

Full text:

Mayor Michael B. Coleman's State of the City speech Thursday, March 13, 2008 5:48 PM

Max, thank you for that fine introduction! I wanted you all to meet Max. His mother is a city employee, and ever since I met him he's inspired me. His spirit is so strong, and that's the kind of spirit that makes Columbus great! Thank you to Michael DeAscentis, our host, as well as our Girl Scouts and the Fort Hayes High School Ensemble.

Let me acknowledge our partners for progress: City Auditor Hugh Dorrian; City Attorney Rick Pfeiffer; City Council President Michael Mentel; members of City Council, Kevin Boyce, Charleta Tavares, Maryellen O'Shaughnessy, Priscilla Tyson, Andrew Ginther and Hearcel Craig. Thank you to all the elected officials here tonight, and our partners in the county. Also, thanks to all those from the suburbs and townships of central Ohio, and from the statehouse.

I want to thank Columbus' first lady, Frankie Coleman, as well as our children, JD and Justin; Kim is in Chicago. I also want to acknowledge my brother, Jeff, his wife, Valerie, and Aunt Elaine Pittman. I want to acknowledge my team, my cabinet and staff, who take on every challenge and believe so strongly in this city, led by Chief of Staff Mike Reese...

Most of all tonight, let me thank all city employees, and the leaders of organized labor who represent them. Tonight, let's all put our hands together for the hardest working employees in the world, who just faced a historic 20-inch storm -- our snow warriors! More than 373 city snow warriors and water-line repair crews, plus almost 50 private drivers and 17 plows from Franklin County battled the worst snow 20 years, in 12-hour shifts, to keep our roads safe. And to all of the citizens of Columbus here tonight, welcome.

I look back on my time as mayor of this great city and I know we've come so far together. Now in my third term, I am even more energized today than when I first took this office, nine years ago. I have seen this city grow and prosper. We cannot take progress for granted, we cannot be passive about tomorrow. We must remain hungry for new ideas, hungry for change, hungry for transformation. Only a sense of urgency will make our city as great as it can be.

I see young people bringing a new energy to our city. I see strong neighborhoods and a thriving Downtown. I see new investment in neglected areas of our city. I see a city nationally recognized by experts who've called us a top ten most-livable city, one of the top ten cleanest cities, a top ten city for African-Americans, a top ten city to do business in, and the list goes on and on.

In fact, just this week, Forbes named Columbus the "No. 1 Up and Coming Tech City" in America. I feel the difference in Columbus. We are becoming a city transformed.

This very building -- this was land that had no purpose, made no contribution to life in the city, and now people by the thousands come here to enjoy concerts and other events, right here in the heart of our Arena District. Next door the community is investing in a new Downtown baseball stadium, Huntington Park, another draw for thousands of people each year, a great partnership with our Franklin County commissioners: Marilyn Brown, Mary Jo Kilroy and Paula Brooks.

These are stories of great and wonderful achievements. But achieving does not mean accepting where we are today. Because still I hear those two words ringing in my ears. Cow Town. We know better. We are neither cow, nor town. This is America's 21st Century City, and we must be relentless in our pursuit of greatness.

2012 Bicentennial

In 2012, our city will be 200 years old -- and that's the time our city will begin our golden age, our renaissance. For the past year we've been working on the question of what we want our city to be by 2012 and beyond. With the 2012 Bicentennial Commission, we've worked with our 3 co-chairs: Bishop Timothy Clarke of the First Church of God, Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee, and Abigail S. Wexner, founder and chair of the Columbus Coalition Against Family Violence.

Together with hundreds of volunteers, we are dreaming again about what this city can become. And we've listened to Columbus residents. I'm thrilled to say that more than 1,700 people attended our Citizen Summit, and thousands more have shared their ideas in other forums. We asked folks how they wanted to see our city in 2012, and they said our city must maintain its Midwestern values of family, honesty and hard work, while at the same time, be active, be alive, be vibrant -- a hip and cool city. I believe we can be both. They said that our City's best assets are our neighborhoods and our people, I agree.

