

City of Cuyahoga Falls

2011 State of the City Address

Cuyahoga Falls - Celebrating 200 Years



Don L. Robart
Mayor

2011 State of the City Address

Wednesday, February 22, 2012

It is an honor to be here today, on the occasion of our City's 200th Anniversary, to deliver the annual State of the City address. Despite living in an economy that is the worst that most of us have seen in our lifetimes, the State of our City is very strong and its future is very bright. They say to be successful, surround yourself with good people. I have been blessed with a very professional cabinet, an outstanding city council, led by its past president, Diana Colavecchio, wonderful volunteers serving on our many boards and commissions, and of course, this great Chamber of Commerce, led by my good friend, Laura Petrella. Let me thank each and every one of you for your role in making Cuyahoga Falls such a wonderful place to live, work and raise a family.

OVERCOMING FINANCIAL ROADBLOCKS

I mentioned the difficulties presented to the City, to all cities, as a result of the economy. You see, unlike the federal government that continues to run up massive deficits, cities are required to balance their budgets. By law, we are forbidden to run a deficit.

Prior to 2006, our property taxes would go up, on average, about 3% per year. And, every six years, it would take a one-time jump about 5-10%. On top of that, we were typically earning about \$1.5 - \$2 million in interest on our money. Since 2006, we have watched our property taxes stagnate, and for 2012, we are projecting about \$175,000 in earned interest income.

A little over a year ago, our Governor came into office, and he was faced with an \$8 billion deficit. He too, by law, is forbidden to incur a deficit. So, rather than raise taxes, he introduced a series of initiatives to, not only balance the state budget, but moreover, to make our state more competitive for business.

The result of those initiatives will phase out both the local government fund and the estate tax. Net loss to our City is approximately \$1.2 million this year.

So what have we been doing to deal with these financial challenges?

When we first spotted the trend in 2006, we immediately began a proactive approach to reduce costs everywhere possible. The primary target was to reduce staff. Largely through attrition, merging of departments, transferring departments to the county, and retirement incentives, we have reduced our full-time employees from 519 in December of 2006 to 397 last month. That is a savings of almost \$8 million per year.

Our next cost-cutting venture was the introduction of the Epoke salt spreaders. We were the first city in the State of Ohio to utilize this forward thinking system, and today, our fleet of 16 units is still the largest municipal fleet in the country. Over the past six seasons, these self-directed salt spreaders have saved our City an estimated 39,865 tons of salt worth over \$1.8 million. It should be noted that, although this winter has been unseasonably mild, the winter of 2010-2011, had a record amount of storms with 43, and a near record amount of snowfall with 107.5 inches.

It costs the City an extra \$32.73 per ton to dispose of trash versus recyclables. Recognizing this, we have implemented our new blue-lidded recycle carts. These new carts have generated an additional 4% of recyclables, which translates into a savings of a little over \$16,000. Total savings as a result of our recycle program last year was \$531,000. Now in our 23rd year of recycling, our City has diverted 236,638 tons of material with a cost avoidance of over \$9 million!

A couple of years back, we negotiated to provide Dispatching Services for both the Village of Silver Lake and the City of Munroe Falls. In the case of Silver Lake, we also provide Emergency Medical Service. For 2012, these two services will generate \$271,462.

One of the better decisions we have made occurred in 2007 involving our Municipal Court. As the host community for the municipal court, we would generally lose about \$250,000 per year. The judges wanted plusher, more spacious accommodations in a stand-alone facility. I declined, feeling that our community was not interested in that type of investment. Rather than lose \$250,000 last year, our Mayor's Court grossed over \$723,000 and I would not be surprised in 2012, to see us top \$1 million.

And, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the cooperative spirit exhibited by our six labor unions. This past fall, we were able to negotiate wage freezes that will carry us through the next two years with our six unions.

Given the fragile state of the economy, our goal has been to reach a 15% carry-over balance in our general fund. As a result of our proactive reining-in of spending and our aggressive cost cutting, we have ended the last two years with a 19% carry-over. This has led to our outstanding Aa2 Bond Rating.

