



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Oct. 6, 2022**

## **State of Greene County 2022 address**



*SPRINGFIELD, Mo.* – Greene County Presiding Commissioner Bob Dixon gave his annual State of the County address Thursday morning, Oct. 6, at the Oasis Hotel & Convention Center in north Springfield.

The address highlights every aspect of the county and its ongoing projects. The following is Commissioner Dixon's speech verbatim:

“Good morning, Springfield!! It is great to - once again - be with you.... fellow chamber associates, community leaders, and friends.

It’s always a pleasure to share with you the great things happening at Greene County, and report to you that the State of the County is strong and improving.

It’s an honor to speak to you on behalf of incredible, hard-working public servants – 13 independent elected officials, 18 merit-selected judges and just over a thousand dedicated employees – who seek to serve their fellow citizens daily.



2022 has been marked by quiet, careful consideration as we have worked with our Citizen Advisory Committee and our community and municipal partners to carry out the detailed requirements of the American Rescue Plan Act under which Greene County was allocated \$57 million for distribution.

Earlier this year, the Commission announced awards that would be instrumental in the construction of a number of major community projects. Notable among them are a Youth Behavioral Crisis Center in partnership with Burrell Behavioral Health, an 11,600 square foot braider production facility at Jordan Valley Innovation Center in concert with Missouri State University, and a Center of Excellence for Airframe and Powerplant Maintenance Training at the Springfield-Branson National Airport alongside Ozarks Technical Community College.

We then moved forward with promised small business relief, awarding over \$3.1 million in grants - with an average grant size of just over \$11,000. More than 300 often.... very small businesses were recipients - with 104 being minority owned in some way.

We are now sifting through more than a hundred applications as part of the non-profit program, and we plan to have tier one completed soon as the Advisory Council has recently concluded their work and made recommendations.

We also employed quiet, careful consideration as we worked with our officeholders to craft an updated campus master plan that will creatively renovate the old jail downtown into much needed courtroom space on the second floor, relocate the Juvenile Administration and Greene County Youth Academy to the first floor, see the construction of a spacious new courts lobby connecting both buildings in the current judicial facility parking lot, and relocate numerous functions currently housed in rented space in the Cox Tower. This means the County Commission will be housed in the Courthouse – and even more accessible to the citizens - for the first time in decades.

Fiscal care has been the watchword as we approach this final bond action authorized by the 2017 voter approved tax to fund improvements, and throughout the entire process. We have now entered the more detailed planning stage of these improvements, which should be completed in about three years.

With its unique checks and balances, county government in Missouri only functions properly when cooperation and collaboration are the first order of business. I am grateful for my colleagues John Russell and Rusty MacLachlan and our many officeholders - whom you elect - and who answer directly to you. I am also thankful to serve alongside dedicated public servants like Springfield Mayor Ken McClure, the Springfield City Council, and the mayors and aldermen of all nine of our cities. We are all serving the same people, and it shows. Please join me in thanking them!

County officeholders and our commission department directors have been serving you well. It has been a year of progress and success.

Sherri Martin, your Public Administrator has been appointed to handle 63 new estates this year, bringing the total to 1,050 estates under management. These are guardianships, conservatorships or in some cases the estates of the deceased who have literally no one to handle their affairs. It is a struggle to find housing for protectees due to pending benefits and often no rental history.

In just a one-week period, Sherri and her staff were able to place and furnish two protectees in homes. One had been homeless and living in a tent for the past 12 months. The other was living in deplorable conditions and was placed in her own apartment that staff was able to furnish with donations. She said she didn't know how long it had been since she had a real bed and that this was her forever home. This was a huge win for the small and dedicated staff as they continued their daily work of navigating the legal system and managing daily finances on behalf of clients.

Another team going above and beyond every day for those with a unique set of challenges and seemingly insurmountable obstacles is the Greene County Juvenile office. This dedicated group of caring professionals frankly take great risks on a daily basis to provide direction and in a few

cases detention to young people who often have no positive adult role models in their lives. The work they do is a labor of love and a unique investment in the future.

