

Chairman Kriefall, Respective County Board Supervisors, Constitutional Officers, elected and appointed leaders, colleagues, friends, family, and fellow Washington County residents,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today and for taking time out of your busy schedules to gather, to hear the state of our beloved county.

The last time I gave this sacred address with all the pomp and circumstance that it so deserves was to the county board of supervisors about two years ago. At that time, that group of officials was contemplating a major decision about the best form of Washington County government to serve our great community. During that carefully considered address, as the hired County Administrator, I implored the board to “recommit ourselves to ‘focus on the people’ in 2019, and for those who are yet to come in 2050 and 2150.” It was less than six months later when that board made the consequential decision to move to an elected County Executive, determining that citizen engagement is not best done through a bureaucratic hierarchy, but instead through a central elected official at the ballot box. Now, nearly eighteen months after that fateful decision, I have the unique privilege of standing in front of a group of people representing generations of hardworking Washington County residents, as your first County Executive.

I speak to you now, acutely focused on our people, today, in 2050, to 2150 and beyond. I am deeply humbled and grateful for those who have come before us, for the foundations of our great community which they so skillfully laid, and optimistic for the future, as together we write the next chapter in pursuit of our shared vision to “cultivate our rich heritage, vibrant economy and attractive communities through the distinct values that define us.”

I find it so very appropriate that our county, with our rich agricultural history, would employ the action verb “cultivate” to convey our hopes and dreams for the future. Generations over generations of Washington County residents have planted the seeds of progress that we have thus far advanced. It is now left to us, the current generation, to renew and improve – to cultivate - these hopes and dreams. At this difficult time in our nation, while so many look to revise our history and forget our past, in Washington County we seek to foster a renaissance of what has been, a passing of the torch to a new generation of leaders and welcoming all freedom loving Americans who share “the distinct values that define us.”

As part of my campaign for County Executive, one of my themes was “Thriving Rural Communities.” During that time, I became keenly aware of the struggles of our farmers as they endured the economic shifts and transitions of a global society. According to *DairyReporter.com*, in Wisconsin in 2019 alone we had lost 10% or 800 dairy farms. As was reported in a captivating series by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, this difficult transition was resulting in terrible consequences for the economic, mental, and spiritual health of many Wisconsinites. And of course, this was several months before the added public health stresses of COVID-19.

To me, achieving the dream of “Thriving Rural Communities” required gaining a thorough and more in-depth respect for the struggles of our people in agriculture, and attempting to identify ways to help them navigate this realtime economic restructuring. Thus, a key action item was holding listening sessions and re-establishing reliable communication channels with this important industry, and our neighbors living it each and every day. For a county that in just over a decade went from a majority of the board having at least some agricultural background to just three supervisors with relevant experience in the industry today, this was the least we could do.

After the unavoidable delays caused by COVID-19, last month I was privileged to finally host three listening sessions to hear firsthand from our farmers, their suppliers, and processors. While I was initially frustrated with the delays the pandemic caused for these conversations, it quickly became clear that the experiences of COVID had highlighted a crucial lesson throughout all of their recent challenges: Prior to 2020, as farmers and their neighbors watched hundreds of their colleagues go through bankruptcies, divorces, mental health struggles and even suicides, those who remained were able to pull themselves through by determination and by relying on one another. Then, when the effects of COVID were compounded on top of those issues, and their churches, volunteer fire departments and town halls were shuttered, so was their only access to their social network and safety net – their community. As one proud farmer told me, “Josh, I finally just lost it when I was forced to dump all that milk. The only thing that got me through was the phone calls with my fellow farmers.” Another continued, “It’s a miracle there weren’t more suicides. Closing our churches at this time made it even worse.”

Our agricultural economy is transforming right in front of us. And while I pledge to do everything county government can to ease us through this time of economic transition, we must fully acknowledge that this time of change is larger than our county, or even our state or nation. Yet we should all find comfort in the hope that these struggling farmers so naturally identified that our county is not built simply on the shaky foundation of one sector of the economy. We are rooted in community, being and living in communion with one another. We are anchored in our people and in the places where we gather to serve one another. And it is our great community that makes us strong, and it is what will help us through this difficult transition, just as it has so many times before.

You see, Washington County is not simply our economy or our local governments, it is so much more than that. It is our community. And community is not found in the newest piece of equipment or the highest yield. Community is not the most fiscally conservative budget, or a shiny new public works project. Community is not a new government building or a fancy new development, a shiny new fire truck or even a beautiful new neighborhood park. Community is found in our people, and in the unity of our families and our civic organizations. It’s at the church potluck with fellow believers. It is at the monthly fire drill with fellow volunteers. It is at the weekly Rotary meeting with fellow servants. It is at the monthly American Legion meeting

with fellow veterans dedicated to earning the sacrifice of their fallen comrades through service to their neighbor. While some feel that “it takes a community” of government programs and projects to raise a child, as a life long public servant I can tell you first hand that government programs and employees are a sad and inadequate replacement for community, neighbors, family, and above all, faith.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the State of Washington County is **resolved**.

