

STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS 2008

MARCH 20, 2008

I. INTRODUCTION

Good Evening: Aldermen, elected officials, city employees, community leaders, and fellow citizens.

Welcome again to our beautiful Coronado Theater.

Let me start by thanking the Guilford High School choir and their talented director, Megan Wilson and thank the City of Rockford Fire and Police Color Guard.

When I took this stage two years ago for my first State of the City address, we committed to excellence and our vision for Rockford's future. Last year, we renewed that commitment, expanded our vision, and demonstrated that we can reach our goals by Leading Boldly and Working Together.

In 2008, I am proud to report on positive changes that are happening as we have challenged the status quo. Tonight, I am proud to describe a community - our community -, which is demonstrating *Excellence in Action*.

This past year we had moments of great success but also extreme challenge. Like many of you, both professionally and personally, I experienced with my family amazing highs and challenging lows.

As I stand here tonight looking at the faces of our community leaders, our citizens, and our students, I know in my heart that we are a community striving for excellence.

We are experiencing the signs of a community reaching for excellence. As we have seen, once committed to excellence, the easy path is not an option. Once committed to excellence, the painless path will evade us. But once committed to Excellence, the rewards will be for the many rather than just the few.

By taking risks and overcoming our challenges, we are building a better community for our children. As John F. Kennedy said, "there are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction." Ladies and gentlemen, there is no other choice but to continue our commitment to excellence.

As sure as our commitment stands strong, we will achieve the excellence we seek. As we report tonight on our progress, I can tell you that:

- We're building the foundation for economic success by investment in our 3 R's: roads, rail, and riverfront development.
- We're lowering crime by deploying new law enforcement strategies and community partnerships.
- We're driving educational improvement by fighting truancy and pushing options for education.
- We're reinventing basic management for running the city, demonstrating dramatic improvements in service.

And we're building an ever-stronger environment for economic growth.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're making great progress. We said we we're going to make major changes. Here's what change looks like. Here's how change feels. This is *Excellence in Action*.

II. EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE

In April of 2007, the people of this City committed to Rebuilding Rockford when we passed our sales tax referendum. We voted for better investment in our roads. We also voted for better flood control and storm water management.

This massive and important referendum victory sent a message to State and Federal leaders that we will do what it takes to match federal and state dollars to improve our community.

Unfortunately, it has been nine long years since the State of Illinois has passed a Capital plan. Progress has been stalled. Opportunity has been lost. We're still waiting for rebuilding major corridors in our City.

Many felt the impact of that lack of investment with the winter pothole plague on state-owned roads like West State, North and South Main, and Kishwaukee. Roads like Alpine and Kishwaukee took a particularly hard beating. In fact, our data shows that crumbling State roads take up far too much of our time, energy, and money. We spent 88% of our pothole patching time in January on only nine roads. Nine roads! Of those nine roads, the State of Illinois owns seven.

But with the passage of our sales tax, we are working as fast as we can to recover from decades of poor investment. Remember that John F. Kennedy quote? Well, that is the cost of "comfortable inaction."

I'm proud to say that our 2008 Capital Plan is the first to use an ongoing funding source that is not dependent on property taxes. Let me repeat that: for the first time we did not have to raise property taxes to fund our roads. In fact, we have reduced the City's property tax rate!

We will get where we need to be in repairing our long ignored roads, but it won't happen overnight. Remember, we had to fight hard just to override the governor's veto to begin our plan. Rockford would not be deterred then, and we will not be deterred now. That is what *Excellence in Action* is all about.

For decades, Rockford gambled with its Flood Control System. Last year we faced the inevitable costs of long term, comfortable inaction. We were hit with our second 100-year flood in less than a year. In a few short hours, many of our people saw their homes and lives devastated.

Let me again recognize the incredible team that provided immediate help to flood victims. Our Police, Fire, Public Works, Human Services, Building and IT Departments, with countless other volunteers and agencies joined our City Council in coming to the aid of our community.

I am proud of our efforts. We acted quickly. We didn't wait for a federal bailout. Our City Council approved immediate repairs to Alpine Dam. We also worked with the Rockford Local Development Corporation to establish a unique home-buying program. In all, 112 families will soon be able to move to new homes. Thank you, fellow City Council members.

In fact, our program is so innovative that our City Storm Water Manager, Brian Eber - one of the architects of the program - has been named "Illinois Storm Water Manager of the Year". What a great honor! Let's all give him a round of applause.

In order to better prepare for future emergencies, we teamed up with Winnebago County. In record time, we received approval from State and Federal officials of our Multi-Hazard Mitigation plan. With that plan in place, we can apply for millions in federal and state grants. Let me take a moment to thank again Chairman Christiansen, who is a special guest tonight as he celebrates his birthday!

