

State of the City of Valparaiso
Mayor Jon Costas
January 15, 2025

Good Afternoon. Thank you all for joining us today. And a special thanks to Rex and the awesome Valpo Chamber for once again hosting of this annual gathering.

As we enter 2025, I'm pleased to report that the state of our city is strong and the state of our union in Valparaiso is even stronger. You see, 2024 was a year of listening and coming together. When I stood before you a year ago, we had just sworn in a new City Council. For the first time in 20 years the mayor's office and the city council were bipartisan. Many eyes were upon us. And some predicted that we would get ready to rumble. Isn't that what political parties do? But perhaps these skeptics weren't familiar with the spirit of Valparaiso – where we shun politics and, instead, choose trust and teamwork for the good of the city. Instead of chaos, 2024 saw cooperation and progress in our city. We gained fresh perspectives, and we built trust and pursued common goals. We had more than a few marathon council meetings last year, but it takes time and patience to forge mutual understanding. Together we accomplished much in our first year together. I'd like to ask our council members who are present today to stand. Please hold your applause until they are all recognized.

Diana Reed, District 1	Peter Anderson, District 5
Robert Cotton, District 2	Ellen Kapitan, At Large
Barbara Domer, District 3	Emilie Hunt, At Large
Jack Pupillo, District 4	

Today is about celebrating the victories we've achieved for our city in 2024, as well looking ahead to the progress yet to come. Let's start by sharing some wins and there are many:

Our **Clerk-Treasurer's** office continued to keep us fiscally sound, passing the annual Indiana audit with stellar results. As a city, we retained our 'AA/Stable' bond rating, placing Valparaiso among the top 20 communities in Indiana; this saves our citizens thousands of dollars in lower interest rates. Further, we have the reassurance of a growing \$4.9 million Rainy Day Fund.

For our **Engineering** Department, construction orange was the color of 2024. We completed the city's *largest-ever paving year* with extensive roadway improvements – on collector, arterial and neighborhood streets. Typically, we have about \$3.5 million for road maintenance annually. So, committing nearly \$9 million for roads in 2024 reflects a renewed commitment to our infrastructure. And even better, bids came in lower than expected, extending our paving miles to include more than 40 lane miles and more than a mile of sidewalk repairs.

Our city utilities launched projects that ensure reliable water and sewer supply for generations to come, embarking on a 76-million-dollar package of capital improvements. Even better, these projects qualified for low-interest financing through the State of Indiana, saving ratepayers nearly 10-million-dollars in interest payments.

The City opened 2 new facilities in 2024: the new **Transit Center** located in the Journeyman Distillery building, and, of course the **Lincoln Highway Garage**. The new garage adds 360 parking spots to our downtown, serving both the public, and soon, the new residents of The Linc apartments. These projects add vitality to our city, meeting goals for transit, parking and housing that have long been part of our master plan.

Our **Development** department advanced several key projects in 2024: The **Grand Gardner Hotel**, which is transforming the historic Gardner School, bringing it from 1899 to 2025. Some of us may best remember the building as the Boys & Girls Club, but Urschel Development is hard at work creating a one of a kind boutique hotel, enhancing our historic downtown.

In 2024, we approved tax phase ins for three key projects. One is **Viking Medical Place**, which will finish that long-vacant building on Glendale, across from ValPlayso. The project had been mired in litigation for years. But today we see progress each day and soon this building will be a modern medical facility welcoming providers to our community. We are grateful to Hasse Construction, a local firm with more than 100 years of experience for championing this project. In fact, Hasse Construction is even using most of the original contractors to finish the job.

Another bright spot for our Development team is the **Bluejay II** project. This multi-tenant spec building fills an important need for readily available industrial building space to add jobs and investment in Valparaiso.

Finally, the city supported tax abatement for the expansion of **Lake Cable** into the vacant former Regal Beloit building on Evans, expanding job growth and further investment into our city for years to come. We are pleased to retain and even grow Lake Cable's job force of nearly 200.

