

The Costas Plan 2.0: Greater Things!

"A person should seek public office to do something, not be something."

Former Indiana Governor, Mitch Daniels

Dear Citizen

October 1, 2023

When I was first elected mayor in 2003, Valparaiso was far different from the city we enjoy today. The downtown was on life support, the roads were in bad shape, several areas of the city looked run down, our police headquarters was outdated, we had no public transportation, no rainy-day fund, and, can you believe it, not a single roundabout!

But the Valparaiso we enjoy today is a tale of a different city, vibrant, beautiful, safe and sustainable. We are indeed the jewel of Northwest Indiana. How did we do it? Through effective planning, teamwork, common sense decisions, perseverance, and citizen engagement.

Working together we brought about the many changes that have increased not only our quality of life, but also property values and opportunity for all. These include Central Park Plaza, Urschel Pavilion, Eastgate and north side redevelopments, the Route 30 transformation, new police and public works facilities, a renovated city hall, the V-line and Chicago Dash, community grants and so much more. And all this done in a fiscally responsible manner to keep taxes low and our city's financial condition strong.

But while we can celebrate this 20-year transformation, this election is not about the past but about the future. We need to constantly reach forward and build on our past successes, not rest on them. This is a critical time for the city of Valparaiso. Proven leadership and a clear plan are necessary now more than ever.

Today, I am releasing a document, The Costas Plan 2.0, that clarifies my priorities and objectives should you re-elect me as your mayor. Valpo is flourishing and I believe that this plan will ensure that continues. During my first tenure as mayor, I accomplished virtually all the goals from the original Costas Plan, and you can expect that to happen again if you return me to city hall.

Yours for a stronger Valparaiso,



Jon Costas

A. City Values Define our Leadership Style

The most vital task for a leader is to create a healthy and effective work culture in his or her organization. In a city administration the mayor sets the tone for the leadership team and staff. I have always fostered a leadership style that is empowering, collaborative and values-based. This type of leadership culture builds optimal performance at all levels of city government. Moreover, a mayor is a public servant, and I will strive to consistently model servant leadership in my words and conduct. Our work culture will be built around the five city leadership values we established in 2004:

1. Surprisingly Responsive
2. Creatively Frugal
3. Respectfully Compassionate
4. Honestly Accountable, and
5. Boldly Proactive

B. Primary Strategies

Major priorities are the foundation for every successful plan. Specific actions and initiatives flow from priorities. Below are ten primary strategies that will drive a new Costas Administration. These are not meant to be exclusive of other priorities we will address but serve as a compass for our actions and decisions over the next four years.

1. State of the Art Public Safety
2. Exceptional City Services and Road Maintenance
3. Creatively Frugal Fiscal Planning and Government Efficiency
4. Fostering Transparency, Unity and Citizen Engagement
5. Careful Planning to Manage Growth and Maintain our Small City Character
6. Maintaining A Vibrant Downtown
7. Cultivating Robust Economic Development
8. Building Strong Neighborhoods
9. Outstanding Parks and Recreation for all Generations
10. Celebrating and Supporting Education

C. Strategy Development

1. State of the Art Public Safety

Safety is the foundation for all we do. Students thrive in safe schools; families flourish in safe neighborhoods, and businesses prosper in safe commercial areas. Our police and fire departments are models of professionalism and collaboration, and that will continue under a Costas administration.

When elected in 2003, I implemented a plan to professionalize our police department with an emphasis on community policing. Our standards and accountability were elevated resulting in becoming accredited through CALEA, which sets us apart from most other departments in the state. We now attract the best and brightest men and women as police officers and have become a department of choice.

Our fire department is vital to our safety as well as health care. Under my first administration we took on the ambulance service which now boasts some of the fastest response times in the state. I also created our fire territory which expanded our reach and effectiveness and created fairness in costs now shared with unincorporated residents we provide service to. We will strive to maintain the highest standards in safety and ambulance service in a Costas Administration.