But if we are going to continue this transformation, we must invest in our future. We must repair and build our roads. We must buy the trucks that pick up our trash. We must build health centers and family recreation centers. We must increase pedestrian safety by building sidewalks. We must invest in our neighborhoods' basic needs: parks, sewer and water lines, policing centers, and bike paths.

In short, we must meet the needs of our residents today, tomorrow and for the next generation. And we can do this by going to the ballot with the Bicentennial Bond Package this November. I am asking you to support your city, support your neighborhoods and support your family.

We can do this without raising taxes. If you vote to give the city permission to sell bonds at a lower interest rate, we will protect our quality of life and build for our city's future.

Economic Advisory Committee

As we look ahead to our 200th anniversary, we must squarely take on the challenges we face today. The nation has seen inflation and job loss, staggering energy prices, and more poverty. We have barely recovered from the last recession, and we are in a new one today.

Columbus, too, has felt the sting of this weakened economy. It's hurt our families, and it's hurt our bottom line. But Columbus remains a shining light among the cities of Ohio. Through it all, we continue to grow. Through it all, we are creating jobs. Just yesterday we landed NetJets.

Tonight, I am here to tell you, the state of the city is strong. Now we must ask, "How do we stay strong?"

The first challenge is simply our city budget. Working with council member Kevin Boyce and City Auditor Hugh Dorrian, we have asked a group of highly respected and experienced leaders to give their assessment of our city's bottom line. The Economic Advisory Committee is looking closely at our expenditures and our revenues to recommend what services may need to be cut and how much additional revenue we need to sustain basic city services.

Neighborhood safety

Public safety is the city's most central responsibility. The Division of Fire earned national accreditation last year under Chief Ned Pettus. Working with Council member Andrew Ginther, I'm pleased to announce that we will be buying \$6 million in equipment this year -- that means seven new fire engines and 16 new EMS medics. We are also purchasing 150 new cruisers with \$5 million in 2007 and 2008.

Our neighborhoods are safer, because we've put more police officers on the streets than at any time in our city's history, and we've employed innovative strategies such as the Police Strike Force and the anti-gang initiative. Last year these initiatives resulted in 225 illegal guns confiscated, 1,200 arrests, which resulted in a 24 percent decline in homicides. We're making a difference, but we have more we must do.

Safety -- curfew

Just two summers ago, I was riding around with our Summer Strike Force. We pulled up behind a van, and it took off, weaving. We pulled them over and found out it was five kids, none older than 15, who'd stolen this van. This was at 2 in the morning!

I called the parents, guardians, grandmas, trying to find out where these boys were supposed to be. Imagine these folks getting a call from the mayor at 2 a.m. -- not a one of them believed it was me, until they picked up their kids.

I can remember when my mother, Momma Joan, would stand in the doorway and point her finger at me and say, "be home by 11." And guess what? When my mother said do something, I did it, and if I didn't, well, there were consequences to pay. Because my mother knew what we all know -- nothing good can come when a child is out at 2 in the morning.

My mother knew that if any of her four children were out at 2 in the morning, we were not in the library studying, we were not at the church choir practice, we were not standing over a wood fire holding hands singing camp songs. Most parents are just like Momma Joan, and sometimes kids will be kids. Youthful mistakes are a part of growing up.

But, these days, far too many young people are out late at night in harm's way, in trouble or making trouble. When the clock strikes midnight, your child should be home.

The city's current curfew law has existed for over 34 years, and since there was no good place for officers to take the kids, it has been difficult to enforce. But we're now giving everybody fair and advance warning, that the curfew laws will be enforced in the city of Columbus.

Beginning June 5, our officers will pick up children 17 and under, out past midnight. They will be taken to the Curfew Drop-Off Center at the YMCA of Central Ohio, until their parent or guardian can pick them up. The first time, parents and child will have to attend a three-hour workshop together, provided by the Safe and Drug Free Schools Consortium. The second time, the child will be given community service. And if they get picked up again, the child may be charged with a curfew violation and the parent may be charged with "parental neglect." Both are third-degree misdemeanors.

