



2015 State of the County Address
July 21, 2015

Good evening, Chair Idsvoog, County Board Supervisors, Special Guests, and Members of the Portage County Community. It is a true honor to address you tonight. A copy of my speech is posted at the County's website.

The State of Portage County is the state of "us." We are a compassionate community at large. We are mostly a compassionate people. As American Author John Green put it: *There is no Them. There are only facets of Us.* That's pretty much our story in our Portage County community. It runs through our blood.

Evidence United Way: I'd like to introduce you to Bob and Nancy Cooper, their son Timmy, and their grandson, Phineas, who is five years old. Bob used to be the President of the United Way Board of Directors in 1979. In that year, the campaign raised \$317,326. This year, Bob and Nancy joined with their son and his wife, London, along with their three children (including Phineas) to become United Way's 2015 Campaign Drive Chair Family. The goal is \$2.8 million. Thank you to them and to everyone across all sectors who make our United Way campaigns a success. I think the Cooper Family demonstrates that we are bringing up families to share the compassion of "us" in this County. What a great gift! Portage County United Way is #6 in per capita giving among all 107 reporting United Ways in the country which raise between \$2 and \$4 million

annually. Ours is #2 in per capita giving of the 18 reporting United Ways in Wisconsin.

Compassion runs deep and generously.

Meet Tiffani Krueger. You'll find her regularly with Evergreen Community Initiatives, a non-profit organization centered out of Place of Peace at the former First Baptist Church just down Church Street. I met her when I was delivering some food for one of the community meals there. Tiffani is called by law enforcement in Stevens Point when they believe that she can help someone who is homeless. Tiffani tells me that she has assisted 50-55 homeless individuals since March this year—working in tandem with the CAP Services re-sheltering programs and other community efforts. One generous donor regularly provides backpacks equipped with survival gear, toiletries, and food. Tiffani has recently met people with medical bills which have caused them to lose everything. One had a brain tumor and another had hand surgery, for example. I should note that veterans who are homeless in Portage County (and we have had several recently) are assisted by our Veterans Service Officer, Mike Clements, who has access to a wide array of resources for veterans.

Our homeless shelters have been full—something uncharacteristic for Portage County during a warm season. Tiffani understands how to help because she was once homeless herself. Someone had reached out to her and changed her life. In turn, she is now attempting to do the same for others.

Besides this way of showing compassion, Tiffani is a foster mom. She was needing to keep a supply of clothing for kids of all ages due to being a foster parent. At Place of Peace she began to notice that children attending the community meals were coming in clothing that was torn, tattered, or just didn't fit. That's

when she started Tiff's Kids Closet. Through networking and social media she stocked clothing and shoes in her basement until she was able to find a more permanent location at Place of Peace where volunteers now assist in cleaning, organizing and distributing clothing to children in need. Tiffani is the first to tell you that she has made lemonade from lemons in her life and now has dedicated her life in service to others.

Compassion makes lemonade from lemons.

Meet other heroes: Lauri and Keith Novotny. They are also foster parents. Lauri has dreamed “since she was a little girl” of being a foster mom. She and Keith have had a placement of two children who are siblings with very high needs since 2012 and have weathered many situations related to the care of these children. Lauri and Keith fondly refer to it as “extreme parenting.” They stand by as an adoptive resource should it not be possible for these children to return to their original family someday. Lauri acknowledges that they don't succeed without a lot of help from Health and Human Services as well as from a network of other foster parents. She quickly shares that the neatest thing of all is when children can return to a healthy and safe, “forever” home.

Portage County currently has 102 open child welfare cases involving 181 children. Eighty-four children are placed in out of home care. More foster homes are needed—especially homes for older teens. Our efforts around child welfare reach across and through a compassionate network of coordinated resources.

We try to make a difference in the long run.

So it is in Portage County government these days as we wrestle our way through the Phase I implementation of our software conversion from a home grown

AS400 system to a Munis system. We “went live” on Phase I last May and are currently planning for Phase II (human resources) and Phase III (fixed assets, work orders and inventory) aspects of the project.

There is acknowledgement (and maybe a little relief?) in hearing our consultants say this is one of the best implementations they have worked through. Okay, but the road is bumpy *and* uncharted for us! This system changes our ways of thinking and it changes our work flows. We look forward to experiencing efficiencies, but it is still too new to feel anything but a little clumsy in the new system.

And therein lies the challenge and the opportunity.

We know the new system will serve us well into the future—as soon as we get used to it and fine tune it and get our first budget under our belt on the new system. It wasn't easy to move from 32,000+ vendor data records to consolidate them down to about 2,500—this is just a glimpse at the magnitude of this undertaking. Our conversion to Munis has been all about “us” as it has been guided by teams of staff from different County departments who discuss, design, trouble-shoot, and train together. And I am proud of them.

