

STATE of the CITY
by Hon. Paul A. Dyster, Mayor
January 27, 2011

City Council members and other government officials, residents, members of the business community, and community activists: Good evening, and welcome.

Just a few weeks ago, a senseless shooting in Arizona grabbed our nation's attention. Law-abiding citizens, people like you and me, went to their local supermarket to discuss the issues of the day with their congresswoman. It was an exercise in democracy - a healthy and civil exchange of ideas between voters and their elected representative. But that quintessential American scene ended horribly. Six lives were lost, and Congresswoman Gabby Giffords is now courageously fighting back from a gunshot wound to the head.

Government isn't easy, especially these days. Budgets are tight. Jobs are scarce. Tough decisions have to be made. It's only right that we should argue passionately about the issues. That's democracy at work. But we must never let these disagreements become bitter or personal, and we certainly have to renounce violence and hatred in our political discourse.

I'm not suggesting a direct link between the shooting in Tucson and the toxic political debate in our country. But the events of the past few weeks do present a teachable moment. We can tone down the rhetoric. More important, we can stop questioning each other's motives and start working together to solve the pressing problems of our time.

Congresswoman Giffords was talking about civility in politics long before her shooting started a national conversation about it. In fact, here's what she told her constituents the night she was elected to the House of Representatives in 2006:

"There are some lines I just won't cross. But there is one line I will never be afraid to cross. I will always extend my hand across the aisle to do what's right for the American people, to build consensus, and to get the job done."

Extending our hands. Doing what's right. Getting the job done. That's a platform we can all believe in. And that's what we have to keep doing here in Niagara Falls. That's how we can celebrate the work of Congresswoman Giffords, even as we pray for her full recovery. In a city where rough-and-tumble politics and petty bickering have often held us back, we have to set aside our grudges and focus on the tasks ahead.

That's why I was proud to join my fellow members of the United States Conference of Mayors last week in signing the Civility Accord. In this document, the mayors of America's cities pledged to act with respect, humility and kindness, and we promised to avoid political rhetoric that humiliates, belittles or questions the patriotism of those whose opinions are different from ours.

I think this document is so important that I've brought it home to Niagara Falls. I'm putting it at the front of the room, and I hope all of you will sign it after tonight's speech.

Why is civility so important?

Again, I want to quote Congresswoman Giffords. In her 2006 election campaign, she became known for three simple words that were the centerpiece of her message: "Change can't wait." Congresswoman Giffords recognized that, in a country struggling to turn the corner, we can't afford to let change get derailed by power struggles. Constant conflict only diverts us from the change that we seek - and change can't wait.

My administration has fought aggressively to change the way our city does business. Tonight, I want to share some of our successes and look ahead to the challenges awaiting us in the future. This annual gathering, more than just a political ritual, is a chance for us to do some soul-searching, to take an honest look at the city we call home.

There may be no better metaphor for the state of our city than the physical and spiritual home of our government, City Hall. It's "the people's house." This past October, the steps to City Hall reopened after a year of restoration and reconstruction. Those crumbling stairs were symbolic of a City Hall that was desperately in need of reform. Years of backbiting, corruption, power struggles and poor decisions left our city financially and spiritually broken. We, the people, lost our faith in city government and those who led it. Some even began to doubt whether the city itself was beyond repair.

But just as we've fixed City Hall on the outside, we've been working to fix it on the inside. Our government is now scandal-free, and as long as I'm mayor, we will continue to root out greed and corruption wherever we find it--but especially in "the people's house." You can count on it.

We're making progress in fixing our roads, restoring our neighborhoods and rebuilding our shattered economy. Old and intractable problems are giving way to new and creative solutions. Our finances are strong. The constant warfare and never-ending lawsuits of previous administrations are over. Finally, we have something to believe in.

And for that, I want to thank my partners on the City Council. Sometimes we disagree, and sometimes we debate forcefully, but in the end we keep working together for a better Niagara Falls. I also want to thank City Administrator Donna Owens and our outstanding department heads for their hard work and achievement.