The flames of community and family still burn strong here. This firm foundation keeps us a step ahead of our neighboring counties, and I firmly believe this is the real reason for our ranking as the best quality of life in the State of Wisconsin. That’s right, it’s not simply our wonderful rural character, or our convenient access to urban delights, or our quaint villages or cities. It is those things combined with the invaluable charity of generations of service to our neighbors, like that celebrated for the recent 75th anniversary of the Fohl Martin American Legion Post 483 in Allenton. It is things like the camaraderie and profound work of our volunteer fire companies from Richfield to Boltonville and from Kohlsville to Germantown, and the celebration of these organizations at events like Richfield Days or Boltonville Rain Days, the Kohlsville Smoker or the numerous firemen’s picnics in between.

While communities around us move to a professional, government run fire and EMS departments they will no doubt provide a higher level of service with dedicated public servants. Yet there is inarguably a cost to our invaluable social networks and our overall quality of life. Whenever we look to invest more into our government run services and programs we must also consider how to better invest in our people, those who comprise our volunteer departments and companies and our churches and civic groups, because while there is certainly value in a higher level of technology and expertise, there is tremendous value in a volunteer who has known your property and your family for generations and who will be there, not only when the emergency comes, but was there long before the crisis occurs and will be there long afterward to, as both a friend and neighbor.

With us today, representing this spirit of volunteer public safety and three living generations of the Wolf family at the Allenton Volunteer Fire Department, are Ray, Ed, and Ben Wolf. It is thanks to the Wolf’s, and the countless families like them throughout Washington County who have selflessly served our communities and at the same time built a strong social networks to provide for one another when in need, whether it is a fire, medical emergency or simply life’s daily struggles.

Friends and neighbors, this is real quality of life, this is real community, this is the importance of social capital and social networks. It is this “authentic quality” that distinguishes Washington County from those around us. While our neighbors grow rapidly into suburban and exurban metropolis’, often losing their identity, we have an opportunity right now to do things differently, to do things our way. We have a chance, in this ever so fleeting moment, to preserve all the best that Washington County has represented, while welcoming the next generation and other freedom loving neighbors to build up our great community.

Eighteen months ago, I urged our county board “to stand on top of Holy Hill and look over the county and set our course.” As we begin our journey of setting that course together, life happens. And in the past year, life has happened in unprecedented ways. One year ago, yesterday, I was sworn into office as your Washington County Executive in the final days of the first phase of this long, hard year of pandemic. We had just come out of the first and most severe government lockdown, which we all remember as “Safer at Home”. By the time I was sworn into office, we had already preempted the Governor’s overdue allowance to start opening our small businesses, by removing any threat of restriction or enforcement for all Washington County golf courses a week prior. This simple action of allowing for personal responsibility and individual liberty would prove to be a prelude to the leadership we would exemplify over the coming year, not just for our county but for the entire State of Wisconsin.

Time and again, Washington County has served as a contrast to Governor Evers’ heavy-handed government centric approach to managing this pandemic. We have continually worked to “focus on the people”, balancing the serious risk to public health with the equally serious risk to economic health, and putting inalienable rights ahead of government controls. This leadership most recently evidenced itself five weeks ago when we began the final phase of this long COVID journey, with a return to life as we have long known it. As of today, nearly 78% of our vulnerable 65 and older population have been vaccinated, hospital capacities are at extremely low risk of being overwhelmed and our people are fully aware of how to exercise the personal responsibility to protect themselves from this novel virus. We have restored a full balance between public, economic, social, mental, and spiritual health. As of March 17, **Washington County is no longer restricting or unduly influencing individuals or organizations about how best to live their lives and do their business.**

This pandemic has proven to be an incredible challenge for our county, our state, our nation, and our world. It has been easy to get lost in the data, like the seven day rolling average or the hospitalization rate or the daily positive cases, to become almost paralyzed with fear and lose sight of what it is that we were trying to protect in the first place. Once again, it has been the people of our great community that have made certain to reorient our focus on one another and have selflessly served their neighbors. Through the amazing efforts of our school’s boards, superintendents, teachers, staff, and families we have kept our focus on our kids. Unlike many throughout Wisconsin and the nation, our public and private school teams worked tirelessly to keep all in our schools safe, while ensuring the educational and mental health of our kids is protected with in person and virtual options for learning throughout this full school year. With us today, representing the countless school stakeholders from throughout our great community who made this all possible, is one of those school leaders, Superintendent Jennifer Wimmer of West Bend School District Thank you, Superintendent Wimmer! Please pass along our sincere gratitude to all colleagues, staff, boards, families, and kids throughout Washington County!

