

State of the City

Jan. 14, 2004

Ladies and gentlemen, it is always a pleasure and honor to deliver my annual State of the City address to this club.

I believe this is the first time 101.5 or any other media has broadcast my address, and I appreciate their doing that. It is a rare thing and a good thing when the public has a chance to hear what an elected official really says.

On the other hand, it is a little disconcerting and discomforting. I once got a note from someone which said, "I used to think you were really smart, until I heard you talk."

That's today's lame attempt at humor.

Now, each year, as a general rule and I think as you would expect, I have told you the State of the City is good, notwithstanding some challenges and problems.

We have just tabulated the results of a survey of city residents, and I think those results pretty much agree with my own conclusions. Most of our citizens feel good about the direction of their city and the quality of life in their neighborhood. At the same time, those citizens understand there are issues we must deal with.

For instance, in our survey, which was mailed with every tax notice and to which more than 1400 people responded, 67% of the respondents rated the quality of life in Jackson as above average, while only about 6% thought our quality of life was below average.

Similar responses were given to questions about how residents feel about their own neighborhood and about whether they live in a progressive city.

Almost all city services were judged to be of higher than average quality.

The survey indicated residents would like to see more police patrols in their neighborhoods, and they indicated that traffic control is one of their major concerns, but the survey tells us that most people feel the response time of both the police department and the fire department is extremely good.

For your information, people responding to the survey feel strongly that developers should pay impact fees and that the city should offer incentives to attract new industry; however, the survey indicates substantial resistance to rebuilding East Jackson and downtown.

We will be glad to share the full survey with anyone who would like it.

Now, today I don't want to go into minute detail about the state of the city. I will tell you we survived the temporary financial strain caused by the tornado without having to borrow money. And I will tell you that we have seen a substantial increase in our revenue, particularly the sales tax, since last June, but we are concerned that the increase might be a temporary result of the roofing and other rebuilding after the tornado.

I also want you to know how proud I felt being mayor of Jackson last year and seeing the extraordinary faith, courage and perseverance of the victims of the tornado, as well as the compassion of those not directly affected.

We are a city of many heroes, in both the public and the private arena.

I must say to you that, at least in recent history, there has never been for Jackson a year full of more challenges than 2003.

There has also never been a year full of more opportunity to accept challenges responsibly and consider the consequences of our actions not simply within the context of an election cycle, but within the context of the generations that will follow, and the potential of Jackson as a city.

We were hit last year with two devastating storms: one natural, one economic.

In both cases, we could no longer depend upon “the way we have always done it,” and we were obliged to search for new answers and untried solutions.

Our responses to both the tornado and budget constraints have only just begun.

From the tornado, we will rebuild, redevelop, and undertake projects to increase the economic vitality, physical conditions and outside perceptions of east Jackson and downtown.

In response to budget cuts, we will re-examine our services, re-evaluate our mission, and streamline and refine the way we do the business of the city.

In both cases we will be drawing upon the lessons of others, but try at the same time be open to new and untried, fresh ideas others have been unwilling to try.

In both cases some of the actions that are necessary to act responsibly will provoke debate and even discontent.

You will not like everything we try to do. For sure, many employees will not like everything we try to do. And, we will make many mistakes. But, that is simply the way it is unless one chooses to stay mired in the mud of mediocrity, and unless one continues to accept old answers to new questions.

Kingmen Brewster, the president of Yale University, once said, "There is a correlation between the creative and the screwball. So, we must suffer the screwball gladly." I ask for your indulgence to suffer this particular screwball for a little while.

It will come as no surprise to you that most politicians make decisions based upon what is going to keep them in office. It will also come as no surprise to you that department heads rarely make voluntary cuts in their own budgets without pressure.

However, this year, I intend to surprise a few people. In 2004, your mayor will be acting with only one thing in mind: what will serve the greater good. If cutting some city jobs will reduce expenditures and increase efficiency, the decision is not personal; it is the right thing to do.

You have heard me say before that we need to look at everything we do in terms of close, fix, or sell. In other words, should we stop doing something we are doing, can we do what we doing better, or should we turn over what we are doing to someone who can do it better.

Things have happened because of that philosophy. We have leased the golf course, reduced manpower, improved leaf pickup, repaired streets better and begun a reorganization that will give us a tighter, more horizontal management structure.

There is a limitless list of things we will be looking at in the coming months, again in the context of whether to close, fix, or sell.

You have already heard discussions about the airport and the possibility of privatizing our garages.

Soon, you may hear discussions about a number of other issues. For instance, should we sell and/or privatize the landfill, are two governments better than one, do we need to be in the jail business, the future of Oman Arena and Riverside Cemetery and how JEA's broadband will both permit and enhance many of our efforts.

Speaking of broadband, you will hear discussions of how that is going to dramatically help us improve the traffic control problems so many of you rightfully complain about.

And you will hear how broadband will give our police department the ability to control speed in a way no police department relying upon traditional methods could ever do. You will also hear how more than \$2.5 million obtained by our Washington lobbyist will allow us to put mobile data terminals in police cars to improve service in ways you will simply have to see to believe.

We will be guided by the knowledge that, as Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's used to say, "None of us is as smart as all of us." So, we will be looking for partners, people willing to help us chase our sometimes elusive dreams, others willing to share the screwball label in a quest for creativity.

We will ask City Council members to join us, County Commissioners to join us, the school board, the hospital, JEA and all necessary entities, as well as every citizen willing to help through town hall meetings or otherwise.

We will also be guided by the understanding that, as the economist John Maynard Keynes said, “The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping the old ones.”

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a new motto this year: “At Your Service . . . and Beyond.” I want you to see that motto manifested by our employees.

I want you to complain when you feel it is not manifested.

And I want you to accept our sincerity, to understand our mission is to serve you in the very best way we can.

I am excited about the future of this great city. Please join us as we set about trying to face challenges with confidence and seize opportunities with enthusiasm.