

First Friday Forum
January 7, 2005

Ladies and gentlemen, I usually take this opportunity to speak to you mainly about downtown, and then give a state of the city speech at the Jackson Rotary Club, where I speak next week.

Today, however, I want to talk more about the state of the greater city than I have in the past, because it is important that we understand how the welfare of any part of the city affects the welfare of the whole.

This is the audience I feel most comfortable with. I've spoken to no group more often. You are a pretty good mix of folks who want substance; a few hoping for entertainment; and a few who wish they were doing the talking instead of me. But, mostly, you're a group of people who genuinely care about Jackson and its future.

I thank those of you listening on the radio or TV. The entire city benefits when our citizens are informed and involved. I have received my fair share of emails and phone calls over the past few weeks, about everything from baseball to rock salt. A great majority were kind; some less so. I appreciate both kinds.

With few exceptions over the years, I have found that even the most upset Jacksonian is receptive to a reasoned explanation of the challenges or decisions involved in whatever issue is on his or her mind at the time. I enjoy the opportunity to speak to the people of this community. Mutual respect abounds when information is presented and received in an objective way.

I am optimistic about the state of our city and the possibilities before us. But, that optimism is not blind faith; it is tempered by

our challenges. In the face of those challenges, I am sustained by the strength and determination our city has shown in the past, and confident that we are more than capable of facing what lies before us.

At this year's Christmas parade, parishioners from St. Luke's walked with t-shirts proclaiming, "We're still here!" Indeed, much of downtown is not only still here, but better than before.

Thanks more to the work of the private sector than the aid of government, and helped considerably by insurance money collected after the 2003 tornado, downtown is more attractive, more vibrant and more obviously moving in the right direction than at any time in the last 20 years.

Well over \$30 million in private investment has gone into rebuilding and new construction in the downtown area since the tornado. The Elks Building and the New Southern are beginning to show the evidence of the enormous work that has been underway throughout the past year and a half. Businesses like Baker's Drug, Horton and Associates, George Morrison's law office, Krazner's Pawn Shop, Frankland's Cantrell Building, and Aeneas have rebuilt and built better.

They are now joined by new businesses and expansions, such as the new state office building, Le Diva's, Lola's, the Downtown Tavern, the Dickson Art Gallery and Woodall Construction. We look forward to the dedication of Rotary Park adjacent to the library and Lambuth's Decorator Showcase home and tearoom.

Church's such as Mt. Zion and St. Luke's are either under construction or soon to be. Mother Liberty has submitted her designs, broken ground, and we await great things for this project.

All these projects were held to design review guidelines, implemented less than two weeks after the tornado and created by a task force of local architects and engineers called together by the Jackson Downtown Development Corp. Since May 2003, over 25 structures have been evaluated through the design review process, contributing to the continuity and stability of downtown rebuilding.

Todd Krazner was one of the first “victims” of the design review process. I’m glad Todd is nevertheless one of the cheerleaders for the process, and I appreciate all who have understood the wisdom of avoiding short-term gain to help build this city.

Not all downtown developments were because of the tornado, but they are undoubtedly positive, including the demolition of the old Fox Restaurant. Trying to get rid of that thing was almost as difficult as trying to get David Hersh to pay what he owes the city. Buddie’s Place is now Shooters’ Lounge. I like it, but I sure do miss Dianne, the former cook for Buddie’s who helped me cheat on my wife’s diet, for sure knew more about the Atlanta Braves than I do, and knew more about sports than Sea Bass and Dan Reeves put together.

I saw Mark Hudgins day before yesterday putting new tables in at Liberty St. Grill. That’ll be another refuge from Ondra’s food. By the way, he’s got two new apartments over his restaurant. I’m hoping I can take a nap in one of them, maybe even rush over late in the afternoon to watch Gunsmoke.

The year has not been without its disappointments downtown. We were unable to assemble the property near the post office for development. But, the city welcomes the rebuilding of Maranatha Church and remains optimistic about the surrounding area’s future.

It is disappointing that nothing has been done or planned on so much property vital to downtown plans or, in the alternative, that the property is not offered for sale at reasonable prices. Areas that are problematic are the old WNWS property, Café Lafayette, Nando Jones and the Hopper Smith buildings. The last thing we want to do is exercise the city's power of eminent domain; but, we may have to.