We'll also be engaging local pastors, neighborhood leaders and hopefully the local media, to spread the word that kids need to be home at midnight. Look, I'm a parent too. I know how challenging it can be, but sometimes, they need a little tough love, and sometimes parents need a little help. There is no intent to be punitive, but we will take action if necessary.

Our intent is to keep kids out of harm's way, preventing them from being drawn into harsher, more serious crimes. If a parent is having trouble, we will help them, with mentorship programs, coaching, summer jobs through our Youth-Works program that we started and social service intervention if necessary.

Safety -- cameras

We are also moving forward with our neighborhood safety cameras initiative to deter crime and detect criminals. This is one more tool for our police to keep us safe. In Chicago, the crime rate dropped 30 percent where cameras were used.

During this first year of operation, we will set aside \$1.65 million for safety cameras. Working with council member Priscilla Tyson, we will first place cameras at several Columbus recreation centers. We are choosing the locations now.

Second, we will buy mobile cameras for events and festivals and special deployments. Finally, we will begin a pilot neighborhood program to put cameras where the local community feels they are necessary and crime data suggests they are warranted.

This is not about watching the good people of Columbus going about their day. This is about crime prevention, crime detection and keeping us safe.

Housing foreclosure

Making neighborhoods safe also demands that we keep taking on vacant and abandoned housing. A vacant house is a threat, it attracts crime, it reduces property values, it creates a hazard, and it undermines the surrounding neighborhood.

Home Again is our \$25 million initiative to help keep people in their homes, and reduce and replace vacant houses.

We've already helped scores of Columbus residents stay in their homes. Last year, our team and the city attorney filed 60 percent more cases to push property owners to maintain their vacant housing. And when a building is too far gone, we knock it down.

So far we've demolished 165 abandoned houses. In addition, we took on, took down, and took out Public Enemy No. 1: Woodland Meadows, a 122-building cesspool of human misery, crime and decay.

We've know we've got more to do. Even though our Home Again initiative impacted some 600 homes, 1,000 more homes are vacant and abandoned today than when we started because of the national foreclosure crisis. I've been working with City Attorney Rick Pfeiffer and City Council member Hearcel Craig, as well as mayors from across the country.

The national housing crisis does not mean we stop building homes and neighborhoods in places where no one thought we could, like at the blighted Columbus Coated Fabrics site. Columbus Coated Fabrics was once a job center, but since shutting down in 2001, it's brought blight and decay to the neighborhood.

Today, I'd like to announce the city's investment of \$14 million for infrastructure construction that will leverage \$80 million in private investment to transform that tainted rubble into homes, jobs, life and hope.

With help of local leaders such as Robert Caldwell, Joyce Hughes and Catherine Gervis, we've begun taking down this eyesore. Campus Partners and Wagenbrenner Development have joined together to build a new neighborhood with 600 new condominiums,

townhouses and apartments. Homes will be priced for working families, first-time home buyers and those looking to move up beginning at \$90,000.

Streetcars and rail

The cost of living keeps rising, especially the cost of just going to work: gas prices, parking, oil changes and maintenance. I was listening to a guest on the "Wall Street Journal Report" the other day who said, "Don't be surprised if gas prices may reach \$9 a gallon in America." That's right, \$9 a gallon.

Yesterday, I saw a gas station selling gas for \$3.60 a gallon. Let me do the math on this: If you fill your 20-gallon tank once a week with \$9 gas, you will pay an average of \$180 a week. That's \$8,640 a year! \$9 per gallon. No way!

The cost of gasoline in Great Britain in February was \$8.52 per gallon, in the Netherlands, \$9.42 a gallon. Our city is not prepared even for \$4 a gallon, which is right around the corner, and will force families to make tough choices.