They continue to gain statewide and national recognition for their work. Recently, Bill Prince, Chief Juvenile Office and Family Court Administrator, Staci Denney, Director of Case Management, and Julie Austin, were invited to present at the Robert F Kennedy Juvenile Justice Symposium in Nashville on the topic of organizational transformation.

They also just completed a three-year probation system review as part of a cohort with Seattle, Washington and Dutchess County, New York under the auspices of the Robert F Kennedy Center for Juvenile Justice designed to create a high functioning, evidenced-based, best practices, trauma-informed system to address the needs of youth and families involved with the juvenile justice system due to delinquent or status behavior.

Your Recorder of Deeds, Cheryl Dawson-Spaulling, has been busy with several customer service enhancements in her office. You can now take advantage of a free fraud notification tool which can be accessed on the Recorder's webpage. This service alerts a subscriber via email when a document is recorded with their monitored criteria. Up to five variations of a name can be monitored per email address, and these can be changed at any time. While this won't prevent fraud, it certainly offers an early warning system so citizens can take appropriate action.

The office has also begun the process of digitizing the last of our historic deed books so that images can be accessed by computer. This will take our accessible digital images back to 1833, aid in convenience and help to preserve the older, more fragile books in our archives. Staff continue to build indexes for these as well so that all records will eventually be searchable by all the means that current documents are.

An interesting fact of history... Both Abraham Lincoln and Daniel Boone lost property they owned as a result of improperly recorded deeds. It matters who is doing this work - and that they strive for perfection when it comes to your property records.

Assessor Brent Johnson has completed a quality assessment of over 30,000 personal property accounts – correcting errors and missing data. This should significantly reduce staff and citizen time required at year-end. He also implemented a new program to process assessment lists, and for the first time in almost twenty years, they were completed by July 1<sup>st</sup> and without the help of temporary staff. These changes positively impacted other offices as well and will certainly benefit citizens as we approach December.

Real property appraisers are also performing a comprehensive parcel review to improve the ability to provide more accurate and equal assessments.

Auditor Cindy Stein continues to lead her team in best practice enhancements, and they have assisted with the return of our weekly county-wide gatherings known as huddles – based on Jack Stack’s Great Game of Business model – where employees, office holders and even the public can participate in the day-to-day financial literacy and success of the county. We have begun to live-stream and record these gatherings which can be accessed on our website.

We have also contracted with retired County Administrator Tim Smith who is facilitating the return of the Greene County Leadership Academy. Our first class is underway with 24 participants, and we are already seeing great signs of progress with this emerging group of future leaders.

Collector Allen Icet recently completed his annual delinquent property tax sale in which 67 properties were sold. Obviously, some functions of county government are not things we enjoy, but duties which fall to us in our role of carrying out the people’s business. This year, the Collector implemented an early bidder registration program and an online registration process as well as adding an improved payment system to make it easier for successful bidders to pay. These improvements broadened the pool of bidders and increased surplus collections – by a whopping \$1.2 million dollars!

The office continues to evaluate and improve its internal processes, upgrading their in-house and online payment systems this year, and as we approach tax season they are fully staffed and offering bilingual customer service.

The Office of Emergency Management facilitated public safety planning and implementation for multiple large-scale events this year including the Bass Pro World Fishing Fair, the Ozark Empire Fair and the Route 66 Festival.

Their team participated in a national exercise designed to promote interoperable communications between local, state, tribal, and federal governments. The Central States Communications Exercise was held in the Quapaw Nation, where Oklahoma, Missouri, and Kansas meet. Over 50 entities from nearly two dozen states and all 10 FEMA regions were represented.

Public education and readiness have been enhanced recently with a new podcast available on Spotify called Hometown Ready. It provides an interesting, behind the scenes look into the world of emergency management and offers citizens insightful information and preparedness tips to keep them safe when things around them are coming apart. We like to be prepared for emergencies.

The Highway Department continues to impress as they maintain your 890 bridges and 2,510 lane miles of roadway throughout the county. A few of their construction projects are highlighted in the Annual Report to Citizens found on your table. These alone amount to nearly \$20 million in

investment. Most notable... the long -awaited Kansas Extension is scheduled for completion in the fall of next year.

As you can imagine, and as you have also likely experienced, workforce challenges have significantly impacted the county this year. Our employees at Highway – and elsewhere in the county – are working several different tasks to try to deliver the same services that citizens of the county expect – and pay for.