I especially want to thank our city workforce - the people who plow the streets, patch the potholes, put out the bids, answer the phones, maintain the parks, combat the criminals and fight the fires. They are the unsung heroes and heroines of our community, and they did some great work in 2010.

I also want to acknowledge the other elected officials who are here, and I want to extend my congratulations to our new State Senator, Mark Grisanti, and our new State Assemblymember, John Ceretto. I am looking forward to working with both of them for a stronger Niagara Falls. In a special way, I'm looking forward to the honest and capable leadership of a public servant whose gifts are truly needed in New York State: our new Governor, Andrew Cuomo. Rest

assured, we have had, have now, and will continue to have a strong friend and ally in the Governor's office

Let me also thank those who keep the faith by remaining in our city as residents and business owners, those who volunteer their time on city boards and committees, and those who improve our neighborhoods through block clubs, church groups and other civic activities. The accomplishments that I will detail tonight truly belong to all of you, because city government belongs to you. We couldn't do it without you.

That's the reason for the "Mayor's Night In," when I invite you to City Hall after business hours to share your ideas and suggestions with me. In spite of the tragic events in Tuscon, I will continue those gatherings this year, and I'll be holding some of them in LaSalle for the convenience of those residents who live farthest from City Hall.

And when I say that city government belongs to you, I mean all of you. In the old days, our city government didn't always respect the human rights of African-American employees and residents. With the hiring of our new Equal Opportunity Officer, Ruby Pulliam, and with the corrective action plan we've adopted as part of our settlement with the New York State Attorney General's office, we're putting our troubled past behind us and embracing the truth that everyone has something to offer in building a better city. I said last year that we would not tolerate discrimination, harassment or retaliation in our City; we put teeth into that policy, and we're going to make it stick.

As we look to increase the diversity of our workforce, we're also investing in the dedicated employees who already work for us. This year, through our Human Resources Office, we're finally adopting a formal performance evaluation system for city employees. For the first time, we've set standards for every single position in city government, and we'll use those standards to help our employees be the very best they can be.

I also want our city website to be a better and more engaging source of information. We've taken another step by working with a private company to create a series of online videos that tell the world about the power of Niagara Falls. These videos were paid for by advertising, at no cost to the taxpayer. Here's just one example.

We look pretty good, don't we?

We're building a government that you can be proud of. An honest, capable city government is the first building block toward a better local economy. Developers want to invest in communities that act responsibly and efficiently.

2010 will forever be remembered as the year when we broke the logjam on projects that once seemed to be "bridges to nowhere." In 1986, I was still working in Washington, D.C. Our new city historian, Chris Stoianoff, was probably in 7th grade. A gallon of gas cost 89 cents, and the Cold War was still icy. That's how long ago this community started talking about moving its Amtrak station from Lockport Road to the foot of Main Street.

A quarter of a century later, we have the money in hand, and thanks to the hard work of Senior Planner Tom DeSantis, grant writer Sherry Shepherd-Corulli, and a little help from our friends Senator Chuck Schumer, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and our all-star Congresswoman Louise Slaughter, we competed for and won the largest TIGER II grant in New York State, and yes, believe it or not, we're building that beautiful new train station, and it's going to open by 2013.

Did you ever think you'd see the day?

We get things done in Niagara Falls.

For decades, we lamented the state of our airport. We argued about who was at fault. We even talked about giving it away to a foreign company.

But now, with dedicated casino funding and with strong leadership from the NFTA, our airport is truly taking off, with new flights being added all the time. Just earlier today, we saw the initiation by Spirit Airlines of non-stop service to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, with connections from there throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. A second jetway is being installed to accommodate the increased traffic.

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In the year 2000, we were just realizing that the world wouldn't end on Y2K. September 11 was just another date to us back then. The dot-com bubble hadn't burst yet. 2000 was the year when the Rainbow Centre closed for good. A decade later, a minor miracle occurred. Baltimore developer David Cordish offered his mall lease as a gift, and the City worked with USA Niagara Development Corporation, Empire State Development, the Niagara County Legislature, and Niagara County Community College to jump-start the Culinary Institute.

