

State of the City Address - January, 2009

It is with a mixture of pleasure and nostalgia that I stand before you today to give this, my twentieth and final, State of the City speech to the joint Rock Island Noon Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs. During the entire time I have been privileged to serve as Mayor of Rock Island, your two service organizations have provided a forum for sharing thoughts about our accomplishments in the prior year and a perspective on the year to come. Hopefully this has been beneficial to you and - through an expanded audience - to the citizens of our city. It has certainly been gratifying to me, not so much to be asked to share my thoughts on our great city; but to experience the positive sense of concern and interest that you, as community leaders, have for the well being of our community.

As this will be my last opportunity to address you in this particular forum, I trust you will indulge me in spending perhaps a little less time talking about the future and more about things achieved and lessons learned over the 20 years.

However, not to depart completely from past practice, I'd like to begin by reviewing a few of the achievements and milestones marked in the year just ended, moving on to a few thoughts about the future, and then concluding with some thoughts on lessons learned during the last two decades in our city's and region's history.

On The Year Ended:

During this last year, Rock Island made progress in a number of important areas.

Along our major corridors, such as 18th Avenue and Blackhawk Road, we saw new facilities open, including the splendid new Hy-Vee store on 18th Avenue, the Virdi Eye Clinic on Blackhawk Road, as well as significant progress made in construction of the new Quad City Kidney Center on 17th Street and Eye Surgeons Associates Center also on Blackhawk Road.

In the downtown, conversion continues on the old McKesson Warehouse into 22 beautiful condominiums with splendid river views and about 20,000 square feet of first floor commercial space. This building, in addition to providing a great use of a vacant industrial facility adjacent to our Mississippi Riverfront, also incorporates a number of LEED "Green" design principles - including a really "cool" green roof.

The downtown will also witness early this year the demolition of the Armory and development of a wonderful new riverfront park. Representing an \$11 million total investment of downtown TIF funds, this new park will include a performance pavilion, fountain feature, river overlook, and playground, as well as ultimately docking facilities and ferryboat service between Rock Island and Davenport. It will be a sort of "Village Green", literally bringing the majestic Mississippi River from our backyard squarely into our downtown "front yard". This will also complement our strong and growing office, residential, and Arts and Entertainment District downtown.

The District itself saw revitalization this last year with new staff hired to coordinate downtown development. With a growing number of people who live downtown - especially young professionals - we're developing a growing neighborhood as well as business base, in this historic heart of our community.

Meanwhile, on the art front, things just keep getting better. With the opening of the newly renovated DeSoto Arts Building at 3rd Avenue and 24th Street we've added the Quad City Woodturners and DeSoto Potters to our downtown arts scene. They join Quad City Arts, Quad City Ballet, Mid-Coast Arts, Liquid Fire Glass Blowing Studio, and the new DuMarche on 3rd artist loft condominiums. These attractions together make downtown Rock Island the arts center of the region. Our strong entertainment base promises to combine with the Arts to provide a magnet to attract ever more young people to our community as visitors, residents, and business people.

Of course, the largest single development project during this last year – and, in fact, in Rock Island's long history – opened in December, 2008. The magnificent new Jumer's Casino and Hotel Resort features 42,000 square feet of Las Vegas quality gaming space, a 205 room hotel, 4 restaurants, a health spa, and a 7,500 square foot convention and banquet facility - all situated on the edge of a 72 acre lake. We expect this \$151 million dollar project will significantly increase our gaming revenue, our property tax base, and our hotel / motel and sales tax revenues. In addition it will generate much needed revenue for the State of Illinois and serve as a catalyst for additional development in our Southwest area. Finally, the new Jumer's resort frees up our Mississippi riverfront to allow for the development of Armory Park. We are grateful to the Jumer's organization for sticking with the City through good times and bad over the last 16 years, to end up with this extremely positive project that will serve our community well while providing a major new tourist draw for our entire region.

Last year also saw continued progress in another area of priority to our City Council and me; namely the Greening of our community. We are all conscious of the problems posed by our nation's excessive dependence on foreign oil, the volatility of fuel prices, and the challenge of global warming and resource depletion threatening the well being of our children. Starting on the local level, Rock Island has sought to lead by example in addressing those challenges. During this last year, we purchased and upgraded the Sear's Hydropower Plant on the Rock River, to provide 55% of the City estimated future fuel needs. This ranks us at the top of America's cities in use of non-polluting energy. We also purchased a fleet of over 20 hybrid vehicles for the City fleet and established a "Green Team" in City Hall to explore new ways to make our building code, City facilities, and purchasing processes more environmentally responsible. The savings in long term fuel costs as well as benefits to our environment, amply justify these initiatives and reflect well on our City Council and staff for pursuing this priority. They also earned us statewide recognition as Lt. Governor Quinn awarded us our second State Environmental Hero Award for our efforts.