Besides cutting costs and raising more revenue, a third option for our City to stretch its dollars is to leverage our money to gain access to state & federal dollars. Our City Engineer, Tony Demasi, is to be commended for securing almost \$1.9 million from either the Ohio Department of Transportation (ODOT) or the Ohio Public Works Commission (OPWC). These state funds became the catalyst for over \$9 million in improvements. Improvements such as the completion of Chart Road in Ward 8 to the paving of Portage Trail from 13th Street to 4th Street, the paving of State Road from Quick Road to the corporation line, the rebuild of Remington Road in one of our industrial parks, and the wonderful improvement to the intersection of Northampton Road and Portage Trail.

We are extremely proud of our Electric Department. And while most residents of our City probably focus on our electric rates being 26% cheaper than the investor-owned utility, it should also be noted that we have, somewhat quietly, crept-up on being one of the most environmentally friendly cities in the state. In addition to being the largest shareholder in the Belleville Hydroelectric Plant, Cuyahoga Falls is now participating in the construction of three additional hydroelectric plants on the Ohio River. This combines with our 25% ownership in the Bowling Green Wind Farm, places our City as a leader in the green energy movement.

Earlier I mentioned the merging of departments. No better example of that can be found than in our Information Technology Service Department. Once made up of three departments, John Konich now successfully manages Tech Service, Dispatch, and Information Services, all under one roof. The consolidation of these departments has yielded a savings of over \$700,000 from the 2003 annual budget.

SAFETY FORCES - PROTECTING US DAILY

2011 ushered in a new era for the Cuyahoga Falls Police Department. With the swearing-in of Tom Pozza as Chief of Police, the department has had a very successful year. Under Chief Pozza's leadership, traffic enforcement was up over 34%, sexual assaults were down 50%, aggravated assaults were down 16%, simple assaults were down 11%, and larceny/thefts were down 3%.

Our "War on Drugs" continued to be a top priority in 2011. During the year, 20 drug search warrants were executed, including 4 meth houses, 3 meth labs found in vehicles on traffic stops, and 3 marijuana grow labs. In addition, 2 marijuana deliveries were intercepted keeping 78 pounds of marijuana off the streets of Cuyahoga Falls. Our Police K-9 unit was reactivated to assist in narcotics investigation, and was virtually self-supported thanks to donations and fundraising.

One of the more interesting challenges for the Police Department this past year was the implementation of our new juvenile curfew ordinance. As you may recall, we were accumulating an interesting array of troublemakers along the riverfront. The Police Department put together a solid plan designed to eliminate the problems. The plan worked perfectly and our Police Department should be commended for their work. Congratulations Chief Pozza on a great first year!

Likewise, our Fire Department performed extremely well in 2011. The average response time on the 7,871 calls for service was just 4 minutes and 4 seconds. This response time is 60% better than the national average. Our busiest fire station last year was Station #1, right across the street, followed by Station #2 which is at the top of Portage Trail hill, on the City's east side. Our busiest months were May and July with 745 and 711 calls respectively.

Cutting costs and generating revenue has been a priority of our Fire Department for many years. One of the best generators of revenue has been our transporting of patients directly to the hospital. In 2011, we were able to collect just over \$1.54 million in transporting fees, which represents an increase of 10.6% over 2010.

Our mutual aid agreements with bordering communities have worked very well. In 2011, we delivered mutual aid, or automatic aid 61 times, while receiving mutual aid 53 times.

Congratulations to Chief Moledor and his entire Fire Department on a job well done in 2011.

PARKS & RECREATION - AWARD WINNING PROGRAMS

Major kudos go to Bill Lohan and the entire staff of the Parks & Recreation Department. Despite the tough economy, the Parks & Recreation Department had another banner year, providing outstanding recreation without raising a single rate or eliminating a single program.

And the awards continue to roll in. In 2011, Akron Life Magazine's "Best of the City" contest picked our Natatorium Health & Fitness Center as #1 in its class. In the Akron Beacon Journal's "Beacon's Best" awards, rated both our Downview Sports Center and Waterworks Family Aquatic Center #1 and both Brookledge Golf Club and the Natatorium as #2 in their respective categories.

Our Natatorium just completed its 7th year of service in the new facility, and its popularity is unparalleled. With almost 10,000 members, we average almost 2,000 patrons per day. With dedicated employees, sound management and a facility that boasts "whole fitness for the whole family" the Natatorium has maintained its prestigious position as the premier fitness center in northeast Ohio.