While this novel virus has tested us all in countless ways, I urge each and every one of you to not just look at the mixed record of government in handling this pandemic, but find renewed faith in God and hope for humanity by seeing the small and impactful contributions to love your

neighbor. While government worked through the changing science on the effectiveness of protocols, your neighbors provided unchanging certainty and warm reassurance. When businesses were restricted, thousands shared a Washington County Restaurants Facebook page to promote struggling businesses and their workers. While indoor gatherings were limited, churches across the county scrambled to organize outdoor services and the communion of believers, preserving essential nourishment for our souls. While even outdoor gatherings were cancelled, impromptu groups of neighbors emerged to coordinate reverse parades to celebrate everything from graduations and confirmations to birthdays and even the 4th of July. And as loneliness and isolation threatened the mental health of our confined elderly, countless senior care facilities hosted drive by type events, providing family members a chance to see their loved ones and for residents to receive a much needed "hello".

In nearly every case, it was not the governor or the legislature, it was not the county executive or the county board, it was not the mayor or city council that has exhibited the kindness and love for neighbor that has helped us all endure. Instead, it is the kind caregiver or the warm friend, the loving family member, or the caring volunteer, each freely expending time and social capital in service to others. It is people helping people, the foundation of our great community, providing that social network and safety net. As French aristocrat and American political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville said, "The health of a democratic society may be measured by the quality of functions performed by private citizens." In Washington County our local democracy is extraordinarily healthy thanks to our private citizens!

While we still have this rich blessing of community in Washington County, you don't have to go far to find a place where community has been undermined and destroyed, and government inadequately and often heartlessly fills that void. We see it in cities where lockdowns are seemingly endless, with economic relief that has little to nothing to do with the real pains of people and organizations, and in ongoing school closures that ignore the real needs of kids and families. What a treasure we have in our great community, where we protect unalienable rights first, where we then create an environment to effect safety and happiness and where we can rely on one another to help us get through in times of need. **It is certainly something worth fighting for, preserving, renewing, and improving.**

As we gather here today, it is upon us then, this generation of Washington County, to cultivate this special gift of community. As Ronald Reagan said, "Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. We didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same, or one day we will spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it was once like in the United States where men were free." This wise sentiment begs the question for us today, with our next generation so frequently leaving Washington County upon graduation from high school, and so often never to return, what must we do to teach the next generation "the distinct values that define us" and bring them home to pass this gift on to the generations still to come? What must we do today to reinforce the foundation that we've been given by those who have come before us, to renew and improve our great community? What must we do to make Washington County

the kind of place that most kids raised here want to come back to and others want to relocate to in order to enjoy our authentic quality of life and to raise their families?

The answer to these questions, and the many like them, must invariably start with our kids, the next generation of Washington County.

It was nearly ten years ago that I was introduced to a quiet, hardworking, and smart young man named Jack Rettler. Jack is from West Bend, is the oldest son of Pete and Kelly Rettler, and is 5th generation Washington County. I am pretty sure the first time I met Jack was on a wrestling mat somewhere in Washington County, but it was about five or six years ago that I had the privilege of hiring Jack as the first Administrative Intern here at the county. During that time, I got to know this wonderful young man and see exactly what the best of our next generation has to offer. After just over a year long stint in our office, Jack left to pursue his law degree at Marquette. He returned for a semester internship in the County Attorney's office, after which we all thought for sure he'd be on to the big city and a big law firm. Maybe a year later I was thrilled to discover that Jack would be returning to live in West Bend and work at Madden Law Group on the city's west side.

In the months surrounding Jack's graduation, his marriage to his lovely wife Sarah and his move to permanent employment with Madden, I joined his dad, Pete at a community discussion about the long-term challenges facing our community. During the event Pete filled in the gaps on Jack's journey and expounded upon the crucial role that the family's social network played in bringing Jack back home. Jack's story, a story similar to many of yours' in this room today, is the beginning of the answer to how we renew and improve our great community. With us today, representing the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th generation of Rettler's in Washington County are Wallace, Pete, Jack, and Reagan Rettler.