I applaud Fish Notes for "hanging on" as it were, in what we hope will some day be a thriving entertainment district for the downtown area.

These disappointments notwithstanding, I am confident that the progress we have seen will be the stimulus for the creation of the kind of downtown that so many of us have dreamed of. In a short while, I believe, we will have a downtown where people live and play, shop and eat, work and worship . . . a downtown that is the soul of a city that radiates with pride outward toward all its parts.

Our progress in the redevelopment of East Jackson is not yet as apparent as downtown progress. We have not received the help we needed to do all we wanted, but we have received a lot, and much is being accomplished.

Many new homes and apartments have been built in the East Jackson area. Those hardest hit by the tornado have kept the faith, built back, and worked together. Developers have seen good demand for and are building and selling \$75,000 homes that are appraising in the mid-eighties, bringing their owners instant equity and increasing the stability of property values. Affordable Housing and Habitat for Humanity have repaired and refurbished 183 homes.

For weeks after the tornado, much of East Jackson was a sea of blues formed by plastic frantically thrown on roofless houses. Now, a quick and unscientific windshield survey puts the number of blue tarps on rooftops around the city at less than five. We have come a long way.

The buy out of Anderson Creek flood plain properties is moving along well, managed by Valerie Horton. 20% of properties have been purchased and 12 structures have been demolished, with 12 pending. The project is scheduled for completion in 2008. This is the largest project of its kind in Tennessee history, and will result in a 58-acre urban park and trail system, linking east Jackson with the downtown core.

Private developers and the city continue to acquire and consolidate properties in the east Chester commercial area. East Jackson Church of Christ will soon dedicate its million-dollar structure and, through the leadership of Brother Lovell C. Hayes, has been a beacon for the renewal of that area.

The biggest disappointment in the east Jackson area has been how slowly the federal wheels turn. From day one, our goal was to demolish Parkview and Merry Lane Courts to provide better housing for their residents. We still intend to do that. Jackson Housing Authority is working to see that it is done by April 2005.

The projects that were planned and initiated in East Jackson have provided striking lessons about dreams and realities. We have had faith to dream the impossible dreams, but we have been reminded that faith without works is dead. We are constantly struggling to adjust to the conflict between potential and possible, especially where funding is limited. Development projects have been reduced in size or altered completely to accommodate changing situations.

I will be visiting next week with Gov. Bredesen, accompanied by our legislative delegation, to request a large grant from the state for creating gateways, named “Community Signatures,” at the four corners of our city core, and tying them together with a community wide greenbelt and bike pedestrian trail. I want the state to help us have the kinds of greenbelts and pedestrian ways that have been funded in cities like Nashville, Chattanooga, Memphis and Knoxville.

Obviously, the tornado has had much to do with activity in East Jackson and downtown. But, there is a lot going on throughout the city, and much of it is very good.

Development continues throughout Jackson. Development south has been accelerated by the completion of Walmart Super Center and Lowe’s. The city continues to work with the state on the possibility of a southern bypass, which would potentially open up 700 acres for development. We are confident that the future is bright for south Jackson.

North of the interstate, growth along Vann Drive and at the Columns has brought some of the restaurants and stores that residents had yearned for in the past, including Olive Garden, Old Navy and TGI Fridays. I am proud to say that the work that the city has done in the past few years in partnership with developers has contributed to making these things possible. By the way, you should hear an announcement in the near future about extending Vann Drive all the way to 412.

I get a lot of questions about the need for a turn lane on Vann Drive, and I have serious questions about the sanity of the mayor who allowed Vann Drive to be built without a turn lane. We’re working on that problem, but we have some right-of-way issues with the state. We hope to see that turning lane in the coming years, but I want to emphasize that lessons learned on Vann Drive

have contributed to a new approach to traffic planning for future roads.

These lessons, including requiring traffic studies for any new development and requiring developers to finance offsite improvements, have been applied in the Columns. They will be applied to all development, including growth at the Campbell St. exit, and any future extension of Vann Drive to 412. Now more than ever, we understand that growth is not a question of if, but when. Our traffic planning must take into account not only current situations, but maximum build out scenarios.

Now, let's get to things which temper optimism.

We are, whether we understand that we are and whether or not we wish it to be so, really in this thing together.

