


# Will County must balance growing economic development with quality of life, Walsh says in state of the county

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Susan DeMar Lafferty

 Will County continues to “prosper” and its future is “very bright,” said County Executive Larry Walsh in the opening of his annual state of the county address Thursday.

But the county must also “actively prepare for our future and act responsibly as we face the challenges of growth,” he said.

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Walsh recited a litany of building projects the county has tackled in the past year – the new \$33 million Public Safety Complex that opened in January, the construction of the \$210 million courthouse now underway in downtown Joliet, and the new health department facility, which will soon begin to replace a 100-year-old structure.

All these projects are expected to consolidate county government, streamline operational costs and provide critical services to residents for years to come, he said.

Will County also has led the Chicago metro area in job growth, with 8,000 jobs added from June 2017 to June 2018, a 3 percent increase, according to Walsh. Most of those jobs were in transportation/distribution/logistics, wholesale trade and health care, he said.

Part of the county’s prosperity has been the “unprecedented growth in freight transportation.” With the growth comes “challenges,” as the county strives to “balance economic development success while preserving the quality of life” for residents, Walsh said.

Improvements to I-80 remains a “critical priority” for the county, he said. County officials are actively collaborating with the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority, the Illinois Department of Transportation and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning to address the safety and infrastructure concerns, and hope to have “more positive news to report on these efforts soon,” he said.

IDOT recently awarded a grant for the Joliet Intermodal Transportation Master Plan, a study that will begin later this fall or in early 2019 to focus on road infrastructure and land use planning in the Joliet/Elwood area, Walsh said.

IDOT also helped fund the county’s Community Friendly Freight Mobility Plan, which will “guide future decisions about transportation infrastructure needs,” he said.

Will County also has been a leader in encouraging green building and solar development practices for its building projects, and has a “Solar Source” page on its website, providing information to residents and business owners, he said.

With new “innovative technology” the county has been able to provide more online services for residents, including building permits and inspections, and management of court cases, and improve financial reporting for the county, Walsh said.

Next month, Walsh will present his 2019 budget. He said the county continues to face "significant challenges" as a result of the state's financial troubles.

In 2017, the state reduced the county's share of local funds by \$2.4 million, forcing Will County to make difficult decisions, he said. More impacts on the county will be discussed in his budget address.

Despite the many challenges, "our future remains bright, but only if we all work together to achieve the ambitious plans we have set," Walsh said.

At the conclusion of Thursday's county board meeting, board Speaker Jim Moustis said, "We really have accomplished a lot in short period of time."

The county's initiatives have made government more efficient, streets safer and the community healthier, he said.

Moustis said he is "particularly proud of the friendly freight study" because it will help lessen the impacts of economic development.

It all starts with the county board, he said.

"We have a great team to move things forward. Let's keep it up," said Moustis.

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