Finally, we'll have the energy and youthful enthusiasm of college students back in downtown Niagara Falls, the Rainbow Centre will be revitalized, and we'll have a whole new attraction for visitors and residents alike. We said we were going to break the logjam on the Rainbow Mall, and we did what we said we were going to do.

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I'm sure many of you are wondering what we're going to do with the rest of the mall. We'll be working with our partners at USA Niagara to aggressively market the mall. We're fast-tracking the asbestos abatement, remediation and internal demolition so we can fill the mall with profitable businesses.

At the same time, we're working with USA Niagara to issue a request for proposals for new development on the adjoining lot that was once home to the Flight of Angels balloon ride. Between the mall and the balloon parcel, we will have more than 500,000 square feet of new

development potential to help us remake our downtown, and that's exactly what we're going to do. Please join me in thanking Chris Schoepflin and the staff of USA Niagara Development Corporation for their outstanding service to our community.

Old Falls Street has reopened, with concerts and festivals giving our city a whole new feel. Soon, we'll be working to attract vendors to the area so our tourists will have more places to shop. And we have some very interesting plans to bring life to the area even during the normally-quiet winter months. We're already rocking the street on New Year's Eve. How many of you were there for our second annual Guitar Drop?

Through our ongoing partnerships with the Hard Rock Cafe and Niagara Falls Bluesfest, we're bringing nationally known musical acts to our downtown tourist area, giving a boost to our hotels, restaurants and bars. In 2010, we had everything from the Buffalo Philharmonic playing Pink Floyd to 97-year old Blues legend Pinetop Perkins to real Alpine horns for Oktoberfest. If you couldn't find something you liked, you weren't trying very hard.

Our Third Street entertainment district is buzzing with more and more private investment and new retail establishments, and we're not done yet. With more parking on the way, and with new businesses springing up to join the hip places already there, Third Street will be at a whole new level in 2011.

The Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Commission has finally begun work on a management plan for our own National Heritage Area. And 2010 brought the dedication of our newest state park, Heritage Park at the gateway to the Falls, where we are finally honoring the memory of City father and park pioneer Thomas Welch.

Farther up river, with assistance from the City, the developers of LaSalle Hospitality are almost finished resurrecting the Inn on the River on Buffalo Avenue. Next up is the vacant Fallside Hotel and Banquet Center near Goat Island. This is all part of our strategy to provide more high-quality hotel rooms for our growing tourism industry.

The Niagara Falls Urban Renewal Agency is conducting a study of the neighborhood near the Seneca Niagara Casino, north of Niagara Street. That study is the first step in attracting developers to the neighborhood, and building the kind of market-rate housing in the south end that casino employees and other downtown workers need and want.

Meanwhile, we're racing to the head of the line to create the jobs of the future. While other cities have seen more of their factories shuttered, we're reopening our plants. We're not just creating new jobs, we're creating new industries.

Globe Specialty Metals and Ashland Advanced Materials have already created more than 150 good jobs in our city. Hopefully soon they will be joined by Green Tire Systems across College Avenue. Derelict factories that have been neighborhood eyesores for years are finally being torn down, and a former brownfield will soon give way to a tire recycling center, creating up to 50 new jobs. That's what I call progress, and there are now announcements of new green industries and new green industry jobs still to come.

Small businesses are the backbone of our city. That's why our NFC Development Corporation awarded \$1.1 million in loans and grants for restaurants, retail establishments and other small businesses last year. And our Entrepreneurial School is helping some of our best and brightest citizens to make the leap into business ownership. Last year, we graduated our largest class ever: 52 people who will be the business owners of the future. Thank you to all the staff in Economic Development for the great work you're doing.

We also recognize that the owner of the next great Niagara Falls business may now be living in Charlotte or Atlanta. That's why my administration is proud to work with the volunteers of Niagara Rises to offer the annual Niagara Homecoming event, which encourages former residents to return home and take advantage of the great things happening here in Niagara Falls. Here's my message to our expatriates: Niagara Falls is on the move, and we hope you'll make the move back home.

As we work to revitalize our economy, we know that the best decisions are informed decisions. In a world driven by knowledge, where perceptions are formed at the speed of a keystroke, we need sound market research to be able to attract businesses and investors to our city.