The state of our nation, the state of our state, the state of our county, and the state of all the entities within our city and state, affect the city. Our nation has a huge and growing deficit; our state struggles with a seemingly unsolvable health care crisis, which drains resources from anything else, especially education. Both the federal government and the state government are less and less able and/or willing to aid cities and counties. Now, more than ever, the buck stops here, and there aren't enough bucks to go around.

The city faces pressure from other sources. We have essentially paid any price and cut any deal to bring industry and create jobs to enable our commercial and retail hubs to flourish, and to encourage our population and housing booms. The industries that are recruited to bring jobs to our citizens have their pick of cities across the country, as well as offshore opportunities, locations willing to roll out the welcome mat and roll back their tax burden. We compete. We do what we must to bring them here, as well we should, because it is good for our citizens. Frequently, the

cost of providing roads, fire and police protection and other services to industries is greater than the revenue they produce, at least for many years.

The same is true for private schools that request an extension of services, but do not pay property taxes. Once the city has extended a road, it must maintain it, and frequently we hear cries of “fix my road, but don’t annex me,” from the non-city residents along those corridors

I mention these examples because they illustrate how an expenditure by the city may not result in a direct return on investment of capital revenues, but results in better jobs, education and quality of life for our citizens.

I mention them also because you need to know that there is a difference between the city in a collective sense and the city as we speak of government. I believe the return on our investment has and will be for years to come enormous for our city in the collective sense.

However, it does take money to make money; and it is true, the better we do, the behinder we get.

I know it is hard for many of you to resolve seeing the massive amounts of construction and new development that have taken place around the city in the past few years, hear me tell you about the huge cuts that have been made in city expenditures, and then understand that our revenue situation might not be as good as we would like. But, listen to me.

Prior to 2003, the city of Jackson had not raised taxes since 1984. Our tax rate has not risen consistent with inflation. If it had, it would be \$5.06, unadjusted for reappraisals. Simultaneously, our

cost have risen faster than inflation, especially the cost of health insurance and other labor costs.

We have borrowed money for capital projects and sometimes chosen to pay later rather than sooner. So, our debt service obligations will increase substantially in a few years.

At the same time, the state has elected to reduce state-shared revenue, Uncle Sam wants to deny our kinship, small cities want to take our sales tax money, the growth in the sales tax has declined significantly, and there are other indications that there will be revenue shortfalls unless we plan for that and do something about it.

Our financial picture makes clear that we must continue to look at what we do in terms of the “close, fix or sell” philosophy I’ve talked about the last three years.

We made significant progress in 2004. We closed the city jail, saving \$448,000. Thousands more dollars were saved by closing the Bennett Center and the pool at the VFW. We bid out maintenance of Riverside Cemetery. We consolidated the city garages, reducing duplicated services and increasing preventative maintenance with what Rodney Todd calls a “fix it right the first time” approach. Look for more savings in the future. In this new year, we’ll continue to question whether we need to keep doing all the things we do; whether we need to change the way we do some of what we do; and whether we need to transfer some of the responsibility for some of what we do to someone else. For instance, just Tuesday of this week, representatives of a company interested in buying the city’s landfill were in town.

Here are some of the things we are going to do, or at least try to do, to move forward as best we can within the constraints we have.

1. I will tell you frankly that the city of Jackson – and this is probably true for all government – has all the employees we can afford. So, I've told appropriate staff to cap the number of employees at 670. We simply must do more with less, continue to cross-train our employees, and utilize them in the most appropriate way. We will look for efficiencies at all levels. It is true that our employees are our most valuable resource; they also represent by far the greatest cost of government and, because of the cost of health insurance and other factors, it is a cost that continues to grow at a pace faster than our growth in revenue.

I think it is important that you understand the realities of where we are. At the same time, I think your city employees must understand the realities of their employment. Now, I get annual reports at this time of the year. They express accomplishments and disappointments, and they express the wishes and wants of employees. Employees want more pay, less costly health insurance, and better retirement benefits. You want that too. I want that too. I want them to have it. But, at least in the foreseeable future, I believe the best our employees can hope for are minimal raises, hopefully in keeping with the cost of living, and hopefully not as meager as we give our teachers.

We must bear the burden when it rains in hopes of rewards when the sun shines.

2. We must find ways to spend less. You'll see us spend less this year on collection of delinquent taxes, eliminate much of our travel and training, and examine more closely the cost/benefit ratio of things we do. We want to stop those programs that serve very few people and make sure we are

doing what we continue to do absolutely as well as we can before expanding to other programs.

