villages, and townships; the Resource and Conservation and Development District and the CEDS; the Local Workforce Investment Board; the Freeport Downtown Development Foundation; and more. Other partnerships that have been created include the HCC Wind Technology Program and the HCC-FHN nursing program. It is necessary that we continue to develop partnerships and identify collaborative opportunities in order to enjoy operating efficiencies. Communication between taxing districts is also important in order to share information and identify mutual challenges. We have been very active in all these efforts and have gained a reputation of being consistent and positive. We understand what Ronald Reagan meant when he said, "Think of the progress we could make if nobody cared who got the credit."

Our relationship with the Federal Economic Development Administration, EDA, has continued to grow. With new stimulus dollars available and the shovel-ready status of our development area, we have been invited to expand the current grant from \$1.725 million to \$2.2 million. In addition, we have requested some additional time to engage in the required construction schedule. We now plan to begin the bid process for the first phases of EDA funded infrastructure no later than September 2009.

In 2007 we received (2) Brownfield grants totaling \$400,000. We were able to use these funds to identify and analyze a number of potential hazardous waste sites around the county. We applied for another round of these grants in 2008 and were unsuccessful. We applied again for 2009 and expect to receive word on a positive award in the current month of April. We intend to continue our effort to identify, analyze, and clean more

contaminated sites within the county in order to give the property a viable economic future.

We have again requested approximately \$4.0 million of non-home rule bond cap from the State to support the First-Time Homebuyer program. However, the problems in the bond market are making the continued viability of this program questionable. We are working with the Illinois Housing Development Authority and NHS to determine the best options for continuing this program.

We are continuing our efforts to finish the Jane Addams Trail and the Pecatonica Prairie Path. Tonight you will consider a contingent offer of funding that may allow the construction of these recreational resources in a matter of months rather than years. The completion of these trails will put us in the middle of a growing tourist and recreational network that will bring more visitors and possibly residents to our county. This project is another example of the importance of partnerships and the leverage they can provide to complex projects that will benefit the public for generations.

We were not successful in our recent grant application for McNeils Landing. However, the City of Freeport did receive a grant for Tutty's Crossing. I continue to believe that the river and streams within our county are an undeveloped tourism resource. I am very grateful that a number of volunteer groups are undertaking projects to clean up and improve access to these blue trails.

There are a number of other projects that are starting to take shape that could lead to an improved local economy and quality of life. We are working to organize a preliminary plan with IDOT to begin a county-wide transportation system that will integrate our village and rural residents into the larger mass transportation system needed in the region. We are working to provide broadband and fiber access to all rural business and residents so that everyone can have a cost effective access to the information highway. We see a great potential in the location of back-office businesses to our county resulting in new jobs in a new economic sector. In addition, we are aware of a large number of home-based businesses in greater Chicago that are trying to relocate to an area with a low cost of living and a rural quality of life. A few of these are already here and are generating a significant amount of retail sales taxes. We are supporting plans by the Village of Lena to build a recreational trail from the village to LeAquaNa State Park. Also, Lena is forming an economic development group and is looking to possibly join NIDA as a new partner.

There are more than 5000 Bills being presented to the State Legislature for consideration. There are a number of them that may have impact on our county. One of these Bills I believe will have a positive benefit and we will consider a resolution of support this evening. This Bill will add Stephenson County to the Quad Cities Regional Economic Development Area, QCREDA. This would give business and investors in our county access to bank qualified tax exempt bonds that would enhance project funding. The QCREDA has been very successful and efficient in providing this finance option to many large projects in the area. This is a tool that we need to help compete for large projects

and the associated jobs. I ask that you support this resolution so that we can so advise our representatives in Springfield.

There is another project we have begun that will not add jobs or create new investment, but it is important to our history and civil responsibility. The old “poor farm” cemetery located at the corner of IL26 and Lamm Road is a sacred as well as a historical site in Stephenson County. We are taking very seriously our responsibility to maintain and enhance this cemetery out of respect to the people buried there, both known and unknown. We are working with the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency to identify grave sites, stabilize grave markers, landscape, and provide citizen access to the site. Fehr-Graham is providing survey assistance and a number of private citizens are providing time and money for this important project. I hope that the actions we take now will preserve this historic site for many more generations.