In order to maintain the highest levels of policing, fire protection and ambulance service, I would explore the following initiatives:

1. A careful analysis of our compensation, benefits, training and equipment for our safety personnel to ensure that we are competitive with area departments and able to continue to attract the best candidates to our police and fire squads.
2. A greater emphasis on technology to improve our efficiency and effectiveness. Our officers should spend less time with reports and paperwork and more time in our neighborhoods and schools. We will expand our new license plate reader program throughout the city to aid in solving crimes and to better prevent crime before it happens.
3. Shorten response times for our entire service area so that an ALS ambulance arrives within 10 minutes of a medical call and a fire engine arrives within 5 minutes of a reported fire. Explore the need for a fourth fire/ambulance facility in our northwest quadrant where growth is occurring. Reduce our ISO rating to 1 within two years (only four departments in the state have that rating) to further lower insurance rates for homeowners and businesses.

2. Exceptional City Services and road maintenance

Valparaiso has prided itself on responsive city services. We will maintain and build upon our extraordinary level of city services. Whether it's trash collection, recycling, leaf removal, road paving and maintenance, code enforcement, water and sewer service, or sidewalk repairs, my administration will deliver in a surprisingly responsive manner while keeping our fees affordable. Here are some ways we can improve in the future:

1. Pursue technology upgrades to our service request and delivery platforms to improve responsiveness and efficiencies.
2. Anticipate our long-term demand for water and sewer capacity to accommodate growth and industry needs.
3. Greater emphasis on sidewalk repair in older neighborhoods.

3. Creatively Frugal Fiscal Planning and Government Efficiency

We will spend your hard-earned tax dollars carefully and prudently. We will continue to bring a "creatively frugal" approach to all we do, whether paving roads, building parks or picking up your leaves. Keeping our tax rate low means our young people can afford homes and our seniors can thrive in their retirement years here in Valpo.

1. Reduce energy costs by exploring additional opportunities for energy efficiency, alternative fuels and sustainable power.
2. Use data and analytics more aggressively to improve service delivery and efficiencies.
3. Consider single source service delivery for items like mowing and vehicle maintenance.

4. Continue building our tax base to keep property taxes reasonable by attracting quality development and construction in industry, business, and housing.

4. Fostering Transparency, Unity and Citizen Engagement

Currently, all formal City business is conducted at public meetings as prescribed by law. Since early 2020, all public meetings have been broadcasted live and recorded for future public viewing. With limited exceptions, all City documents are available for public inspection and all City financial information is available through the state's Gateway database. Also, all city finances are carefully audited each year by the state of Indiana. These are the minimum requirements that every community must follow, but I have and will continue to go beyond the minimum.

A mayor must unite citizens and build strong bridges of trust across all sectors of the city. Unfortunately, in today's political world, civic distrust and discontentment flow down from the divisive political rhetoric that often defines our national political arena (and has recently crept into our community). We must work together to focus on the many things that unite us while accepting and appreciating our differences. Civic renewal in America must begin at the local level, in our cities, towns and counties. This is where real life happens; where we have face to face conversations, and act together based upon authentic relationships. Valparaiso has enjoyed a legacy of collaborative civil civic engagement, and I will strive to lead in a way that builds on this most vital attribute. Here are some strategies I would pursue:

1. Find more effective avenues for communicating with citizens and making it easier for them to obtain useful information and access city services.
2. Build trusting relationships with leaders from the opposite party, other sectors in the community and marginalized groups so that no one feels they are excluded from being heard at city hall.
3. The mayor must set a positive and consistent example of servant leadership by listening well, being accessible and being a peacemaker in the community.

5. Careful Planning to manage growth and maintain our small city character

Valparaiso's population has grown around 1% per year over the last few decades and this level of growth is expected to continue into the near future. This is a healthy and sustainable growth rate. The city needs to add around 100 to 130 housing units annually to provide for this growth. This will come through natural residential development around the outer perimeters of the city. Additional annexation will be required as well as utility capacity and extension to new residential developments. The city appears to have sufficient undeveloped commercial ground currently in its borders, so the city should show caution in rezoning new commercial areas which could cause blight within existing commercial areas. The following principles will be employed to ensure that new growth complements rather than detracts from our current quality of life.

1. Residential annexations closer to city limits will have preference over non-contiguous annexations
2. Housing developments should be designed to create neighborhoods and a strong sense of connection.

3. Redevelopment of existing outdated commercial areas and buildings will have a high priority. It's important to make the old new again to avoid blight and vacant buildings.

4. Our current Unified Development Ordinance needs to be carefully assessed and updated in a timely fashion to ensure that it is practical, sustainable and encourages quality construction without adding unnecessary expense or delays to development and construction.