So we're working with USA Niagara on a research study of the best business development opportunities for potential investors. The final reports are still a month away, but I'm pleased to report that the hard numbers are bearing out what we all sense instinctively: Niagara Falls has great opportunities for new hotel rooms, retail, entertainment, and new housing downtown. Until now, we haven't had the data to back up our hunches. In just a few weeks, we finally will.

People want to live and do business in places with a strong quality of life. So we're making smart investments to ensure that Niagara Falls is a great place to live and work.

For too long, we've heard that our kids had nothing to do and nowhere to go. So, for the third year in a row, we've increased the hours at our city pools and night gyms. In 2010, we built on the progress we made at Nor-Loc Park, South Junior Park, the Stephenson Avenue Hockey Pad, and the outdoor skating rink at Deveaux Woods. The new Legends Basketball Courts on Portage Road are another sign of our commitment to offer world-class recreational opportunities for our children. If we want them to stay, we have to give them something to do, so we're going to program some great tournaments and other events at the new facility.

Kids and adults alike will be thrilled with the improvements we're making to the Hyde Park Ice Pavilion. This facility has been crumbling before our eyes. Our community deserves better, and so we're doing a multi-phase project to upgrade the Ice Pavilion. Just yesterday, we celebrated the completion of over a million dollars in energy efficiency improvements--part of over \$3 million in improvements done already--that will reduce our annual energy costs by \$86,000. I even got to drive the new electric Zamboni machine! Next up on our "greening" list: solar panels on the roof of the DPW garage; watch for a ribbon-cutting soon.

Holiday Lights of Niagara at Hyde Park was bigger, brighter and more energy efficient than last year, thanks to our partnership with the United Way of Greater Niagara and the fantastic volunteer efforts of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 237. And the Holley

Trolley also had a great year; I'll never forget the hundreds of people who greeted us along the way, especially the enthusiastic welcome at the constantly-improving Gill Creek Park.

Hyde Park will also soon be the home of the Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial. This project, which we've supported with a \$500,000 investment, will honor the men and women who have sacrificed for our freedom and safety. I want to personally thank the members of the Niagara Falls Veterans Memorial Commission for driving this great project, and all those private citizens who have made donations to make it happen. We can't wait to see the results of your work.

We're also making repairs to the LaSalle Senior Citizens Center and both branches of the Niagara Falls Public Library, which are vital resources for city residents. Within the last few days, I signed the contract to redo the windows at the LaSalle Library, and there are more improvements to come.

Of course, we know that quality of life goes beyond recreational activities. It also has to do with streets and housing and clean neighborhoods. We're fighting hard on all of those fronts, and we've made a huge difference.

We broke our own in-house paving record in 2010 by repaving 40 streets.

We're used to measuring our progress in paving by counting how many streets get paved, or how many square feet of roadway we resurfaced. We've done a phenomenal job by that standard. We paved 40 streets. But dig a little deeper.

How many square yards of paving did we do if you include not just the surface layer but the underlying pavement that gives the street integrity and strength? In 2008, we did just under 155,000 square yards; in 2009, about 218,000 square yards. I'm happy to report that in 2010, we put down a total of just under 300,000 square yards of binder and topcoat combined. That's basically double what we put down in 2008.

Since we dug deeper when we fixed those roads, the repairs will last longer and we used the famous Pothole Killer and our highly effective Zipper Machine to make countless other streets more drivable, including the upper end of Buffalo Avenue. Thank you, Dave Kinney and the Public Works team.

We also took on larger reconstruction projects, completely rebuilding 72nd Street and starting full reconstruction of 10th Street and Cedar Avenue. After a slow start while we figured out how to deal with radioactive slag under the roadbed, we're finally making progress on Lewiston Road. It's going slower than we had hoped, but hey, we waited 40 years to get this job started. This year we'll also tackle the total reconstruction of 97th Street. Pothole Lou, are you out there in the audience?