We must begin to move toward better transit in this city or our residents won't make it to work, our businesses will wither and our city's future will be in jeopardy.

Every president of the United States of America and every Congress for the past 25 years has said our country is too dependent on foreign oil. Well, the time has come for Columbus to declare our independence.

It's time to start with a 21st century streetcar in Columbus. Electrified, sleek, modern streetcars that operate alongside cars on High Street, and connect Downtown with the Short North, Italian Village, Ohio State's campus.

A study by the Danter Group projected that streetcars in Columbus would help spur thousands of new jobs, new housing, new hotel rooms, new visitors and, most importantly, about half a billion dollars in new economic development.

Streetcars will help us connect people to our stores, our restaurants, the life Downtown and neighborhoods to each other. Most of all it will give the working man and woman the freedom to get to work without digging ever deeper into their pockets for gasoline.

On March 27, I invite you to join me at City Hall, to hear from the financial experts and planners on how we can build and operate the first rail transit system in our city in generations.

Finally, I want to say tonight that I join our Governor, Ted Strickland, in urging Amtrak and the Federal Government to bring a rapid transit passenger line through Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati.

We are far too reliant on the automobile. Our city was built to accommodate them with roads, highways, stop lights, parking meters and traffic jams. And as we sit at the traffic light, waiting for it to change, or on the cell phone or stuffing a doughnut in our mouth our belts are getting tighter because our waists are getting bigger.

Bikeways

We can do better, and rather than be hungry for a doughnut, we should be hungry for new throughways like bikeways!

Tonight I am proud to announce that we will make our start this year, and I am committed to investing \$20 million to build 86.3 miles of new on-street and off-road bike routes and trails by 2012. This will be funded by our current capital budget and by the Bicentennial Bond Package going on the November ballot, if our voters agree.

That includes 54 miles of new on-street bike routes and lanes by the bicentennial, which will require rebuilding dozens of intersections in this city to make them safer for walkers and bikers alike.

In the next four years, we're also adding new bike racks, bike lockers, and water stations for riders. This is just the start, as we wrap up the Bicentennial Bikeway Planning process, which will guide further construction and bikeways planning for many years to come.

This plan sets a higher standard for bike safety, convenience and connectivity. We will team up with Franklin County Metro Parks and other regional partners as they build another 49 miles of bike trails by 2012. I want to thank all our partners, especially MORPC, and the bike riders, bike commuters and neighborhood leaders.

Let's take advantage of our city's flatness. Flat is good. We haven't beaches and oceans, we haven't mountains to climb, but we do have hundreds of square miles of flat land, and we should make the most of it and make biking the No. 1 outdoor activity, something everyone can do.

So, watch out Ford, wake up Chrysler, take a break Toyota, GM will no longer stand for General Motors -- but Get Moving! We will be moving on bikes -- all over our city.

Foundation for Healthy Lifestyles

Bicycling and walking are great for your health. We need to encourage that and other healthy habits in all our residents and especially in our children. We need to protect our children by fighting their enemies -- obesity and diabetes.

Columbus has among the nation's highest levels of obesity, diabetes and heart problems. Tonight, I am announcing the creation of the Foundation for Healthy Lifestyles, a group

that will raise money to promote healthy living and encourage residents to take on individual responsibility for healthy living.

That means bending your elbows to do push-ups, rather than lifting a cheeseburger to your mouth. That means making our children move their feet outdoors, rather than using their thumbs to play video games in front of a TV.

Our foundation's first event will be a bicycle tour -- called the Tour De Columbus, an event for families linked to the annual Long Street professional bike races. Bicyclists will begin in the King-Lincoln District, on Aug. 23 for the first ride.

The Foundation for Healthy Lifestyles will then help create a series of farmers markets in neighborhoods. You know, there are too many neighborhoods in Columbus today where the only healthy food you can buy is the lettuce and the pickle that comes on a fast-food hamburger. Ketchup is not a vegetable!