Our newest expansion to the fitness experience is our Center for Functional Fitness. Aimed exclusively for ages 50 and above, participants can enjoy an intimate, non intimidating fitness setting while working out among members of their own peer group. Located in the western portion of City Hall, where the municipal court was vacated, we currently have 176 members with a goal of reaching 500. For the baby boomers that are interested in a totally unique, personal, real-life fitness program, the Center for Functional Fitness might be just for you.

2012 marks the 20th anniversary of our beautiful Brookledge Golf Club. 2011 proved challenging with the incredible amount of rain we sustained.

Fortunately, due to the smart design work at the inception of the course, we were able to deal with the 17 inches, above average rainfall, for the year.

With any break in the weather, 2012 should be an outstanding year for Brookledge. A major renovation to the parking lot along with an expansion to the restrooms will make Brookledge an even more desirable place to be. Brookledge Golf Club, indeed, is one of the finest public courses in the state.

Waterworks Family Aquatic Center was a popular place in 2011. With 10 of the 83 days we were open, reaching above 90 degrees, many Fallsites scurried to the cooling waters of our pool and lazy river. A new feature last year was the addition of 3 rentable cabanas which proved to be very popular and brought in an additional \$4,830 in revenue.

One of the best-kept secrets in Cuyahoga Falls is the Quirk Culture Center. Geared primarily for our Senior Citizens, the Center is literally bursting every night of the week with a plethora of activities for all ages.

We are extremely proud of our Parks & Recreation Department and its long tradition of bringing the finest facilities and programs for fun, relaxation and peace of mind.

CHAMPIONING CUYAHOGA FALLS

The primary focus of the Development Department in 2011 was the new development at Portage Trail and State Road, called Portage Crossing. And rightly so. For this is by far, the largest project the City has ever undertaken. And of course, the market conditions over the past few years could not be any worse. But despite the conditions, the progress toward launch has been excellent. Our original plan, passed unanimously by city council, called for 279,000 sq. ft., built in phases with a price tag of \$40 million. The current plan calls for over 470,000 sq. ft. built in one phase with a \$60 million valuation. This additional valuation means more jobs, more taxes coming back to our City, and of equal importance, more taxes coming back to the Cuyahoga Falls School District. Ground breaking is anticipated this spring.

Speaking of jobs, another significant ground breaking occurred recently on West Bath Road, just west of State Road, with the beginning of Bath Creek

Estates. This one-story, 100-bed nursing home will have 16 semi-private and 68 suites. The building will consist of approximately 54,000 sq. ft. and will be completed in the fall. This first phase will create 100 new jobs, and speaking recently with the developer, additional phases will ultimately provide over 250 jobs on that campus.

Another major addition to our community was just dedicated ten days ago at Cuyahoga Valley Christian Academy. This 35,000 sq. ft. addition was a \$5.5 million investment that includes nine new classrooms, a multi-purpose room, locker rooms and restrooms for athletes, a weight room and storage areas.

We are beginning to see modest growth in the residential development area, with over \$10 million invested in this segment last year. There were forty-five new single-family home starts in 2011 verse only fourteen the previous year. New home construction is occurring in Hidden Lakes, Boulder Estates, North Pointe, Hampton Bluff and Manchester Falls.

Manchester Falls on Howe Avenue, east of Barney's Busy Corners, consists of five buildings with fifty-six units, valued at over \$3 million. This complex will be single-story, luxury apartments complete with a clubhouse. Monthly rent will range from \$900 - \$1,115.

Nearby, the Danbury Independent Senior Living facility began construction of a 40-bed, \$2 million addition aimed at Alzheimer's patients.

Another project we have been working on for several years is located on State Road, just south of Buckeye Sports Center. This former shooting range was fraught with environmental problems that deemed the area obsolete. Seeing the potential of the site, Sue Truby and the Development Team put together a program utilizing Clean Ohio Assistance Funds (CORF) funding that was used to environmentally clean up the property. The first phase of this new project is scheduled for this fall and will include seventy-five units to be marketed toward senior citizens. When completed, we anticipate this complex will consist of 166 units and 20,000 sq. ft. of retail on State Road.

One of the more exciting programs to come out of our federal government recently has been the Neighborhood Stabilization Program (NSP). Due to the mortgage crisis and the number of foreclosures and vacancies, the NSP has provided funds to purchase, renovate, and in some cases demolish vacant, foreclosed homes. Our initial allocation was slightly over \$780,000, with which we have bought, refurbished and ultimately sold six homes. The project has

worked so well, we have since purchased three more homes that are under renovation.