This evening I am pleased to announce that, by St. Patrick's Day, we will be accepting bids on the reconstruction of one of the most important gateways to LaSalle and one of the worst remaining streets in the City. In 2010, we resurfaced part of Buffalo Avenue from Veterans Drive heading west just past 24th Street. And yes, in 2011 we are going to fully reconstruct

Buffalo Avenue from Veterans Drive to the I-190. Thanks to Tom Radomski and the staff in Engineering.

Last year, we spent \$1.4 million to demolish 67 buildings that were dragging down our neighborhoods.

We fulfilled more than 3,000 requests for tree trimming and removal. We planted 356 new trees, a 47 percent increase over 2009, using grant money we got from the Federal stimulus program.

And this year, if Council approves, we're going to replace the lighting on Pine Avenue, saving energy and making sure pedestrians are safe in that vital business district.

Our ZOOM team continued to make great progress in 2010. We use citizen complaints to identify hotspots. Then we send in a unique mix of Police, Fire, Code Enforcement and Public Works to dig in and make it better. The ZOOM team goes block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, looking for code violations, overgrown grass, fire hazards and illegal activity. After we cite violators, we follow up to make sure they're taking care of business. If we have to clean it up ourselves, we bill the owner for the work. And we're not cheap. And when property owners still don't take responsibility, we haul them into City Court.

That's common sense. That's accountability. That's ZOOM. Last year alone, our ZOOM team cited 348 properties and cleaned up 185 of them. And through our Clean Neighborhood Program, we improved another 639 properties.

You've heard a lot about our reorganization of the Department of Code Enforcement. In 2010, our code enforcement officers conducted 9,438 inspections - that's an increase of 38 percent from the previous year. Let's hear it for Dennis Virtuoso and the Code Enforcement team.

And make no mistake, our Police Department is doing an unbelievable job responding to the challenges they face. Everybody knows that when the economy goes down, crime goes up. That's been true here in Niagara Falls. But our Police Department is fighting back. The total number of crimes committed in our city went up about 3.5 percent last year. But get this: arrests went up 61 percent. Property crimes increased 5.3 percent last year, but arrests for those crimes jumped by 56.6 percent. Violent crimes actually went down by 2.6 percent last year, and arrests still went up 69 percent. Our cops are finding the bad guys and making sure they pay for the crimes they commit.

The increase in arrests has a lot to do with our Roving Anti-Crime Unit and our three police substations, which allow us to take the fight right to the streets. We're working closely with other law enforcement agencies to address gang violence. And in 2010, we started using surveillance cameras in key locations as another tool against criminals. We're looking for more funding this year so we can install even more cameras in more high-crime locations. I echo the words of our U.S. Attorney, William Hochul: "The beginning of the end of street violence in the Falls has begun."

But there's more. Even if you've been away from your TV or radio all day long, you've probably heard something by now about the sensational story of the arrest of 14 people,

including a prominent local physician known on the street as “Doctor Feel Good,” as part of Operation “Whatever-U-Want,” a joint investigation involving Federal, State, and County law enforcement and yes, our own Niagara Falls Police Department.

This one doctor stands accused of writing more prescriptions for prescription painkillers than all 157 other physicians in the City of Niagara Falls combined. In 2009, he was the number two prescriber of controlled substances in all of New York State. The Medicaid cost for these drugs from January 2008 to December 2010 was over \$2.8 million. That’s money that was coming out of your pockets, ladies and gentlemen. You wonder why Medicaid costs are going through the roof? Here in Niagara Falls, we’re fighting back against greed and corruption. Ladies and gentlemen of the Niagara Falls Police Department and other law enforcement agencies, Chief Chella, Sheriff Voutour—I think you deserve a standing ovation for what you accomplished on behalf of all the honest citizens of Niagara Falls.

Our Fire Department, now under the leadership of Chief Roger Melchior, hit a huge milestone last year. In 2010, the Fire Department responded to more than 6,000 calls for the first time in recorded history: 6,234 to be exact. The Department performed 1,600 commercial inspections and also provided fire safety education to more than 4,700 adults and 3,200 children (that latter number is particularly meaningful to us this year, because we lost a young man in a fatal fire on 19th Street). Most of us will never know what it means to run toward a fire to protect people we’ve never met. Let’s thank Chief Melchior and our firefighters for their bravery.