3. There are people in our community performing wonderful services, including many faith-based organizations. We want to better understand what they do, partner with them, and eliminate as much duplication as possible. In the same vein, I believe the folks at the Jackson Center who manage our public facilities need to partner with our schools, our churches and other entities in providing a venue for programs, meetings and entertainment.
4. Early on, the city avoided annexation, believing we needed to take care of what we had before extending our borders. Then, in 1994, we began an aggressive annexation policy that greatly expanded our borders, as well as our population. Frankly, we may have bitten off more than we could chew. At this time, very simply, our plate is full. Our manifest destiny is not northward expansion. We must in the immediate future resist annexation, concentrate on development within the existing city limits, and take a more serious look at impact fees.
5. Some of the capital projects that had been planned must be put on hold or killed completely. This includes the Campbell St. widening project and some additional road projects. In times of limited resources, which certainly are not adequate to do everything for everybody, our philosophy must be that we start from our inner city and extend in all directions, not that we start at the far reaches of our borders and move inward.

In 2005, we will be trying to put the property we have acquired to good use. I have come to believe that there is

very little progress without the opportunity for private profit. We're acquiring land and otherwise implementing our redevelopment plan in hopes of creating money-making opportunities, along east Chester, at the old Westwood Gardens site, and around the Farmers' Market.

I've gotten used to suspicions about whether those who profit are "friends of Farmer" taking advantage of inside deals unavailable to others. Here's what we're going to do about that.

We'll be issuing requests for proposals. Anyone can respond to them. We'll let you know what's available and give you a good idea about the kind of project we are interested in. For instance, we want something around the Farmers' Market appropriate for an entertainment district, something that will bring lots of people downtown, in keeping with the plans developed by the Urban Land Institute. We want residential housing at the Westwood Gardens site, something that will be complementary to Lambuth University and the LANA area. And, we would like a public/private partnership for a parking garage downtown. I'd like for the city to lease some parking space in a multi-story garage that would have space on the ground floor for retail and office.

The Lord has blessed Jackson and this entire area in such a way that sometimes I feel that we are always going to be ok, in spite of mayors, City Council members and County Commissioners. But, I don't believe He is going to make us all that we can be without a little help from the Fellowship of Believers.

I applaud the efforts of Jerry Gist to bring about county-wide strategic planning. I hope it succeeds, but I must

confess my confidence is limited by bruises that come from battering apathy and disunity that always erupt when calls go forth for all of us to come together in search of a common agenda.

We must be willing to continue to plan, to discuss, to work together, to compromise; to surrender “turf” in order to serve the citizens of this community in the best and most efficient way possible.

I have taken to telling folks with what I feel are great ideas that “I’ll be for you or against you, whichever helps you more.” That is my message to Mayor Gist.

I believe every time we reach out and every time we set a goal and move toward it, we revive that spirit within all of us, as individuals and as a city, that longs to do something truly good, to leave our mark, and to somehow make a difference. I believe Mayor Gist and those who are joining with him can help us move toward those common goals, and I thank them for being willing to try.

We lost three good and faithful public servants last year – Andy Bailey, Tom Davis and Delores Ballard.

Sometimes, perhaps when our employees brave the cold and ice of wintry nights in futile efforts to clear your streets and pave your paths, yet you slip and slide in road rage riots, you wonder what we mean by our motto, “At Your Service . . . and Beyond.”

None could question how far beyond Andy would go, nor could anyone who knew him doubt Tom’s desire to serve.

Thousands mourn the loss of Delores, yet we feel she has found her promised land.

Better than anyone I know, Delores expressed the kind of home I believe all us yearn for. Here's how she expressed it in her book, "Barbecue and Butterbeans."

"West Tennessee speaks with a voice you cannot hear without your heart. And to teach your heart to listen, you must go where West Tennesseans are, and learn what matters to them.

West Tennessee is home. Because home means the comfort of comradeship for an old veteran who still has nightmares of the war. Home means giving a biscuit to a stranger who says he's hungry without asking you first if you can trust him. Home means worshipping on Sundays and praying on the days in between and not being all that surprised when miracles happen, because we believe in things like that around here.

It feels good to lie here. And after more than 30 years, I'm still learning my way around the house and meeting the folks. And loving every day of it.

In this new year, I hope we can make this home of ours what it was for Delores and what it could be for those who have not yet learned to love it as she did.