At Highway alone, our full-time staff is down about 20% and our part-time, seasonal staff is down about 90%, making some tasks – like mowing our 8,000 acres of public rights of way and clearing brush - almost impossible to manage, but they continue to work hard and get the job done where it makes the most impact.

In what might be a surprise to some, but to us is a just another validation of our team-minded, county family approach and a major endorsement of our highway leadership team and the care they take, the collective bargaining employees at the department recently voted to end their affiliation with the Service Employees International Union and to disband. Of course, we will continue to work closely with them to make sure they have the tools they need to deliver important services. Even procuring the special paint required for highway striping has been a challenge this year, but we just keep moving forward.

Speaking of procurement, our small purchasing department does Youmans work behind the scenes in maximizing savings with each public purchase of goods and services. They strive daily to stretch your tax dollars, and in one recent instance their bidding effort for a building restoration project resulted in a \$40,000 savings. You can imagine how their work, with almost 50 formal bids this year alone, has a very positive impact.

Our Budget Team has masterfully managed numerous projects in addition to our \$261 million budget, including the infusion of nearly \$16 million of federal emergency rental assistance with the help of local non-profits. Again, we thank our local partners: Ozarks Area Community Action Corporation (OACAC), Consumer Credit Counseling Services, Community Partnership of the Ozarks, Catholic Charities of Southern Missouri, Council of Churches of the Ozarks and the Salvation Army.

When finalized, we expect over \$22.3 million in rental assistance funds will be dispersed into the economy. As I mentioned last year, this is NOT happening everywhere. In fact, in many communities around the country, the program has been an abject failure and the subject of congressional hearings, but Greene County has been a shining example of how success is possible when we roll up our sleeves and work together with others.

With the inclusion of Rental Assistance funds, this brings the total of all federal recovery funds – ARPA, CARES, Stafford Act & FEMA – being dispersed by the county to \$113.8 million.

The Budget Office works closely with our Sales Tax Oversight Board which was seated in 2017 in an effort to maintain the integrity of delivering what was promised to voters in that year's county-wide sales tax. Those citizens have poured over stacks of data and financial reports and have helped maintain the spirit of voter intent. We salute them - and thank them - for their work, as they have recently voted to dissolve - their task complete and their final report published for public review. You can find that report on our website under the budget tab.

Underscoring the excellent management of resources and the great work of our budget team, earlier this year we learned that the County's debt rating would be upgraded from Double A2 to Double A1, indicating high quality investment and very low risk for bond buyers. This will help reduce the cost of bonding to some degree compared to the old rating.

We are also pleased to have recently gone under contract on the pending sale of the Jamestown property in Rogersville which will free up county resources, end a per parcel debt payment on the property agreed to many years ago and finally bring a host of new rooftops to southeastern Greene County.

Our team of Human Resource professionals have also been busy moving the county forward. After recent training, 50% of the department is now certified by the HR Certification Institute, the premier credentialing organization for the profession. They've onboarded and oriented nearly 350 employees this year and have successfully implemented both a new employee referral program and a tuition reimbursement program. In addition to her duties, director Mailyn Jeffries serves as President-Elect of the Springfield Area Human Resources Association and will lead the group next year.

In May, many of you joined us at the new Jail and Sheriff's Office for its dedication. On June 3rd, Sheriff Arnott and more than 300 Sheriff's Office employees from every division came together to successfully transfer 838 inmates to the new facility without incident. The operation occurred overnight and took about 8 hours. As always, they were professional, prepared and proactive in the carrying out of their duties to keep the public safe.

As I shared with you last year, some of those same employees helped to oversee their own construction project alongside Director of Resource Management Kevin Barnes and Project Manager Rob Rigdon and successfully saved millions of dollars in project costs, allowing the Commission to authorize the construction of the onsite Training, Evidence Storage and Quartermaster Facilities. Unspent savings will be helpful as we begin upgrades to the main campus downtown.

On August 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Greene County Sheriff's Office Law Enforcement Academy began its first class. Those attending are current detention officers who were hand selected for this first academy. Ours' is only the second Sheriff's Office in the State to become POST approved for its own "in house" academy. Of course, this has reduced cost, but it also offers an opportunity for other law enforcement agencies to attend such as regional municipalities.