Our Transit system is always on the move, adding 3 new low-ride **V-Line buses** in 2024. These new buses make this vital service more accessible for all.

We also completed beautification efforts along Highway 30, adding signage and landscaping to highlight that Valparaiso is more than a place to pass through, but a highly desirable **destination**.

Public Safety is an essential priority for Valparaiso, we strive to set the standard for professionalism and excellence. To that end, in 2024, the **Valparaiso Police Department** earned its fifth award from CALEA, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies. This accreditation is the international gold standard for policing and the VPD is one of just 14 Indiana municipalities to hold themselves to this high standard.

In 2024, the VPD expanded its Emergency Medical Responder program so that today 21 officers are trained to help treat members of the community in critical situations, prior to the arrival of an ambulance. In 2024, 8 members of the VPD completed crisis intervention training, leveling up their skills to respond to mental health crises and substance abuse situations. The department has also added its first secret service Task Force Officer, adding skills in cyber investigation and national security.

Completing our public safety wins, the **Valparaiso Fire Department** hired seven new firefighters in 2024. The VFD maintains the city's favorable Class 2 rating by the Insurance Service Office, putting Valparaiso in the top 1% of Indiana communities. This superior rating reflects excellent fire protection and it also saves Valparaiso property owners on their property insurance.

Our Community Engagement Department continued to promote unity and neighborhood pride, awarding 21 new Neighborhood Improvement grants in 2024. This makes 120 projects in 40 neighborhoods funded since we introduced these grants in 2018. That's more than \$1.1 million in funds shared with neighborhoods, thanks to the support of the City of Valparaiso and the Redevelopment Commission. 2024 also saw a new class of City Government Academy graduates. That makes 150 graduates to date – future leaders who have invested their time to learn about city government and how to serve, plus a new class of Mayor's Youth Council students, sharpening their community skills. Community Engagement was also the spark behind the local art that we saw pop up in 2024. 24 local artists were featured on utility boxes citywide, making summer 2024 a more colorful season that lives on for years to come.

The city's **IT department** continues to keep us progressive and in 2024 enhanced cyber security initiatives. These efforts allowed us to cut our cyber liability insurance premiums by half. In addition, we added a dedicated webmaster to keep our website current and user-friendly.

Finally, our renowned **Valpo Parks** department continued marking milestones, making improvements in accessibility, safety and infrastructure. Parks keep getting more fun and more user-friendly. I encourage you to check out the enhancements at Rogers Lakewood where you'll see added paving, lighting, kayak rentals and trails. Golf had another extraordinary year and the Popcorn Panic saw its largest registration since 2019, energized by a new course. And we're so excited to transition the exclusive operations of our Memorial Opera House to the City of Valparaiso and Valpo Parks, starting this year. Adding our expertise and resources in events to this newly renovated jewel promises to be a magical combination. We look forward to growing a creative arts district in our downtown, centered around the beloved and historic opera house.

These accomplishments light us up at the City of Valparaiso. But what we see ahead is even brighter. As I look around the room at this gathering, each year I'm struck by the collective talent and energy in this room. It's easy to be optimistic in the midst of so many positive leaders and caring residents. Here are some of the reasons we're so excited for 2025:

Today I'm pleased to unveil plans to **upgrade up to 10 of our city's existing parks** in a 10-million-dollar project for 2025! Over the past decade, it's been rewarding to add offerings like the super popular Flounder & Friends Skatepark, new trails at Creekside, the dedicated dog park ValPAWraiso and more. But we've never lost sight of the timeless parks we grew up loving. Kirchhoff. Tower. Ogden Gardens. What's *your* favorite? In 2025, we will embark on aggressive upgrades in a plan that we call "RePLAY." RePLAY will add new play spaces, increase accessibility and update our parks for the future. The places we remember will continue to be the places where we make new memories!