Yes, we’re taking back our neighborhoods. We couldn’t do it without our block clubs. At the recent Block Club Council retreat, Roger Spurback said, “I see sunlight. I see neighbors and neighborhoods recovering from the onslaught of gangs and drugs, blight and decline.”

I’ll tell you what I see, Roger. I see community activists taking a stand and insisting on safe, solid neighborhoods for themselves and their children and their grandchildren. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things to make their City better. In our block clubs, I see everything that’s right about Niagara Falls. Thank you to all of our block club members for standing your ground and working for a better life in our city.

It’s not often that we get to reinvent an entire neighborhood. But thanks to the Niagara Falls Housing Authority, Center Court is being reborn as the HOPE VI community. Stephanie Cowart, the executive director of the Housing Authority, is fond of saying that Center Court is a “beloved community.” Stephanie, let me say that you are beloved by our community for your leadership and tenacity. We’re very happy that you’re back on the job, and we’re praying for your continued recovery and good health.

Speaking of housing, our Department of Community Development continues to help our most vulnerable citizens through its federally funded Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program. Since October 2009, we’ve provided 512 people in 211 households with rental assistance, utility payments, security and utility deposits and moving costs. And our Niagara Falls Homeownership Center helped 23 first-time home buyers last year with closing cost grants to buy homes in the city. That’s 23 homes still occupied. That’s 23 dreams come true. Thank you to Bob Antonucci and our Community Development staff.

The health of our community matters, too. That's why the Mayor's Task Force on Health Care is working on a plan to improve our community's health by promoting more use of Preventive and primary care. And I'm proud to note that 2010 brought significant investments from the healthcare sector, including the newly expanded Mount St. Mary's Neighborhood Health Center on 9th Street, the new Federally Qualified Health Center at the Hamilton B. Mizer Clinic on 10th Street, and Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center's new Behavioral Health and Wellness Center.

Our city is turning the corner, and that process costs money. We were able to go without a property tax increase for several years, but we faced some serious challenges as we prepared this year's budget. Promised state aid was cut. Pension and health insurance costs skyrocketed. Sales tax revenues declined because of the economy. We were able to generate more than \$10 million in savings through 2009 and 2010, and we will run the City in 2011 for just \$100,000 more than it cost us in 2007; given the way the price of everything goes up each year, that's quite an accomplishment. But it wasn't enough to prevent a modest tax increase. All of our neighboring towns and cities had to do the same. But our fund balance and our bond rating are strong, and I can assure you that our city is standing on solid financial ground. We are constantly looking for ways to do more with less, and we are not afraid to toss aside things that aren't working and replace them with things that are. Our Finance Department, led by Controller Maria Brown, has planned carefully to keep our finances on track, and I thank the Finance staff for those efforts.

I also want to thank the unsung departments of city government that have worked diligently behind the scenes to make all of these accomplishments possible. That includes Corporation Counsel Craig Johnson and the attorneys and staff of the Law Department (what a great job they did unraveling the complex agreements that had tied up the Rainbow Mall), Dean Spring and the Purchasing Department, John Cahill and the Management Information Services Department, Joyce Mardon-Serianni and the Human Resources Department, and Carol Antonucci and the staff of the City Clerk's office. You may not receive much of the glory, but you know and I know that your work is important and appreciated.

That's a look at where we've been and what we've done. I'm proud of it, and I hope you are, too. But I would be remiss if I didn't talk about where we need to go and what we still need to accomplish. Many challenges remain as we reach for new prosperity in the City of Niagara Falls.

First of all, we can't rest on our laurels. We've made a lot of progress on economic development, neighborhood improvement and public safety, but there's still more to do.

We need more paving, more demolitions, more activities for our young people. We need to find new and innovative ways to fight crime and gang violence. We need to create new housing, especially in the south end.

We need to see the Culinary Institute through to completion. We need to make sure that the train station leads to the redevelopment of north Main Street, and we need to make sure the Underground Railroad heritage area comes to life.

We need to resolve the long-simmering dispute over the future of the Robert Moses Parkway. It won't be easy to find consensus, but once the state scoping process is complete, we have to find both short-term and long-term solutions.