The Commission recently appropriated \$5 million to replace our entire fleet of suddenly failing communications equipment being used by deputies in the field. While the existing radios did partially function with the new digital networks being deployed as part of the trunked radio system, coverage and audio quality of communications were so poor they were putting the lives of deputies and the public at risk. We wish to thank the City Utilities Wireless Systems Division (who manages the trunked radio system) for their partnership in determining the cause and cure to this challenge. Coverage, clarity and function are all dramatically improved and now with features like GPS on the radio itself, dispatch can see exactly where a deputy is located, even if away from their car.

The Patrol Division now has a fully staffed K9 Unit, and there is one team for each of six squads. Patrol is also continuing to fill a number of vacancies. A new fleet management program is reducing repair costs as vehicles are rotated out of service once they reach higher mileage. The Criminal Investigations Division is routinely called on in extenuating circumstances to assist neighboring counties and municipalities, and they do so with great care.

Recently, 7 detectives attended special training on a 3D Laser scanning device used to assist deputies in diagramming crime scenes. Detectives have also increased proactive enforcement - conducting surveillance and undercover buys of controlled substances.

Our Judicial Courts are also undergoing changes. Six courtrooms have recently been renovated, and with the opening of the new jail, there were 16 video rooms placed in service. The court is currently using 8 of the rooms on a daily basis reducing the need for inmate transport and making plans to more fully utilize this technology. This also allows the court to communicate in real time with the jail staff regarding court operations and inmate readiness for court in each circuit division including completion of hearings.

The Court is entering a period of significant change, perhaps the most impactful of our lifetime. There have been four recent retirement announcements, and the court will be reassigning caseloads as the positions are filled. We congratulate and commend Judges Holden, Mountjoy, Brown and Cordonnier on their retirement. We also congratulate Judge Harmison on his elevation to Circuit Judge and Judge Borthwick on her elevation to the Court of Appeals for the Southern District of Missouri. Times of change are also times of opportunity. We thank the Courts for the tremendous partnership we share. Although they are a function of the State, we appreciate the care they take to operate very efficiently as we fund their annual operations.



Right alongside the courts, you will find our County Pretrial Services staff helping to bring efficiencies and effectiveness to the process of justice including the supervision of some awaiting trial but not housed in the jail. They carefully monitor defendants using GPS and other technology – managing 657 defendants since January of this year. The office has prepared nearly a thousand public safety assessments this year for the courts on both felony and misdemeanor cases so that judges can make an informed, data driven decision on how to best deal with the accused as they await trial. They also screen for drug court, DWI court, veterans court and co-occurring cases in order to keep the justice system flowing as it should.

Prosecutor Dan Patterson and his team of assistants play a key role in making the criminal justice systems flow with all due speed. They've conducted 21 major trials this year and collaborated with the Springfield Police Department and US Attorney's Office to shut down the individual responsible for purchasing most of the stolen catalytic converters in the area, drastically reducing the instances of that crime.

Assistant Prosecutor Phil Fuhrman was recognized by the Missouri Bar Foundation with the coveted Lon Hocker Award for Trial Advocacy. Recipients are chosen based on their demonstrated balance between zealotry and honor, strength and courtesy, and confidence and respect. They must also possess a quick wit in the courtroom that is supported by meticulous preparation in the pursuit of truth.

Christi Froneberger, also part of Dan's Team was honored with the Family Justice Center Staff Excellence Award for outstanding performance in survivor-centered services, partner collaboration and promoting the guiding principles of the Family Justice Center – a beacon of hope in the midst of the increasing instances of domestic violence.

One area that doesn't get much public notice but works around the clock to serve is the Medical Examiner's Office. In December, Dr. Deiter Duff oversaw the final completion of the isolation suite at the morgue along with the negative pressure room. This combined with a full-time forensic investigator has improved the safety and delivery time of autopsies. They are pleased to be able to provide death certificates and bring closure to grieving families in a more timely fashion.