Poor eating habits endanger the health of our residents, so we're going to bring farmers' markets right into the neighborhoods of Columbus. At farmers markets, our residents can buy an ear of corn, a head of lettuce, a tomato or my favorite -- collard greens -- rather than two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions, on a sesame seed bun.

The Health Department tested a farmers' market concept last summer and folks lined up down the block to buy fresh fruits and vegetables.

We're also bringing some healthier choices to the East Side, bringing something every neighborhood should have -- fresh fruits and vegetables at their neighborhood grocery store. I am proud to announce our partner, the Columbus Compact Corporation, is scheduled to open a new Save-A-Lot Supermarket on E. Main Street in June. The nation's fifth-largest grocery chain expects 3,000 customers a week and will generate 48 jobs in the neighborhood.

We are once again bringing jobs and investment to older neighborhoods -- and attracting the quality goods and services that every resident deserves.

Health centers

Access to health care is as important as access to healthy foods. Residents on the South and West sides of Columbus have an unmet need for greater access to health care.

The John Maloney Center nearly collapsed due to poor construction, and I ordered it demolished. Working with council member Charleta Tavares and Columbus Neighborhood Health Centers, we opened a temporary site at Great Southern Shopping Center, while we planned for a more permanent site.

The demand for health care is so great, and the availability is so low, that we have decided to (have) two health centers on the South Side. First, we will turn the temporary health center into a permanent center. Second, we will build a new John Maloney Health Center as an anchor on the site of the boarded-up Schottenstein's Department Store on S. Parsons Avenue.

I plan to tear this building down in May to make way for a block of new development on the South Side. By building on this site, we not only provide families with health care, we jump start economic development as well.

On the West Side, on Broad Street, the Hilltop, we will break ground on the 35,000-square-foot health and wellness center in a few weeks. This, too, is exciting because not only are we providing access to health care to thousands of people, we will bring jobs and opportunities to the Hilltop and Franklinton neighborhoods.

Downtown

A healthy city also requires a healthy Downtown. I've often said over the years, Downtown is everybody's neighborhood. With more than 100,000 workers and 10,000 residents by 2012, Downtown is the engine that drives our economy and epicenter of life as we know it in central Ohio.

We are making progress. With the acquisition of City Center, we will see commerce. With the expansion of more affordable housing, we will see young professionals live in this urban environment. With the completion of a new neighborhood on nine city blocks along Long and Gay streets, more people will move in.

With the completion of Lazarus, more workers are moving Downtown into one of the largest green rehab buildings in the nation. We're building two new parking garages to meet the parking demand for workers, visitors and residents Downtown.

With the completion of the Main Street Bridge, we will see a work of art, and we will soon begin the Rich Street Bridge that will connect Columbus east with Columbus west. We will rebuild Town Street, and Front Street to create a 2-way, pedestrian friendly, park-like avenue that slows down traffic like Gay Street. With the construction of the Scioto Mile, we will see the greatest public park in all our state. The Scioto Mile will be our signature park, the symbol of our city. It will connect the riverfront from North Bank Park to the Whittier Peninsula. It will feature numerous fountains and a four foot wide water canal, a place for outdoor concerts, and a restaurant with outdoor terrace dining overlooking the park. Benches and chess tables, dominos tables, swings, and free wireless internet access will invite people to stop and sit for a while. It will be a place for relaxation, recreation and entertainment. Our business community is making an unprecedented commitment to help us make this a reality. I thank them and AEP, who took the lead with a \$10 million gift to our Citizens. In fact, we are scheduled to break ground in April and we should complete the project in the fall of 2011. As we watch The Scioto Mile take root, we also want to see a revitalized High Street.