As we look back on the past year, I think it's safe to say, we've had more than our share of disasters. This past winter was tough. In fact, it was the toughest on record. We had over 60 inches of snow. We experienced dramatic temperature extremes. For the second year in a row, we were declared a winter storm disaster area. While the conditions have been extreme, our public works employees rose to the occasion. Heading into this winter season, our new Public Works Director, Tim Hanson, had us prepared.

We practiced our core A.C.T.I.O.N. values to the letter. We were Accountable and Customer focused. We worked as a Team. We created Innovative procedures through Open communication. We Never gave up. Tim met early and often with our employees as well as City contractors.

The results spoke for themselves. Despite the record snowfalls, complaint volume was down. We have as our guests tonight many of the men and women that worked so hard to keep our streets clear. Let's take a moment to thank our crew for their excellent work.

But along with more snow came more potholes. Director Hanson's team has put together, however, a Three-Tiered action plan to solve the problem.

Step One: We secured \$80,000 in emergency funding for Alpine Road.

Step Two: We began the repair of arterial roads, an effort that's still in progress.

Step Three: Repair work will move to residential streets, with expected completion in late April.

For our longer term solution, our Aldermen and staff have created a Neighborhood Program this year that invests \$6 million dollars in our neighborhoods, including the resurfacing of more than 350 city blocks. Simply put, this means better roads and a better future.

I'm also proud to report tonight that work continues on all phases of our water system rebuilding. These updates are critical and long overdue. But we're getting them done with your help. Ladies and gentlemen, we're working together to Rebuild Rockford.

Thank you again Rockford for passing our Rebuilding Rockford Referendum in 2007. That is ***Excellence in Action!***

III. EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: NEIGHBORHOOD SAFETY

Now, when it comes to Public Safety, 2007 marked a turning point. While we have a long way to go, we should be proud of our efforts. We are working together across departments and across the community to make Rockford a safer place.

In 2007, we created a new Weed and Seed target zone on the near-east side along Kishwaukee Street. City Council provided financial support to launch a revitalized "Neighborhood Network" organization, training and organizing neighborhood leaders to improve our public safety partnerships.

Also in 2007, we launched our Alternative Drug Enforcement strategy. This new effort has shut down drug houses, gotten drug dealers off our streets, and sustained reductions in open air drug markets. It's a new community partnership and it's working. It's a program that exemplifies ***Excellence in Action!***

In 2007, we also passed a new Liquor Code that is tougher on violations. Through our new code, we have shut down businesses that have brought violence to our neighborhoods. The message we send to liquor sellers is clear: be proactive and prevent problems from arising in the first place.

This type of Weed and Seed approach is more than just reducing crime. It's also about eliminating blight and neighborhood decay. In 2007, with support from City Council, we combined resources from multiple departments and created our new "Code Enforcement" team.

Our new team members are accountable for specific areas of the City. We've equipped their vehicles with the latest technology so they can spend more time in the field and less time at City Hall. This means better service and better value for our citizens.

Tonight, we have several members of our Code Enforcement team in attendance. Let's give them a hand for the important work they are doing for our community.

In 2007, our Enforcement teams helped us eliminate several major obstacles to redevelopment. The "Inn Town Motel" had been one of those obstacles. For years, it was known for crime,

blight, and decay. But last year, our Building Department members of our Enforcement Team worked with our City Legal Department to condemn the building. We fought and won a court battle and our City Council provided emergency demolition funds.

Our teams were also instrumental in supporting the Rockford Housing Authority's efforts to demolish the Jane Addams projects. The City had been working with RHA for years. In 2006 permission was given to demolish the buildings. Unfortunately, an 11th hour lawsuit threatened to stop the progress.

Through our work with the RHA and the leadership of Ald. Victory Bell and Ald. Doug Mark, we fostered a settlement of the lawsuit. Today, those buildings have been demolished. We're paving the way for future growth.

To paraphrase Alderman Mark that day, 'it was a cold, bitter, stormy day' when we took down the Jane Addams housing project; but, 'it was a warm day in the hearts of many' as we witnessed the start of a new day for that neighborhood.

I can't say enough about the support we have received at our City Council to maintain order in our neighborhoods. You know how important this is if you've ever had a car drive by your home or pull up to your car at a stop light only to be blown out by the noise of their car stereo.

In 2007, our City Council improved our quality of life by passing a tougher ordinance against loud car stereos. Thanks to that effort, we're impounding vehicles that violate our standards. We're bringing more peace and quiet to our neighborhoods.

As Winston Churchill once said, "no matter how beautiful the strategy, you should sometimes look at the results." Well, we've looked at the results when it comes to crime.