We continue to work on plans for the upgrade of the Kellogg’s Grove Battlefield Monument near Kent, IL. With the increased attention to the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln since the debate celebration and his 200th birthday, we are becoming aware of additional resources available to upgrade and preserve this historical battle ground and cemetery.

I am very pleased that Mr. Jay Castro, a Freeport resident and artist, volunteered to provide some new statues for placement at the site. He plans to develop three statues: one of Lincoln as a member of the militia, one of Chief Black Sparrow Hawk, and one of Chief Winneshiek; all major participants in that era of history. Mr. Castro could not be here this evening, but he has allowed me to bring the work-in-process here tonight for your review. Therefore, on behalf of Mr. Castro, I would like to unveil Mr. Lincoln as he begins to take shape as a young member of the Illinois Militia.

When this piece is complete, Mr. Castro will send it to the factory where it will be scanned and enlarged into an 8-foot statue ready for placement in the Kellogg Grove Park. This is a tremendous project undertaken by Jay Castro and is an example of the tremendous talent we have within our community.

Our planned move of the Administrative, County Clerk, Treasurer, Assessor, and GIS offices to the Stewart Centre is proceeding on schedule. The 10th floor space is complete and we will begin moving into the space as time permits. Mr. Kane informs me that the 5th floor space is being painted and glass and trim will be installed next week. We believe that these new spaces will provide improved access for the public and a more efficient office layout for all the departments involved. We plan to move committee meetings to the seventh floor board room of the Stewart Centre beginning next month. These committees will include Planning and Development, Public Safety, Administration, Nursing Center, and Finance. The ETSB/911 Committee will also meet at the Stewart Centre.

The partnership between the Stephenson Nursing Center Foundation and Blair Minton is moving closer to reality in the form of the new Supportive Living Facility, called

Heritage Woods of Freeport. This facility, planned to be built at the southwest corner of Pearl City and Forrest Roads will be home to almost 100 seniors and provide dozens of new jobs for our community. The project has received final enterprise zone approval from the State and has been annexed into the City of Freeport. The developer is currently finalizing construction financing.

A growing concern with regard to our future budgets is the rising cost of crime. Most of our general fund budget is dedicated to supporting departments that are necessary to process criminals within our justice system. These costs include the Sheriff's Office, States Attorney, Public Defender, Probation, Circuit Clerk, and Courts. While we have a number of very dedicated and capable employees working in support of the local justice system, it is a significant burden on the tax payer to support these costs. It is certainly, not in my vision that crime can be eliminated, but we need to find ways to reduce crime so that local families will be stronger, our youth better mentored, and communities safer for everyone.

In 2008, according to our probation department, there were a total of 2740 charges filed against individuals within the county. Of these charges 1568 were misdemeanors, 750 felonies, and 422 juvenile. I am working with probation to extract data from 2006 and 2007 in an effort to begin establishing any trends. These numbers indicate that approximately 1 out of every 20 people in the county was arrested in 2008.

The cost associated with these crimes is tremendous. Not only in terms of broken families, damaged property, and even loss of life, but the cost of prosecuting, incarcerating, evaluating, and monitoring after the fact consume the majority of our general fund budget.

The seemingly forgotten component in the cost of crime is the victim. However, we have a number of services here in Stephenson County that assist crime victims. On Saturday, April 25, 2009 we will participate in a community awareness activity called "Walk a Mile in my Shoes". This will be a community walking event sponsored by the VOICES organization. I will be there along with our States Attorney, John Vogt. I invite all of you and every citizen to join us beginning at 8:30 a.m. on April 25 in Krape Park to participate in this event.

As we look forward to the challenge of the 2010 budget I see continued concern with the cost of providing health care benefits for our employees as well as liability and workmen's compensation premiums. Our employees need to do what they can to stay healthy and work safely when on the job. Many of the jobs we have are stressful and dangerous. We are going to continue to emphasize health, fitness, and safety for all county employees. I am making a personal commitment to get myself back into shape, lose some weight, and spend more time on my bike than behind my desk. I invite each member of the county board, department heads, and staff to organize a commitment to a healthier lifestyle and would welcome a "biggest loser" competition over the next 12 months as a way to measure our success.