HIGH STREET CORRIDOR

The High Street Corridor was once a bustling boulevard where people came to shop, visit and live. Times have changed, and so has High Street. High Street is the spine of our city, and for our city to work best, our backbone must be strong. Today, there is 152,000 square feet of vacant retail space in the High Street corridor and 12 acres of vacant lots and surface parking. These vacancies scar this corridor, and it's made worse by the space of City Center. The High Street Corridor needs a 21st Century make-over, like we've begun at the corner of Broad and High. So today, I am proposing a new district downtown - The Mile on High District. This new district will increase our focus on rebuilding the High Street Corridor with active retail, office and housing, bringing more people and new investment back to the area. The Mile on High District will include a specific plan and a toolbox of aggressive incentives, working capital loans, façade improvement grants, new parking requirements and better transit and pedestrian options. It will also require special zoning changes to increase development density. That means getting retail back into downtown for visitors, downtown workers and residents.

Last year, I said City Center must be solved, and we will solve it with a cooperative developer or we will "do it ourselves." Well, we are doing it ourselves. We sued the operators, we've achieved control, and now for the first time in 20 years, its future lies with us. In the coming months, we expect to present the first phase of a redeveloped City Center. It is our concept to transform the High Street side of City Center into a retail destination around a town square at the point where Town Street meets High Street. We will open up High Street by demolishing the cavernous City Center walkway. I want to thank Guy Worley of the Downtown Development Corporation and his entire Board for all the hard work and support on this project. We've still got a lot of work to do, but we are making progress.

We've been making major strides on many fronts in our Downtown, we've listened to young professionals who want more affordable housing options Downtown. They want to live Downtown, but can't afford many of the 5,000 condominiums now built or being developed. I've got good news for you, because this summer I will stand with Michael DeAscentis, and his team at Lifestyle Communities to break ground on more than 200 new apartments and condos along Front Street between Town and Rich Streets. When it comes to building for the young and talented, Lifestyle Communities gets it and they are going to deliver it, as they move their corporate headquarters Downtown in June. We welcome them and the hundreds of young professionals that will be moving into this community. This \$25 million project will create a new neighborhood of great looking, but accessible, Downtown homes with more than 300 on-site parking spaces. The 130 apartments will start from \$750 to \$990, and the 76 condos will sell between \$125,000 and \$250,000, far less than what most Downtown units costs. To all our young professionals, we don't want your last day in Columbus to be the day you graduate.

There's a future here for you. Michael DeAscentis is here tonight, please give him a round of applause for his commitment to Downtown housing.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Even though Downtown is on the move, a hungry city doesn't sit back and wait for businesses to walk through the door. It goes after jobs and builds the kind of city where companies want to locate and grow. Our city has gained and retained some 30,000 jobs since we've been in office. During the same time, Ohio lost more than 200,000 jobs. Our city has an impressive record of economic growth, really the best in the state, but we must do more. That's why we worked so hard with City Council President Mike Mentel to retain and expand NetJets in Columbus. NetJets is a great company that will be a tremendous asset to our City. We will retain more than 1,900 jobs, with an average salary of \$73,000 a year. We will gain another 810 jobs and \$200 million in private investment. We gain a national headquarters of a growing international powerhouse in the Aviation Industry. Net Jets is flying some 700 jets around the world at any given time, and more than 1,000 flights a day are being directed from their operations center in Columbus. This is a significant operation and a major corporate headquarters. To put this in perspective, NetJets has the largest fleet in the Private Aviation Industry and if they were a commercial airline they would be the 2nd largest fleet in the world, 2nd only to American Airlines. In addition to the great jobs, we will gain a great civic partner to help our residents and our city grow stronger. Please join me in welcoming NetJets representatives.

This Net Jets deal is more than just retaining and creating good jobs with a good company. Net Jets is a part of a larger vision, a new path, a new industry in Columbus to make Columbus a leader in the aviation and aerospace industry, an industry that could result in thousands upon thousands of jobs and millions upon millions of dollars in private investment. This is our new frontier, or better yet, our new horizon.