The compassionate spirit of “us” can be our way forward on other challenges and opportunities.

In the County Board packets tonight is a resolution from the Portage County Commission on Aging/Aging Disability Resource Center Board which takes a second run at an opportunity that first came to the County Board about two years ago. I had urged action on this matter in my 2013 State of the County Address. And yet we stand two years later no further ahead.

It presents an opportunity for coordination of Portage County's Transportation Program and the City of Stevens Point's Transit Program. Essentially, together we can access more resources than either the County or the City can access alone—over \$717,500 in additional resources annually can be tapped by joining together. Multiple studies have recommended coordination. Yet two years have passed by without moving closer to a unified transportation system much like our unified dispatch in Portage County.

I'd like to introduce you to Marlene Pohl. She is the Travel Trainer employed by the City of Stevens Point to assist people in learning about and developing skills related to accessing their transportation options. She is reached through the Stevens Point Transit Office. She assists people in accessing the City Bus System and quite often, how to connect with the Plover Taxi and ADRC services, too. She most often works with people who have disabilities—helping them learn how to use our local transportation system so that they can be more independent.

Marlene tells the story of a young woman with some learning delays who had been referred by her Social Worker to learn her bus route to her new job. After training, not only could she get to her job independently, but she was also able to get to her group activities at the YMCA, shopping for her family, and is now looking for apartments to live on her own. Another individual was able to get to his doctor, saving on costs. Yet another found a way to get beyond being so isolated in his life because now he could go places without bothering his family for rides.

Access equals freedom. I hope we move ahead on this long overdue community initiative tonight!

Since my State of the County address last year addressing the topic of groundwater, there has been a great deal of discussion, outreach, and focus across sectors on this issue. If any issue is about “us,” it is the topic of water—water quality and water quantity because water connects us all.

From late September last year through early February this year, I convened ten listening sessions across Portage County to answer three questions: “What's going well with water?” “What's not going well with water?” and “What ideas do you have for guiding the future of water resources in Portage County?” About 200 individuals participated. (Report found at <http://www.co.portage.wi.us/News/Full%20Color%20Groundwater%20Summary%20Document%20Feb%202015.pdf>)

I also held a listening session for our Portage County teen leadership class of about 20 students in April. Then, I convened a Groundwater Summit on April 29, 2015, which involved over 30 individuals from across multiple sectors and disciplines in considering the listening session ideas about how to guide the future of water resources. The Summit led to four main overarching ideas for consideration by the larger community to hopefully create a framework for our County's groundwater management plan:

1. Set goals.
2. Educate/Market/Conduct communication campaign, making information easy for citizens to access.
3. Build trust in baseline of knowledge.
4. Establish incentives for sustainable use.

The next step is sending these ideas out to more than 30 different organizations identified at the Summit for wider input on our way to ensuring that there is a broad and balanced stakeholdership.

But unfortunately, this participatory approach has been interrupted by what appears to be an “end-run” rush to control Portage County’s water staff and to censor Portage County’s groundwater plan. For some reason, there has been a hurry—which even led to special meetings with extra per diems this month—to push through three resolutions related to water which appear on the County Board agenda tonight.

I am stunned. I am stunned particularly because it is such a huge contrast to the spirit of our community as shared through the stories of my Portage County guests tonight.

Changing staff reporting structures and the place they hold in an organization is no simple matter on a perfect day. But these proposals have all come forward without any prior coordination with my Office from those leading this effort. As Chief Executive Officer in charge of all County staff and all County operations, I find it incredibly disrespectful—not only to me, but to the newly hired Water Resource Specialist who just wants to do a good job for all of us. I wonder how this can “be in the best interest of Portage County” as it states in the resolution when we haven’t even completely looked into this.

The truth of a fair, transparent, and inclusive process accounts for so much in ensuring that, in the end, we are able to find solutions ACROSS THE SECTORS that we all can believe in and commit to when it comes to groundwater management and protection—or anything else for that matter.

And yet, we are here tonight with few citizens aware of what this may or may not mean (pro or con), with not one conversation with the Groundwater Citizen Advisory Committee, with some elected officials who may not even understand

that one committee is attempting to grab duties away from another with no prior coordination.

Where exactly is the “us” in this?

One farmer at a meeting not long ago reminded me that “we didn’t get into this overnight, so we can’t get out of it overnight.” Indeed. No different than United Way. No different than someone who is homeless. No different than a foster child or foster parent, or the person with disabilities needing a transportation system that works for her. No different than the landowner who purchased property on a lake or stream or the parents who bought a home and expect that their children can drink the water.

No....We all didn’t get into this overnight. But working *together* from a place that is honestly open and true and for the “good of the whole” can make the difference for “us” and for generations to come.###