

"If you want a better future, you better build it," Alton Mayor Brant Walker discusses re-election

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - After becoming Alton's first write-in candidate for mayor, **Brant Walker** said he has done a lot to improve the city - and he has the numbers to prove it.

Since taking office nearly three years ago, Walker's administration has overseen the revival of Alton in many ways. Most recently, his administration and department heads have been working to secure grants to improve many Alton roadways and parks. Late Friday morning, he was proud to display some of the projects going to be done using nearly \$4 million in newly-secured grants.

"If you want a better future, you better build it," Walker said. "Grants are the way to go these days."

Using those grants, Walker envisions Broadway's infrastructure from Henry Street to Landmarks Boulevard becoming completely refurbished by 2018. He sees Washington past Salu to College redone in the same fashion College Avenue was by 2019. He sees the same treatment being done to State Street by 2020. Walker sees a city going through growth everywhere he looks.

"We have had 200 new businesses come to Alton since I took office," he said. "And 2016 was a fantastic year for permitting."

Walker cites unemployment numbers falling from around 12 percent since he took office to the most recent figure of just below eight percent. Retail sales, which were the worst since 2001 when Walker took office at \$481 million, have risen to \$515 million in 2015, which is the third highest since 2001.

"I believe we may even go from the worst to the first in 2016," Walker said.

He attributes those numbers to a variety of things. He credited **Greg Caffey** for his economic direction for the city as well as the amount of new businesses. He also said business retention visits to more than 150 new businesses have also helped those numbers grow.

"We go to new businesses and help them with things they need like sewer and signage," he said. "One business was going to relocate to outside of Alton, but partially because of their retention visits, they decided to relocate within Alton."

Another aspect of Alton Walker wore with pride was the crime rate. Walker said crime was 16 percent lower in the first half of 2016 than it was in the first half of 2015. He said homicides in the city have dropped by 50 percent as well. He said arrests were up this year as well. He credited the work of **Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons** and his department for those rates.

"Under Chief Simmons, we now have three drug officers instead of two," Walker said.

Those officers may help with "nuisance crimes," which Walker said randomly spike in the area. Walker attributes several of those incidents to the ongoing heroin epidemic ravaging Madison County.

Community policing has also been in place within Alton since before the events in Ferguson took place. Walker said the Alton Police Department has been very proactive

and involved in the community to ensure incidents such as what occurred in Ferguson between Darren Wilson and Mike Brown would not happen in Alton.

"It's not as much about what did happen as much as what didn't happen," Walker said. "Overall, Alton is a very safe city."

Public safety is on the forefront of Walker's current administration as well as his reelection campaign. Besides crime statistics, Walker cited the city's ability to weather the weather as proof of his commitment to public safety.

"In the last three years, we've survived four top 10 floods," he said. "We've also evacuated the **Alton Marina** two times with no damage done. That's something we've never had to do before."

Alton Fire Chief Bernie Sebold was another official to whom Walker bestowed much credit for Alton's public safety record. Under his administration, Alton improved its **Insurance Service Office (ISO)** rating from a respectable four to a nearly-unbeatable two.

Walker credited **Alton Parks and Rec Director Mike Haynes** with the current influx trend to local parks.

"I wanted to see the neighborhood kids connect to their neighborhood parks again," Walker said. "Now the parks are filling up."

Private/public partnerships and grants have also improved Alton's parks and green spaces. Recently, **Ameren Illinois** presented a check for \$17,000 for the purpose of redoing the electrical wiring at **Riverview Park**. Various corporate sponsors across the Riverbend area have also contributed to electronic scoreboards at **Gordon Moore Park**, which Walker said were desperately needed.

A **Congestion Mitigation Air Quality Grant** secured by Walker's administration will be utilized to do work on the entrance to Gordon Moore Park, which sees as many as 1 million visitors a year. The park also contains the latest fountain revamped in the Alton area, which is located within the park's Oriental Gardens. Walker said the city had fixed the vast majority of its fountains over the last two and a half years, some of which were not working for more than two decades.

"It's all part of my commitment to improving Alton's quality of life," Walker said. "We're improving infrastructure, quality of life, green space and sustainability."

Many of these improvements are Walker's method of transitioning Alton's economy from its industrial roots of old to a more tourism-based retail center. Walker said he wanted to make Alton into a nice place to visit and an even nicer place to live.

The **Liberty Bank Riverfront Amphitheater** is another aspect of the city Walker said is bringing people. He said nationally-famous acts such as **Sugar Ray**, **Lynyrd Skynyrd** and **Charlie Daniels** have been sponsored by St. Louis radio stations, whose advertisements bring people from across the region to Alton. He said the amphitheater's increasing diversity will only continue that positive trend.

"We started with some concerts and fireworks, then we got concerts, fireworks and a food truck festival and now we have concerts, fireworks, a food truck festival and movies," he said.

Walker will be running against **Alton Police Lt. Dan Rauschkolb**, **Scott Dixon** and **Joshua Young** in the April 2017 mayoral elections in Alton.