As you can imagine, the devaluation of the real estate market has taken its toll in Cuyahoga Falls, as well. Home values in our City last year averaged \$124,634. This represents slightly over a 10% drop from our peak year of 2008 when the average was \$139,477.

We are very excited about several projects that have either recently opened or will be opening in the near future.

Community Development Block Grant Loans (CDBG) were made to two local businesses last year. Rock Fresh, a restaurant owned and operated by our good friend Rockne Becker, opened its doors recently. Located at 3883 State Road, Mr. Becker now provides both carry out and in-restaurant meals that are made fresh daily. Another business loan was approved for Gone Fishin' Bait & Tackle on Munroe Falls Avenue. The owner has expanded the business to include inland fishing charters and an online store.

And did everyone notice that the Diamond Deli has recently moved in at the corner of Front Street and Portage Trail? I understand their food is extraordinary and we wish them the very best success.

And speaking of great food, who among us doesn't like a great hotdog? The Retro Dog Restaurant at the intersection of Steels Corners Road and Wyoga Lake Road is scheduled to open this spring. Owned and operated by the Jeff Bruno family that also owns and operates Papa Joe's in the Valley, Retro Dog specializes in chargrilled hotdogs, three root beers on draft, soft-serve custard with 11% butterfat and hand-cut fries. Seating will be available both inside and out.

We started our mission on South Front Street in 2003 with our first matching Grant purchase of Prospect Mold & Die. Obviously, the landscape there has changed significantly with the addition of Highbridge Glens Park and more recently, the near completion of the 40,000 sq. ft., \$8 million Watermark. One of the most beautiful buildings in our community, this project consists of 40 senior apartments, 12 market rate condominiums and 9,500 sq. ft. of retail space on the first floor. Occupancy has already taken place in nine of the new apartments and it has been most recently announced the "The Office" restaurant and bar will be moving into a portion of the retail space.

Speaking of announcements, I'm sure everyone noted the recent announcement that Acme #10 on State Road will be building a brand new facility. Almost doubling in size from its previous building, this \$8 million structure will carry a retro style of its own, complete with the resurrection of its 1950's style blinking Acme sign. Ground breaking is expected around May 1st with a tentative completion date of Thanksgiving.

A series of buildings on the south side of Portage Trail between 11th and 12th Streets had withstood years of neglect and an absentee landlord. By leveraging both Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding and the help of our local Community Improvement Corporation (CIC), we were able to purchase and demolish the long vacant structure. The Development Department then took the next step and secured Clean Ohio Assistance Funds (COAF) that we used to conduct environmental assessments of the property. We are currently working with a developer for purchase and construction of a new medical office building on that site.

Many of you may have read in last Sunday's Akron Beacon Journal, that the Liberty Harley-Davidson store is moving to Cuyahoga Falls! Renamed Rubber City Harley-Davidson, Mike and Franscene Davis have purchased the former Circuit City building off Howe Ave. Davis intends to spend nearly \$1 million to renovate the 40,000 sq. ft. facility. We had been working with the former owner, Ernie Passeo for some time on this site, and are quite excited to see this development.

One of our top employers, Americhem, celebrated their 70th Anniversary this past November. With headquarters located in the downtown district, Americhem manufactures custom color and additive solutions for polymer-based products such as the orange Tide detergent containers and blue Dasani water bottles. Americhem reported an increase in domestic sales over their 2010 figures. Additionally, the automotive industry continues to gain momentum thereby increasing production at the Steels Corners Plant. Americhem has made a substantial investment into the health and beauty markets and are predicting a return on that investment this year.

The Falls River Square District continues to be very popular with Fallsites and beyond. I am constantly asked by other mayors how we did that. And, of course, the answer is it did not happen overnight. Rockin' on the River may have been the catalyst, but hardly a year goes by that something new isn't added. Rockin' on the River continues to be the largest, most well attended, free outdoor concert series in northeast Ohio, with several concerts drawing

over 10,000 people to the district. In 2011, the Monday night Riverfront Car Cruise-in was awarded the #1 ranking for the 5th consecutive year by Cruisin' Times Magazine. And, from June through August on Thursday nights, "Flicks in the Falls" takes center stage with young families bringing blankets, lawn chairs and strollers to enjoy weekly movies.