Thanks to innovative strategies, community policing partnerships, and "hot spot" policing, in 2007 we saw the overall crime rate drop by 17%.

Let's take a moment to thank the men and women of our police department for their hard work in reaching this achievement. Change isn't always easy; but our success *is Excellence in Action!*

With that said, we need to do more. Handgun violence continues to dominate our community's concerns. In 2008, we need to continue our work with the State's Attorney's office to develop a system to track illegal guns.

The vast majority of all guns used to commit a crime in our community are illegal handguns. We need to identify where those guns are coming from. We need to find out how they're getting into the hands of felons and children. We must do our part to improve enforcement locally. But, the State must also do its part to close the private gun sale loophole. Pending legislation would do just that by requiring background checks on secondary gun transfers. I ask you tonight to call on our local state leaders to help keep our city safe by voting to close that loophole.

In fact, the criminal justice system must be improved at all levels: city, county, state's attorney, law enforcement, probation, and the judiciary. To make sure we are all improving, the County has completed an analysis identifying many gaps in our justice system.

To fill the gaps and ensure improvement, we must measure performance, have rigorous follow-up, and transparent reporting. In 2008, we must challenge our justice partners to use that study to create better accountability and better management systems. Like Churchill said, it's about looking at past strategies and honestly assessing results. Where results are lacking, new strategies must be deployed.

Part of our strategy in the City this year is to fully implement our ROCKSTAT management system within the Police and Fire Departments. Our Police Department also needs to develop a geographic basis for both assigning officers and holding our teams accountable for improvement.

This approach will differ from the old one of simply assigning responsibility to a "shift". Our geographic approach focuses on the entire team responsible for a specific "beat". Our "teams" are also made up of more than just police officers. Our other City departments as well as

churches, neighborhood groups, and citizens are on our team if we invite and involve them. That's what community policing is about. We only achieve *Excellence in Action* when everyone is involved.

Now, you may have noticed that there has been some media coverage and more than just a bit of noise regarding changes within the Police Department. But isn't it our duty as leaders to make changes where we know change is necessary?

In fact, although we still don't have a decision from the arbitrator on the last Police and Fire contracts, we must prepare for our next contracts. We must return to the bargaining table this year to pursue more opportunities to improve.

To be effective and efficient, we will invite our Police Union to engage in honest dialogue on how to improve performance throughout the department and reduce our unacceptably high crime rate.

Ladies and gentlemen, the notion that criminals don't adapt to police tactics is wrong. Our police department must have a culture that monitors and responds to change, however difficult and uncomfortable that might be.

Let me say again, we MUST have the courage to confront challenges head-on and adapt! We must be willing to turn our backs on what we are and concentrate on what we must become.

Will we make mistakes along the way? Sure. But what is important is not whether we risk making a mistake. What is critical is our pursuit of excellence through continuous improvement throughout our organization and throughout our community.

Of course, there may be healthy conflict in the process of coming together. Tonight, I pledge to the police union, police management, City Council, and our community that we will continue to seek new, better ways to improve public safety.

In the City of Rockford our resources are limited - but our ingenuity and our commitment to *Excellence in Action* are boundless.

IV: EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS

Yes, we're making a lot of changes. But we have a system in place to monitor our progress and modify strategies as needed.

RockStat is the City of Rockford's new approach to data-driven management and continuous improvement. Through RockStat, we strive toward Excellence Everywhere while guided by core A.C.T.I.O.N. values.

RockStat will keep us on track as we move toward our goals. It gives departments and managers the tools to review day-to-day operations. We're building strong teams. We're focusing on our customers. We're holding ourselves accountable.

In 2007, our Public Works Department led our entry into this new business model with fantastic results. The demands of our new system brought changes in our leadership and changes in our approach to Public Works.

These changes brought immediate savings and improved results. We eliminated two divisions and three Positions in Public Works allowing for overall savings of \$447,000. We improved snow operations, reduced call-in time for crews, and improved crew assignments resulting in savings of 30% per snow event. We are very proud of our Public Works Department's achievements.

Again, I would like to thank our Aldermen for committing to improve city operations. We're working across departments to break down silos. For instance, data from our Public Works Graffiti Hotline was shared with the Police Department resulting in the arrest of four long-time “taggers”. They had caused thousands of dollars worth of damage.

In 2007, we also committed to improve our building and construction permit process. We first conducted meetings with our customers, our private sector partners, for feedback and improvement ideas.

Our City Council then approved the purchase of new software and a new approach that will dramatically improve the quality and speed of permit approvals. We're installing the new system this year. It will mean better service and value for our customers.