If we are to **defend** "our authentic quality of life" and **propagate** the "distinct values that define us," we must dedicate ourselves today to this difficult and rewarding work. We must resolve not just to grow our "attractive communities" for the sake of growth, or for lower tax bills, or for our prosperity, but for the sake of preserving our "rich heritage", and for continuing our way of life, and for our posterity. We must lay forth a path to replicate your story, to replicate Jack's story, and to give every child in Washington County and every freedom loving American who wishes to join us, a hope and a future in our great community - a bastion of "the last best hope" that Lincoln so eloquently described over a century and a half ago.

As I speak to you today, we all have significant work to do in order to achieve our shared vision. There is no doubt our next generation needs to be the beginning chapter of this exciting new future. And to fully achieve our destiny we must also be prepared to welcome their friends and our neighbors from far and wide. As they begin to come home and realize the fulfillment of authentic quality of life, they will most certainly attract others to come and join them. We need to build now to accommodate and embrace them, welcoming them into our bigger and better

Washington County family, while ensuring they embrace “the distinct values that define us” and in so doing give back to our great community.

Last year, during some of the most difficult months of our nation’s most recent struggle with race relations, I visited protesters across the county and asked several of them what type of change they were seeking here in Washington County. One particular sentiment struck a chord with me in those conversations. A middle-aged black woman who lives in Hartford told me how she moved here to get her kids out of the city and out of MPS. She described how grateful she was to be here, and yet how sad she was to find that no one here celebrates Martin Luther King Day. Most profound for me was when she told me that what bothered her most was that no one here celebrated her Independence Day – Juneteenth Day. I respectfully acknowledged her feelings and walked away embarrassed to not know what Juneteenth Day was. After researching its history, I learned Juneteenth is a celebration of the day when the last state in the union, Texas, was notified of the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War. It’s been a day celebrated across America ever since. Upon learning this, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s most persistent and urgent question struck me, “What are you doing for others?” Immediately I was moved to find a way to solemnly and meaningfully celebrate our first Juneteenth Day.

With the help of many caring members of our community, a respectable and respectful gathering was held at the Veteran’s Memorial at the Old Courthouse in West Bend, last June 19<sup>th</sup>. Over 100 people came together to sing, celebrate, and learn a little bit about exactly how inextricably linked we are, and how our shared history can and must propel us into a promising future together. I never got the name of the women who taught me something new about exactly how connected we are through past generations, but I came to better appreciate the connection between her family and mine, and how the hundreds of men from Washington County who served and sacrificed in that great civil war made a difference to this day for both of us and our children by overcoming slavery, what John Adams called “an evil of colossal magnitude.”

You see, just as our histories are inextricably linked, so much so are our futures. That is why the way that we treat our next generation matters, even if they do things a little differently than we did. That is why the way that we treat those who don’t look like us matters, even if their traditions and culture are a little bit different than ours. That is why the way that we interact with those who don’t agree with us matters, even if they don’t look at things the same way we do. It is why I have so frequently paraphrased the words of Matthew 22:39 “Love your neighbor.” If we are to renew and improve, we can only do it together, and that takes trusting networks and common values...love.

Our mission in Washington County government is to “create an environment”, that is the primary purpose of government. Government doesn’t create jobs, but it can destroy jobs.

Government doesn't create families, but it can hinder families. Government doesn't create acts of kindness, but it can stifle them. Instead, government secures our unalienable Rights and creates the space (or the environment) to effect Safety and Happiness. Then, it is up to the business to do business, it is up to the church to spread the gospel, and it is up to individuals to show kindness and fully realize the opportunity of Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness – "authentic quality of life".

In the coming years, it is the sacred duty of each of us to collectively work to ensure that our next generation and other freedom loving people can fully realize "authentic quality of life"; where they can actually afford a single family home in one of our cities, villages or towns; where we fully invest in them and their education, while at home and beyond; where they can work for a local company and make a family sustaining income; where they give back to others through a church, civic organization or non-profit; and, where they can firmly grasp the torch of our great community, fully embracing our tireless work to "cultivate our rich heritage, vibrant economy and attractive communities through the distinct values that define us", and taking their turn in passing it on to the generations to come.

This is not simply the work of the county, or the county board or the county executive. County government will remain focused on "creating the environment ". Meanwhile, it is our work, together, as the current generation of people fortunate to call Washington County home to "cultivate" our hopes and dreams in a renewal of the spirit of our great community. Let us join together to fulfill the American dream of making our small piece of Lincoln's "last best hope" a little bit better for our children than it was for us. Let us fight to give our children's children Reagan's opportunity to live "where men [are] free." And let us do it all with love for our neighbor, with all freedom loving people, reflecting the words of Dr. King: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, what are you doing for others?"

Join with me today in the challenging and rewarding work of building, renewing, and improving Our Great Community!

Thank you! God bless you! God bless Washington County! God Bless the great State of Wisconsin! And, God Bless these United States of America!