When the work starts this very spring, you'll see we are adding 4 NEW PICKLE BALL COURTS at ValPLAYso, replacing the dated courts at Kirchhoff. There will also be 3 new shelters and new bathrooms at Kirchhoff, the park that started it all. Fairgrounds Park is getting upgrades to the ballfields, lights, parking lot and Butterfield Pavillion. Throughout our parks citywide, you'll be seeing new pathways, new playground equipment, new lighting for longer days of play. The projects chosen are the result of ongoing public input and with an eye toward the future. We look forward to sharing all of the exciting details in the coming weeks. And it's all happening... starting now at a park near you!

That ambitious paving and road restoration program we saw in 2024? Well, we've gotten the green light from the council to do it again for 2025! Look for over 9M in road and infrastructure improvements in 2025, making our driving and walking safer and more enjoyable.

Our city continues to grow in population at a healthy and manageable rate of just under 1% per year. In 2024 we added 188 new housing units to our city. We expect that growth to continue as we plan in an orderly way. While we enjoy a diverse housing stock in our city, adding attainable housing is important to expand home ownership opportunities to more of our citizens. To that end, the city is working on two initiatives that will partner with the private sector to increase the housing stock of quality attainable housing in our city. Also, we are just about to open a new state-of-the-art men's homeless shelter on the city's south side to provide supportive services and hope to those who need a hand up in life towards self-sustainability.

In early 2025, we look forward to acquiring the former McGill Factory located in the very heart of our city on Lafayette Street, to be transformed into a vibrant, multi-generational community center. This will be a place to play, exercise, learn new skills, create art and more – a place for all ages to connect and grow. This is a project that will take years to accomplish, giving us a new project to work on together. Soon we will be inviting all ages to share their ideas to make this new community center uniquely Valparaiso's. We can't wait to see the vision come clearer – for a new destination in the heart of Valparaiso.

I'm also excited to introduce a new city-wide **Community Conference** to be held on April 17, and you're all invited! Our Community Engagement team will host a day of insightful speakers, hands-on workshops, active networking, and ways to plug into your community. If you've ever wanted to be in the room where it happens, we'll share how to get there in this day of building knowledge and connections. Visit our website at Valpo.us and follow our Facebook page at Valparaiso Now to learn the details.

2025 will also be a year of bringing people together in celebration of expression and the arts. We will continue to support the Valparaiso Creative Council and its new talented full-time director Jessica Corral, to expand art opportunities throughout our city. Look for the new Creative Council arts center to open up later this year in the downtown on Indiana Avenue.

All of these sparkling accomplishments and plans are the result of hard work and collaboration. I want to thank the city's leadership team for making these dreams a reality. I assure you, they are, collectively, one of the most talented and effective city leadership teams in the state. We all benefit greatly from their expertise and dedication. I am immensely proud of them. Please stand so we can recognize your efforts today – as you'll be rolling your sleeves up for the year ahead. A special welcome to our new Planning and Transit Director Bob Thompson who brings more than 33 years of experience with Porter County government – in planning, engineering and construction.

Over the last year, our leadership team have been exploring a book by Adam Grant called *Think Again*. Rather than being skeptical and tentative, Think Again reminded us to be open minded, collaborative and innovative. We met regularly to move the needle on projects but also to revisit and revise our leadership team values that drive our actions and interactions for the community.

I'd like to share the new values the team created. At the City of Valparaiso, we are:

- Innovative
- Respectful
- Responsive
- Accountable and...
- Proactive

As we embark on a new year full of ambitious goals, I pledge to you that we will approach each challenge with these values in mind. Local government that is responsive, efficient and visionary is necessary for a city to thrive and for its citizens to flourish. Effective local government enhances your life on a daily basis. Our mission is to deliver excellence in our core responsibilities to maintain our high quality of life for all citizens. And to fashion a city that our children's grandchildren are drawn to call their own.

I ask you to partner with us in our optimistic and community-minded approach. With these values driving us and the example that our bipartisan city council has set, there's nothing we can't accomplish as a community. I thank each of you for your commitment to our beloved city.

Happy New Year to You and to the Vale of Paradise.