We also need to work with the New York Power Authority, as I have been for nearly two years, to create an economic development fund that allows us to pursue big projects that will attract private investment.

Let me ask you this: do you think our top priority should be to create more jobs?

If that's true, then we need an economic development director in the City of Niagara Falls. The past is past, and there's no point in continuing last year's arguments. It's time to look ahead. Let's be clear: this position is funded through casino revenue. Cutting the job provides absolutely no savings to the taxpayer. But it does put another obstacle in our way. Later this year, I will ask the City Council to restore full funding for that position so we can get about the business of rebuilding our economy. I hope the Council will cooperate with me to put economic development at the top of our agenda.

Together, we're building an exciting city, a fun city, a vibrant city that will make us proud. That's happening because we have a city government that works. We're making things happen. We're taking control of our destiny. The state of our city is hopeful.

But there's a lot more to do, and the first step to meeting our challenges is to believe that we can.

Too often we've accepted the idea that we can't do any better. We've given in to the philosophy that our city is doomed to keep reliving the failures of the past. Every so often, we need to be reminded that Niagara Falls is every bit as talented, capable and blessed as any other community.

Most recently, that reminder has come in the form of a 24-year-old named James Starks. In case you're one of the three people left in Niagara Falls who haven't heard of James yet, let me fill you in. He was a standout football player for the University at Buffalo, and before that he was a three-year captain of the Niagara Falls High School Wolverines. James just made his NFL debut on December 5th as a running back for the Green Bay Packers. And as of this past Sunday, he's going to the Super Bowl - not as a backbencher, but as a major catalyst of his team's success.

When he was injured and missed his senior season at UB, James could have lowered his sights. He could have said, "I'm just from Niagara Falls, and kids from Niagara Falls don't go to the Super Bowl." But instead, he aimed for the stars. He put his heart and soul into being the best he could be. And he just keeps driving toward that end zone.

We've made it to the end zone a few times in the past three years, but we can't stop now. We've got a lot of ground still to cover.

Last week, I had the honor of visiting once again with President Obama during a gathering of the United States Conference of Mayors. Just two nights ago, I watched him on television as he

summoned us to a new spirit of optimism. The president reminded us that America has a proud legacy of innovation and achievement. He told us, "We do big things."

It's the same for Niagara Falls. Even before the Industrial Revolution, we stood proudly as a nexus of international trade. We were a stop along the Underground Railroad. We birthed the Niagara Movement that was a predecessor of the NAACP. We pioneered production and transmission of electricity, and lit the night. Then we combined our hydropower with our human power to run factories that fueled our nation's postwar boom. Those moments in history may have passed, but there are new chapters in our history yet to be written. There are moments of future greatness as yet unimagined, and dreams of the present that the future will fulfill.

Nothing lasts forever--not the good times, but happily not the bad times either. It may be late January, and it seems like winter has been going on forever, but we know that spring eventually will come. One day not too far in the future we'll walk out our front door and notice the crocuses popping up in the garden. You can feel the change in the air here now--not the weather, unfortunately--but out there in the community there is a sense that positive change is finally coming. The fates seem to be smiling on us, at least a little, for a change.

But make no mistake. There is nothing inevitable about the resurgence of our city. The crocuses only come up because someone bothered to plant them in the first place. We haven't lost our capacity for greatness, but our future is entirely up to us. We the citizens are the gardeners who must plant the seeds of our future city, of our future lives. We have to start believing that we can build an exciting and visionary city of the future, one where people choose to live, and love to visit. God built a natural wonder in our backyard. The least we can do is to invest our full faith and energy into making the most of what we've been given. I hope that, as my administration enters its fourth year, each of you has been blessed, as I have, with at least a little glimpse of the crocuses peaking out from under the snow. Because the wind of change is starting to blow across the land, and it's time to get to work in the garden. Are you ready?

Let's keep the positive change going. Let's keep moving forward, not turn back. As the President said, "let's do big things. Let's do them together."

It has been a high honor and great privilege to serve as your mayor this last year. Thank you for coming, and God bless our city and our nation.