Last year we saw some wonderful developments with long time Rock Island businesses, including the 16,000 square foot expansion of KJWW Engineering. Not only is this a beautiful new addition to KJWW's headquarters, but it was built in accordance with LEED environmental standards, thereby providing an energy-efficient model for clients worldwide to see how Green principles can be incorporated in a very attractive and functional office setting.

Rock Island has also continued, in these troubled times, to create home ownership opportunities for people who live in our area. The Economic Growth Corporation has now assisted over 410 people with becoming homeowners. A range of creative programs includes Live-Work Rock Island, in which Rock Island employers help pay closing costs for folks who work in Rock Island and buy homes here. Habitat for Humanity has continued its great humanitarian work, by filling all seven lots the City donated in Habitat Park with first time homeowners. We also continue to work with the Housing Authority and private developers to expand housing opportunities in Rock Island. As a result, and unlike many other parts of the country, our property values have remained stable and actually gone up in Rock Island.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the wonderful affirmation that our residents expressed early last year by endorsing, with an overwhelming 65% majority, a bond referendum to allow the Rock Island - Milan Schools to build the first new school in the City in over 35 years and to renovate all our older grade schools to 21st Century standards. The school district has a tradition of award-winning excellence, which will be well served by this vote of confidence. Both our public and private schools in Rock Island give excellent educational opportunities, from pre-school Head Start Programs, to graduate level courses at the Quad City Graduate Center on Augie's Campus.

This educational base, coupled with our vibrant Arts and Entertainment District downtown, our great diversity of neighborhoods, and a cultural range that extends from people of multiple faiths to various ethnic backgrounds, truly makes Rock Island the most cosmopolitan of the Quad Cities. It is a great place to live, work, and raise a family.

On The Future:

As mentioned at the outset, my comments on the future will be somewhat abbreviated today, given the fact that much of what the future holds in store will be in the hands of others to decide.

However, I would like to comment briefly on the current economic and political situation as it relates to our future.

Because the Midwest tends to be a little less "exuberant" than our neighbors on the east and west coasts, we aren't seeing the same kinds of dramatic drops in real estate values that afflict other parts of the country.

However, the effects of the national recession on business expansion, consumer spending, and availability of credit, all give us cause for concern. With relatively flat or declining revenues from income, sales, and replacement taxes, as well as increases in costs of government caused by unfunded mandates and rises in costs of materials and services, the days ahead will be challenging. With new leadership in Washington less hostile to Federal economic help to local and state economies, we're hopeful that there will be infrastructure dollars coming our way at a far greater rate. This should create better opportunities for all of us. Our advance planning in the area of Green development should tie in well with new federal financial initiatives, putting us ahead of the curve in an area President-Elect Obama has targeted as a high priority of his new administration.

Even the debacle of our Governor's recent arrest may prove ultimately beneficial. It may lead to removal of a player at the state level who has been largely an obstacle to meaningful forward movement over the last half decade.

However, all these changes underscore the need to act regionally, both to attract new businesses and to work effectively with State and Federal governments, to see that our area's interests are well served and protected in the days to come.

Lessons of the Last Two Decades:

And this leads to my final area of comment: sharing a few thoughts on lessons learned over the last 28 years.

Since I've had the opportunity to study in one of the best schools of all – the School of Experience – several things have become apparent to me over the years:

1. That although each of our Quad City communities has their own unique strengths and resources, we all gain when we work together. There are always questions about whether any given city gets its fair share, but we all benefit when we focus on the things which unite rather than divide us. We're heard better in Washington, Springfield, or with prospective industries when we speak as a community of 400,000 rather than as separate communities of 20, 40, or 90 thousand people. Areawide organizations such as Bi-State Regional Commission, Quad City Development Group, The Rock Island Arsenal Task Force, Quad City Graduate Center, and Quad City Arts cannot exist without the cooperation and participation of all of us; and each in turn has done much over the years to attract new jobs, industries, and a better quality of life to our region.

This doesn't deny that differences will occur. Or that these area-wide organizations must constantly consider reasonable distribution of benefits throughout the region. Such measures are always important to keeping all stakeholders engaged and satisfied.

