

Mayor Walker looking to revitalize Alton



Segue • SIUE

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In a time of intense economic stress and uncertainty in the state of Illinois, overseeing and operating area municipalities has become a difficult task for its leaders. Despite the challenges within the city, Alton Mayor Brant Walker has brought a certain life back to the city he loves.

In this week's episode of Segue, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound, SIUE Chancellor Dr. Randy Pembroke sits down with Walker to discuss the positive changes that have occurred with the city of Alton, economic perseverance and the future of one of the most historic cities in Illinois.

Walker graduated from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with a degree in business administration. Before entering local politics, he owned Strategic

Search Service, which is a full-service employment agency that served as many as 300 employees a year.

Remembering the industrial and economic influence that Alton once enjoyed inspired Walker to run as a write-in candidate for mayor in 2013. He unseated incumbent Mayor Tom Hoescht by 74 votes, receiving 1,853 votes. This was the second time in 40 years a write-in candidate had won in Alton.

"I saw Alton go from what used to be an industrial powerhouse when nearly 30,000 jobs were within a three-mile stretch," Walker says. "That all went away over time, and I did not see the city do anything to address it or bring anything new to the area to bring back those jobs."

"After living in the city limits of Alton for more than 24 years, I have seen our infrastructures fail. Our sidewalks were crumbling, and our streets and parks were deteriorating. I finally said, 'Okay, maybe I will give this a run,' and here we are."

Since he was elected, Walker launched and completed several infrastructure projects, improving roadways, sidewalks and parks around the community. The city has been working diligently to revitalize the park system to attract visitors and potential residents to the area.

"When people look for a place to visit and live, they want to see great green spaces and places for their kids to play. I have always said that if you want a better future, you better build it," he says. "That's what we're doing in Alton right now."

Walker is proud of Alton's connection to the Southern Illinois University system with the SIU School of Dental Medicine.

"The School of Dental Medicine alone has a significant economic impact on our community," he says. "Not only does the School provide a tremendous quality education, which is first-rate particularly for the tuition, but the amount of civic things it does for our community is also completely unheard of. We're blessed to have a university like you here."

Founded in 1837, Alton remains one of the most historically rich communities on the Mississippi River. Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas famously debated in the city prior to Lincoln's election. Alton resident

and U.S. Senator Lyman Trumbull co-wrote the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. Alton was also the home of jazz musician Miles Davis and Robert Wadlow, the tallest human being ever.

“Aside from our history, our entertainment, dining options and places to stay are just phenomenal,” Walker says. “If you cannot find something to do in Alton, you just do not want to do anything at all.”

In the past two years, the city’s Liberty Bank Alton Amphitheater has welcomed national acts like the Charlie Daniels Band, Dwight Yoakam, Jana Kramer, Rodney Atkins and Lynyrd Skynyrd. The amphitheater has also hosted the Sauce Magazine Food Truck Festival. These events bring thousands of people to the city each year, along with millions in revenue. Along with its flourishing tourism industry, the area is currently flooded with eagle watching opportunities up and down the Mississippi River.

Throughout the last 20 years, Alton had several brushes with Mother Nature. Located on the Mississippi River, Alton has become accustomed to the flooding that occurs in the area. Minor flooding occurs each year, but in the last four years, levels have reached near-historic proportions.

In December 2015, the city battled the worst flooding in its downtown area since the Great Flood of 1993. As the area was threatened by rising waters, city workers and employees, various departments, first responders, students and other residents joined together to evacuate the Alton Marina and put up a 1,000-foot wall to keep the downtown Alton dry.

“I was so proud to see that in our worst of times, our citizens were at their best,” he says. “It was neat to see everyone come together and save the city.”

Fostering relationships between law enforcement officers and Alton citizens has become a top priority. With the help of the city, the Police Benevolent & Protective Association of Illinois Unit #14 has sponsored several events like Shop with a Cop, Coffee with a Cop and Ballin’ with a Cop, to help break negative stereotypes and create positive relationships between citizens and police officers.

“Our police department has been absolutely phenomenal about what they are willing to do for and with the community,” he says. “The officers embrace and take on each idea we give them. The police enjoy it as much as the kids.”

Looking ahead to Alton’s future, Walker hopes to continue to serve the community as he will be running for reelection this spring. In the coming months, the city is expected to open its brand new multimodal transportation hub. The new center will bring high-speed railway technology and further economic opportunities to Alton.

Catch this episode of Segue at 9 a.m. this Sunday by tuning in to WSIE 88.7 FM.

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