Most citizens are familiar with the Sunshine Law, some utilize it, and we are careful to abide by it. This year, County Clerk Shane Schoeller was awarded the Sunshine Hero Award by the Missouri Sunshine Coalition in recognition of his efforts to promote government transparency and trust through the principles of the Missouri Sunshine Law. He also has served as the President of the Missouri County Clerks Association all while he and his team of 72 newly trained deputy registrars have registered over 8,000 new voters this year. Shane has also enhanced the documentation paperwork for the chain of custody procedures and flowcharts to

both streamline and ensure even better accounting of the custody of voted ballots, unvoted ballots and election equipment deployed for election day.

County Treasurer Justin Hill continues to do more with less. The volume of transactions and assets under management has increased exponentially, yet they operate with 25% less staff than they did a decade ago. They provide excellent service and support for all divisions of the County. They continue to innovate with new technologies such as their current project which will bring on a fully integrated payables solution to improve vendor relationships, reduce time of exchange and save even more.

I realize I have given you more in-depth details about the day-to-day functions of county government than you may have bargained for this morning, but I did so because we are incredibly proud of the work that our amazing team does every day to make it function - for you. I mentioned we employ quiet, careful consideration, but we also employ some of the most consistently servant-minded people I have ever met.

Some might even think county government to be boring. We like it that way, because it means we are getting the job done without controversy or acrimony.

On the other hand, these are exciting times as we look to the future as a region -working together to promote growth and progress. I was pleased to once again join roughly 85 of you for the Chamber Leadership Visit to Northwest Arkansas. Matt, I must say, I think it was our best trip yet. Building on last year's discussion of thinking and acting regionally, we learned of great successes and similar challenges in the greater Ozarks Region, we discussed what can be accomplished when a region acts as one, and most importantly we found willing partners.

I'm pleased to update you on just one of the county's regional priorities this morning. Earlier this week, the Regional Broadband Initiative consisting of Greene and Christian Counties and the municipalities therein - finalized its contract and will shortly begin the next phase of assessing the needs and feasibility of expanded rural broadband access. We believe this is a start to something that needs to grow in our region.

Thinking regionally was also the subject of your own Vicki Pratt's presentation last week to the Greene County Mayor's Association hosted in Ash Grove where she pitched an excellent case for what this organization could do for all communities in our area - complete with community action steps for growing regionally. With area population growth continuing upward at about three per cent a year, we are an attractive region and stand on the forefront of something big - particularly if we think and act regionally - even taking up our Northwest Arkansas counterparts on their offer.

We also learned at that meeting that the Annual Fair Grove Heritage Reunion was just awarded the title of #2 Fair in the state – second only to the State Fair in Sedalia. We have so much to offer here in the Ozark Region. We are also a region that cares for one another. Just last night, the Commission visited the oldest community in the county, Ebenezer, to see first-hand the amazing work of neighbors opening their own foodbank and building a community center.

County unemployment now stands at 2.5% for August, well below the state and national rates - and lower than the number I reported to you last year. Our task is workforce development which we will continue to prioritize with our local partners including the Missouri Job Center, a regional collaborative of 7 counties.

Sales tax receipts in the county are up 11% over this time last year, with August introducing slightly slowing growth. These are still strong numbers as we approach the planning season for next year. We believe these two indicators suggest our overall regional economy is still strong.

Quiet, Careful Consideration. Regional Partners working together with excitement for what the future CAN hold if we do our part. THAT - is Greene County.

On behalf of our office holders, judges, department heads and employees, thank you for the opportunity to partner with you for our region. It is a pleasure to serve.

Have a great day!”



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*Greene County is the State of Missouri's fourth most populous county, serving approximately 295,000 people. Its mission is to provide all citizens of Greene County, including those in its cities, a safe and thriving community through excellent customer service, unparalleled dedication, and the efficient use of taxpayer dollars. The Greene County Commission is the executive body of Greene County operating under guidelines established in the Revised Statutes of the State of Missouri. Within that authority the Commission enacts ordinances, resolutions and policies, supervises the activities of county departments, fixes salaries, adopts the annual budget, provides for construction and other services, and conducts hearings on planning and zoning matters.*

**For additional information, contact Robert Jehle, Public Information Officer, at 417-844-4311 or [rjehle@greencountymo.gov](mailto:rjehle@greencountymo.gov).**