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Every year I appreciate the opportunities that we, the Marion County Board of Commissioners, have to present our state of the county address to the many chambers of commerce throughout the county and to SEDCOR. These presentations allow us to provide a year-end recap and a sneak preview into the new year.

Our first presentation was January 14, hosted by SEDCOR at Mission Mill, in Salem. Although CCTV taped our presentation and the Statesman Journal has it streaming on their website, I know we still will not get our message to many people. So, I'd like to share with you a brief summary of my state of the county comments here.

Despite economic hardships touching virtually everyone throughout 2009, people in Marion County continue to reach out to those less fortunate with generosity, compassion and community pride. That's not easy when unemployment rates in the Salem area continue to be higher than the state's; when Marion County median household income is less than the state's, the country's and neighboring counties; when many businesses continue to lay off large portions of their work force; and, when many businesses have shut their doors permanently.

It has been a gut-wrenching year for all of us. The county, like many businesses, had to lay off several employees. We, too, had to make deeper budget cuts to balance our budget.

Staying focused on core functions, providing a manageable level of services with financial uncertainties looming into the future, all make for difficult decisions and delicate balancing. But, I am proud of the can-do attitude our county employees have and the commitment they have made to find innovative ways to do things more cost effectively; all of which has become a hallmark of Marion County government.

Through our Risk Management Program alone, we recovered over \$250,000 in costs. We have lowered our workers' compensation claims and costs. Through our wellness program, employees are healthier having made lifestyle changes resulting in reduced health care costs and absenteeism.

It is impossible to separate the issues of public safety from healthy families and a strong economy. When one link breaks, the whole chain fails, and causes a myriad of problems for our local communities.

These challenges don't exist in a vacuum. Community input is critical to good decision making. Working together with community groups whether they be private, non profit or governmental, is the only way we can understand the unique challenges individual communities face. It is the only way we solve those individual problems. And, it is the only way we find opportunities for a better future.

What we learned through the year-long series of town hall meetings conducted by the Marion County Public Safety Coordinating Council has helped to shape our updated strategic plan. A key element of our new plan is the collection of data that will enable us to monitor, track and assess community trends. With this information, we can plan, prioritize and realign policies and expenditures to better respond to changing trends and community needs.

An historic meeting of the Marion County Public Safety Coordinating Council and the Marion County Children and Families Commission last summer resulted in mutual goals and a set of key actions to also respond to community needs. These key actions include: supporting parenting, jobs for youth, and the availability and access to healthy choices and activities for youth.

But, it all comes back to having a healthy economy, which is everyone's biggest challenge in this new year. I can tell you that we in Marion County will continue to work arm-in-arm with local businesses, SEDCOR, chambers of commerce and other government officials and agencies, so that Marion County is a place that encourages businesses to locate here, grow their business, retain jobs and create new jobs.

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