The PTELL, or tax caps, is going to be a challenge to the 2010 budget. The cost of living increase that we will use is 1/10 of a percent. This is virtually zero. The only way that revenue will grow is if new property is added to the tax rolls or existing property has grown in assessed value. There is a possibility of some deflation and we now wonder what happens if the cost of living adjustment in future years is actually negative?

The PTELL will be a factor as we look to provide the wage increases contained in our union labor agreements. In addition, the cost of funding the IMRF is ballooning due to the collapse of the stock and bond markets over the last year. We will have to raise the IMRF levy by almost \$.04 to compensate and under caps we will have to bring these dollars from another levy. Every department and oversight committee will be challenged to provide a balanced budget in 2010. Again, it is so important that we have economic development opportunities working to help maintain revenue and broaden our tax base. Again, \$750 million of new wind power investment is a welcome antidote to any virus that may infect our local economy.

We are gearing up for the 2010 census. Ron Kane is coordinating the county effort and is in the process of forming the required "Complete Count Committee". The Department of Commerce will begin scheduling meetings to distribute the plan of action and census guidelines in the near future. A calendar of activities will be announced for the balance of 2009 in preparation for the actual census. There will be a series of events designed to promote the census and encourage voluntary participation. Citizens will be required to submit their individual surveys no later than April 2010 or a census worker will come and visit your residence. It is planned that the census will be completed by May of 2010. The census data is very important. It will determine the home rule status of the City of Freeport and determine how much financial assistance we can expect from various government programs.

The 2010 census will be followed in 2011 by the reapportionment process that will redraw political boundaries insuring compliance with the "one man one vote" criteria.

We will be very busy with the census and the reapportionment over the next couple of years, but this time we will have the benefit of a functional GIS system that should make the process easier and more accurate.

In 2009 and 2010 I would like to see us complete the rewrite of our County Code and make it available on the internet. I would like to see us design for and provide a system of backup electrical power for the courthouse. I would like to see us find a way to curtail the amount of trash appearing along county roadways and help provide a more user friendly and economical way to dispose of it properly. I would like to see our departments continue to develop innovative and efficient ways to conduct our business to reduce the financial pressures on the tax payers. I would like us to stay engaged and look toward the future armed with new ideas, new alliances, and a continued positive attitude that will motivate others to participate in local government and contribute their vision and energy to build a better community.

When I mention community, I think mostly of the people that live here. I think of the children, the seniors, and students. I think of the workers, the care givers, and those that protect the peace. Many times we take each other, our friends, our fellow citizens, or family members for granted. It may be the fast pace of our lives or the competition for our time. But, there will come a time when life stops giving and starts to take. We lose people that we care about or those who always seem to find a way to contribute and help.

A few weeks ago we lost a good friend of Stephenson County in Valeria Wiegand. Valeria spent many hours planting and tending to what little green space we have around this courthouse. She continued working the ground here well into her eighties. I never thanked Valeria enough, the community probably didn't know that she did this, and now she is gone. I would like to plan a special area on the courthouse lawn and dedicate it to Valeria. I will work with the Sheriff and the Public Property Committee to design and install a small memory garden that Valeria would be proud of.

Also, a few weeks ago, I was very saddened and yet honored to attend the funeral of Specialist Norman Cain III, a US Army soldier who lost his young life in Afghanistan. While I didn't know Norman Cain personally, I felt a great sense of loss for his family and the families of all who lose their lives serving our country and protecting our citizens. A few months ago, while flying over the Atlantic in the middle of the night, I overheard a short conversation between an Air Force C-17 and a civilian airliner. The civilian airliner asked the C-17, "What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" The response came back, "Providing the blanket of freedom under which you sleep." No more was said. Norman Cain and hundreds and thousands of others have given their lives so that we may sleep under that blanket of freedom. Appreciate it.

Freeport and Stephenson County is our home. Every decision we make is tempered with sensitivity to our fellow citizens and neighbors. Many of the issues we consider have many components and need to be reconciled with the relative benefit over the long term for the majority of the people we represent. There will always be many opinions, views, and concepts that temper our decision making process. As we move forward we gain experience and knowledge to minimize the unintended consequences of the legislative process. Your public service is greatly appreciated. We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.