6. *Maintaining A Vibrant Downtown*

Perhaps the most significant achievement in my first tenure as mayor was to transform our downtown into one of the most beautiful, active, and vibrant small city downtowns in the entire Midwest. When the downtown beats strong it gives life to the entire city. Our residents take great pride in our downtown and find community in all the events and happenings that take place there. Keeping our downtown strong and exciting will be one of my top priorities. Here are some possible initiatives:

1. Revisit our long-term plan for the downtown and set implementation goals to ensure its future vitality and sustainability. Plan to ensure a healthy balance of quality restaurants, retail and office use alongside a growing residential sector.

2. Envision new attractions like a performing arts center or children's discovery museum that would add to the downtown experience.

3. Carefully analyze pedestrian movement and handicap accessibility in our downtown streetscape to improve pedestrian flow in the downtown area.

7. *Cultivating Robust Economic Development*

Creating a climate for job growth is more complex than in the past. It is a combination of having a high quality of life so that it attracts people who can work remotely, as well as having the proper support for growing business and industry. We need to ensure that we have sufficient utility capacity (water, sewer, electricity, gas and broadband fiber) as well as the shovel ready sites and collaborative spaces that help birth new companies and help our current ones expand. The mayor must create a climate for business growth by encouraging an entrepreneurial business climate and by finding solutions to the challenges of business and industry growth. I would explore:

1. Facilitating a timely redevelopment of the old Regal campus off Lafayette in the near north end of the downtown.

2. Be more engaged in regional economic development initiatives.

3. Removing outdated regulations that delay or add unnecessary expense to business projects.

4. Assess business and industry broadband need and current supply as well as our current inventory of shovel ready sites.

8. *Building Strong Neighborhoods*

Strong neighborhoods make strong cities. In my first term, I made neighborhoods a priority by helping them organize and self-govern. We hired the city's first Director of Community Engagement who continues to shine in her charge to "cultivate safe and vibrant neighborhoods". I also started our neighborhood grant program that has proved to be very successful in funding local neighborhood projects and building neighborhood pride and unity.

Good local government is always a partnership between citizens, elected officials, and city staff. I will work to enhance our neighborhoods by:

1. Encourage sustainable cohesive neighborhood development for all new proposed subdivisions.
2. Expand funding for our neighborhood grant program and consider restoring the mini grants for neighborhood block parties that was provided during the Covid season.
3. Create and implement a homeowners welcome guide for all new residents to make them aware of city services, events and opportunities for engagement and volunteering.

9. Outstanding Parks and Rec for all generations.

Our award-winning parks and recreation department has been a Valpo tradition for many years. It is a key ingredient of our DNA. Parks keep us active and bring people (and their pets) together for shared community and friendly competition. In my first administration we made beautification and horticulture a higher priority for our parks turning many roadside ditches into flower beds and empty lots into rain gardens. We also built an expanded horticulture facility where we grow many of our own plants and flowers. Mayor Murphy has set forth a bold park plan called Valparaiso for All Generations. We are completing our state of the art skate park at Fairgrounds Park, and making progress in developing the new park west of RT. 49 as well as a (senior center) in the future. Here would be my park priorities if reelected:

1. Re-envision the proposed Valpo Sports and Recreation Campus plan due to substantially increased development costs.
2. Place greater emphasis on improving our legacy park system along with a redefined mission and upgrades for Rogers Lakewood Park.
3. Increase pathway construction, focusing first on the missing links and then building additional loops to keep our citizens active and connected.
4. Complete the proposed Adult Center for Enrichment (ACE) within four years.
5. Consider an additional water feature in an existing park location that would appeal to a wider age group of children and their parents.

10. Celebrating and Supporting Education

Recently both high schools that serve students in our city (Valparaiso High School and East Porter County School District) were named in the top 20 high schools in the state by US News and World Report. This is just one indication that our citizens highly value quality education. While the mayor has no formal oversight over our schools, he does ensure a safe learning environment through a close partnership with our police department. We must strive for the most effective safety protocols in our schools and expand on our SRO (School Resource Officer) program to ensure that our students feel secure and confident at school. The mayor must also maintain a supportive working relationship with Valparaiso University and Ivy Tech Community College so that they can continue to thrive in our community. Finally, the mayor can be a cheerleader for the value of lifelong education within the community.