AVIATION CLUSTER

The foundation already exists in Columbus for this new industry. Just step back and look at what's happening before our eyes. Since Skybus took flight less than a year ago, it already has 379 employees. We expect another 700 more jobs upon full expansion. NetJets and Skybus put us on an incredible trajectory for economic opportunity. In addition, air transport companies like Airnet and the new air passenger company Waypoint Corporation are also being headquartered in Columbus. We've only scratched the surface. We must make Columbus an international center for the aerospace and aviation industries. We can reach this new horizon if we create capacity, focus on our goals and establish a framework to deliver. I want to thank Ty Marsh and his team at the Columbus Chamber for all the hard work and research to help guide us and for helping recruit NetJets.

Tonight, I am proposing the creation of the Airport Economic Development Corporation. In partnership with the Cities of Gahanna, Whitehall, the Columbus Regional Airport Authority and the private sector, we will develop the district around the airport and focus Columbus on becoming a major player in the aviation industry.

While the future of our local economy is sky-bound, we must also keep grounded right here on our good green earth.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT - GREEN JOBS

Working with City Council Member Maryellen O'Shaughnessy, we launched Get Green Columbus to show how we could be environmentally friendly, while building the economy and making neighborhoods healthier. One of my top priorities is to grow a new generation of green jobs. I believe this will be one of the fastest growing sectors of tomorrow's economy. Columbus is well positioned to create green collar jobs, and tonight I am proud to announced three new strategies: The first is an economic incentive package for green businesses. And to make sure our workforce is ready for those green businesses, we'll launch the second initiative called "GreenWorks." GreenWorks is a partnership with COWIC, the Electrical Trades Center and Columbus State Community College to train residents for jobs in hot Green industries. Thanks - Suzanne Coleman-Tolbert! The third initiative is "The Green Spot." The Green Spot is a new initiative which challenges everyone in Columbus to Get Green, and recognizes businesses, schools, organizations and even homes for greening our city. So when you see this seal – it means something, it means they've stepped up to protect the environment and make Columbus a green city... so support them, buy from them, visit them and thank them.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT – SISTER CITIES

Columbus is getting green in an environment of global competition and it's clear that no city can be an island, separated from the world. A city must engage in international trade, cultural relationships and educational opportunities, just like our state and our nation. Columbus is becoming a more international city. For many years we have developed sister city relationships with cities in other nations, and it is time to expand into more diverse cultures. Tonight, I'm pleased to announce our new sister city relationships with Kumasi, Ghana; Zapopan, Mexico; and Ahmedabad, India. Recently, Luis Alcalde traveled to Zapopan on our behalf and Nirmal Sinha traveled to India, both helped us reach agreements for these new Sister City relationships that will bring greater cultural, educational, and economic connections. And as we cement these new friendships, I am also excited to tell you that in April, I will lead a trade mission to Israel to help spread the word of the great opportunities available in Columbus.

CONCLUSION

Twenty five years ago, Columbus Monthly asked the question, "Can Columbus ever be great?" The article quotes a former mayor calling us a "Grade B city," and said that some people believed Columbus was "doomed to slide slowly toward extinction." The story mentioned several things Columbus needed to be great: it said we needed the I-670 freeway, we've got that now. It said we needed a major league, professional sports team, and we've got that now. It said we needed a Downtown shopping mall, well, we had that! By the standards of 25 years ago, we've made the grade on greatness. But I don't measure Columbus with the modest expectations of days gone by.

We need to have a different standard, a new measure for our City. Sure, we must complete the projects we've announced, of course we must execute the basics, fill the pot holes, arrest the criminals and pick up the trash. All tall orders, all very important. But a city, a real city, is more than projects and programs, it's more than fulfilling the basics. A city is how we view ourselves, and the degree by which we are willing to do what we have to do, before we can do what we want to do.

We have so much going on in Columbus - our neighborhoods are strong and our quality of life continues to be high. That's where we are today. But we must stay hungry, hungry for change, for new ideas, and to make our city as strong as it can be. So hungry that we cannot accept where we are today. Columbus is a great city, I can't wait to wake up tomorrow morning to make our city even better. But, I can't do it alone, so I ask you the question, are we a great city? Only you can answer that question.

Thank you and God Bless.