In the warmer months, our interactive spray fountain continues to be a very popular free attraction. In the winter months, everyone is invited to throw on their ice skates and enjoy our full-scale, refrigerated outdoor ice rink which operates when the temperature is 60 degrees or below.

Our festivals continue to be an overwhelming success. Kicking off the season in June with the Riverfront Irish Festival, followed in July by the greatest Italian Festival in Northeast Ohio, Festa Italiana, and then in September, the grand daddy of them all, the Oktoberfest. RIOT on the River and the Halloween Spooktacular are also wonderful draws to our downtown activities.

2011 was a sad time for the Development Department, with the untimely passing of Jonathan Dailey. Mr. Dailey was our Housing Division Manager and was to assume the role of Senior Planner on August 15th. Unfortunately, Mr. Dailey passed away the day prior to his taking over the Senior Planner's duties. I don't know of a finer, more professional individual that has ever worked for the City of Cuyahoga Falls. All will miss his professional work ethic and humor.

We are actually blessed by the hard work and dedication of everyone in the Development Department. Consider that in the past fifteen years, the Development Department has successfully created twenty-six tax incentive agreements, leveraging over \$125 million in private investment and the creation or retention of 2358 jobs. Congratulations to Sue Truby and her entire staff for a job well done.

A CELEBRATION OF MONUMENTAL PROPORTIONS

2012 is a very important historical year for Cuyahoga Falls. Our 200th Anniversary, our Bicentennial will be celebrated all year. This past January we kicked things off with the Frozen River Festival, followed this past weekend with the Kid's Birthday Bash, held at our Natatorium. In addition to the

monthly Bicentennial events, the full thrust of the celebration will occur during the ten-day period between August 3rd and August 12th . Plans for the ten-day celebration have been in the works for the better part of a year.

The first weekend will include an opening ceremony, followed by a weekend long Crooked River Summerfest. An ice cream social at the Keyser Park barn will include entertainment from our great Community band. That first weekend will also include a free concert at Blossom Music Center and numerous historical tours.

Monday through Friday will include the opening of a time capsule that was placed in 1962, a performance by the Air Force Band, a “Splash” at Waterworks Park and ward picnics.

The final weekend will feature the Riverfront Rhythm & Blues Fest, a phenomenal Bicentennial parade, fireworks on Saturday night, and will wrap up Sunday with an Ecumenical Church service, performance by the Western Reserve Band, and a closing ceremony.

Two other significant activities that will occur in conjunction with our Bicentennial will be the removal of the two dams in Cuyahoga Falls on the Cuyahoga River, and the initial refurbishing of the barn at Keyser Park. The removal of the two dams in conjunction with the Ohio EPA will change the entire dynamic of the river. The American Whitewater Association advises that the flow of the water within Cuyahoga Falls will be a "Category 5", which is a rather unique category for whitewater rafting, kayaking and such. The next closest "Category 5" is said to be in West Virginia. We anticipate some sort of public/private partnerships will be formed to capitalize on this rare opportunity.

The second initiative is a result of our desire to incorporate a legacy project into our Bicentennial. A project that can preserve and respect the rich past of this community, while at the same time, serving as a catalyst to a new chapter in our history.

The Bicentennial Committee chose, as our legacy project, the restoration of the Keyser Park Barn, which is part of the original Keyser Homestead in Northampton Township. This barn is not merely a physical link to our agricultural history; it is a reminder of the successful merger between the City of Cuyahoga Falls and Northampton Township in 1986 and part of the patrimony of both communities.

Keyser Park Barn is also an excellent example of historic timber frame construction and is already on the must-see list of the timber framers in this region. Restoring the barn will allow the City and the Northampton Historical Society to showcase the elegance and simplicity of a fine example of heavy timber construction that is in remarkably good condition. In fact, the restoration of the barn will kick off at the annual conference of the Friends of Ohio Barns in late April.

Many thanks to our Honorary Bicentennial Chairman, Councilman Jeff Iula and to our day-to-day Chairman, and outstanding Service Director, Valerie Wax Carr for their leadership of this great Bicentennial.

2012 is going to be an outstanding year to celebrate our past, our present and our future. I'd like to conclude with a short, but powerful quote that hopefully, many of us can take with us throughout this Bicentennial year, and perhaps beyond. Gandhi said, "Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever". Thanks to each of you for your significant contribution to our great Cuyahoga Falls!