But, regional cooperation is critical to our future success.

2. That we must constantly focus and build on our strengths. Rock Island's proactive, well-run government; its rich culture and history; its compact downtown; its strong civic spirit and diverse economy, all favor our future. We have challenges as well, including aging infrastructure and neighborhoods. But we do well always to focus on our positives in our marketing and development efforts to build on these considerable strengths. Patience, persistence, and a positive outlook will always bear the best fruit.
3. That public-private partnerships are essential to development. I have always been a strong believer in the ability of government to serve as a catalyst for positive change. Hopefully, during my term in office we've demonstrated this with some of the things we've initiated – such as the Commercial Industrial Revolving Loan Fund set up 25 years ago, which has helped create or retain over 3,900 jobs and leveraged over \$80 million in new investments in Rock Island. Or Renaissance Rock Island with its various parts, that has led the way in downtown revitalization and promoting homeownership opportunities.

By the same token, the private sector has become very dependent upon public sector participation to make things happen. There aren't many major developments within the Quad City region in the last 20 years that haven't had significant public sector support - whether by way of tax increment financing, revolving loan funds, or other incentives to make a deal work.

But like any partnership, both partners are important. The government cannot do it alone. We may be able to provide incentives, favorable zoning or other provisions, even tax rebates to help desired outcomes come to pass. But without active and major private sector initiatives, things don't really move forward.

Because of our geography and unique demographics, Rock Island has more of a challenge in generating private sector investment than some of our neighboring communities. That has prompted City Hall in Rock Island to be perhaps more consistently forward-leaning than others in our region.

But this is not, and cannot be enough without significant and enhanced private sector initiatives in the years to come. This is what it will take for the kind of positive momentum we all desire, to yield our community's even better days in the years ahead.

4. That answers for the future can often be found in the past. As we faced the national economic meltdown this last year, parallels were drawn to the 1930s and the Great Depression. We have found many leaders invoking the experience of Franklin Roosevelt during those dark days as a model for innovation and experimentation. Secretary of Treasury Paulson has exemplified

this in repeated efforts to tweak the bailout funds to better respond to the credit crisis and sagging stock market.

On the local level, looking to the past for the future often also makes good sense. So we find ourselves talking about passenger rail service as an alternative to driving to and from Chicago. We find ourselves utilizing hydropower in place of natural gas, drawing an interesting parallel to what brought John Deere and Fredrick Weyerhauser to the area over 150 years ago. We find downtowns once again becoming urban centers, not only for offices and businesses; but for art, entertainment, and residential populations. Volatile gas prices are likely to make in-fill housing and moving back into the city more attractive. The concept of neighborhoods, where people live closer together and share common green space, are also gaining appeal again, recreating something of America's past.

Such historical awareness may help us respond to a whole new range of 21st century problems - from rising gas prices, to loss of farmland, to increasing desire to connect with our neighbors. The "past is truly prelude"; and we may shorten our learning curve if we take seriously lessons of the past to build our future.

5. And this brings me to the final lesson that I have seen reinforced over the last 20-plus years: The value of civic engagement.

It has been popular during the last several decades in America to argue that government is bad, greed is good, taxes are a dirty word, and if we all just take care of ourselves, society will be fine.

Now, as a nation, we have come to realize, especially in recent months, that we truly do depend on one another, upon responsible and engaged government, and upon the role of each citizen to do his or her part to build a stronger community. Whatever our gifts - whether as teachers or preachers, plumbers or mechanics, as orators or those who do the deeds that need to be done -we all have gifts that are best measured, not by what we do for ourselves, but what we do for one another. Winston Churchill aptly observed that "we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give".

Rock Island has a wonderful tradition of civic engagement. We have, for many years, had more boards and commissions - with opportunities for citizen service - than any of our neighboring communities. We have always had a can do attitude in the face of economic reversals, such as the plant closings in the 1980s. This has allowed us not to curl up in a ball or sulk when things go wrong. Instead we figure out how we can take what we have and make it better.

With confidence in the presence of this remarkable quality in Rock Island, as well as in our strong and talented team of people in the public and private sector willing to lend a

hand, and new Federal and State leadership, I have confidence that the better days of our community still lie ahead.

So, in closing, I want to thank all of you for your support, confidence, and trust over these many years. And I want to express to you my firm belief, in the words of a great American President, that “the only limitation on our realization of the future, is our doubt in the present. Let us move forward with a strong and active faith”.

Thank you.

Mayor Mark W. Schwiebert
City of Rock Island
January, 2009