Frankly, every part of our organization is being challenged to improve. Our Fire Department accepted this challenge as they began a national accreditation process with the Center for Public Excellence. They have begun a long and hard analysis on the way that we do business. This effort will also result in better service and better value for our citizens.

In fact, we applied our new approach last year to reform and modernize our City Health Insurance Plan. Thank you to our City Council, non-union employees, and AFSCME employees for embracing these changes.

Costs are coming down as a result of these efforts. We also held the City's first "wellness fair" last year. As a result of that effort, free testing was provided. One of the great stories from that day was a city employee who found out that he had a condition that needed immediate attention. The nurses told us that his life was saved that day. Now, ladies and gentlemen, that is ***Excellence in Action.***

As the City proceeds on our path of improvement, we will encourage other entities to follow our RockStat program. We're learning from other communities and the private sector. In turn, why shouldn't we expect the same analysis and accountability in our courts, our social service agencies, and in our schools?

It's this type of accountability and continuous improvement that sends the message that we are an entire community committed to ***Excellence in Action.***

Our ability to achieve excellence depends on strong community management partnerships. This is what community policing is all about. It's also what growing our regional economy is all about.

Our efforts with the Rockford Mass Transit District and organizations like the Coronado Performing Arts Center, Rockford Local Development Corporation, the MetroCentre, and the Economic Development Council are all about those types of partnerships.

We are working right now, for example, on a new housing marketing partnership to support and sell our growing list of housing incentive programs. We also have Tax Increment Financing districts and property tax rebates for market rate housing as well as employee assisted housing. But we must do more to market our tools.

The fact is, we will never have enough money nor staff to market our city on our own. That's the bad news. The good news is that we don't need to do it on our own. Companies representing realtors, homebuilders, banks, economic development agencies, tourism and the arts that can help us market and sell our incentives.

This type of creative marketing partnership happened last year through the "Attracting and Retaining Talent" group's "Live Big Weekend" and the web site "realoriginalrockford.com."

This year, we expect to launch more of these efforts in the area of housing, arts, and tourism marketing. These are templates for future efforts for industrial and commercial development in our community.

We're also building strong partnership's to grow more jobs here that take advantage of our global marketplace. Long-term success for the Rockford Region requires links to cities and regions throughout the world. To do this, we are leveraging our international relationships.

Our strong Swedish connection helped foster an Industrial Trade Agreement, cultural ties and exhibits, internships, and a corporate headquarters. We're hosting many visits from government, tourism, media, and economic development groups. Companies from Rockford and Sweden are exploring business agreements.

In China, our efforts include outreach with entrepreneurs, government, and educators. Success will not be achieved overnight. But we're in a better position for our companies and workers to succeed in the global marketplace.

Over the past year, we've worked on another critical regional partnership. Our federally required planning organization, known as RATS, is made up of the chief elected officials representing Rockford, Winnebago County, Loves Park, Machesney Park, and Belvidere and Boone County. In the past, this group focused almost exclusively on transportation. In the future, we will do much more. We have come together over the past year to develop a broader vision for the future.

By the end of this month, we expect to present our plan to the federal government. It will expand our vision, goals, and technical capacity to support better planning and smarter growth patterns.

These steps towards comprehensive regional planning are a direct result of the leadership of our County Chairman Scott Christiansen, Belvidere Mayor Fred Brereton, Boone County Chairman Cathy Ward, Loves Park Mayor Darryl Lindberg, and Machesney Park Village President Linda Vaughn. Let's thank them tonight for their leadership, which is an example of *Excellence in Action*.

V. EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ladies, and gentlemen, when I took office, I stated that we as a community must Reduce our dependence and reliance on property taxes. Why? It's simple. Our high property taxes hurt our ability to compete for jobs and families. They hurt our community.

I am happy to report to you tonight that for the third year in a row, the City of Rockford's property tax rate is lower than it was the prior year. In fact, 2008 will bring the biggest City of Rockford property tax rate decline since 1992!

Let me repeat that: this will be the biggest city property tax rate decline since 1992!

Our property tax rate did not get to be one of the highest in the State overnight and this problem will not be remedied overnight. But, make no mistake; we will continue to push to lower our rate even more.

While we must focus on lowering our property tax rate, we must do so while making investments that will give us the highest rate of return and the greatest chance of success.

Our 2008 City budget enhances our organization's productivity and capacity by investing in technology and training.

- We're installing computers in our fire trucks and ambulances;
- We're routing more efficiently and tracking our effectiveness.
- We're installing new building permit software to make us faster and more effective.
- We're making it easier for our customers to invest in their property.
- We're improving water billing and collection.
- We're improving customer service while reducing costs.
- For the first time since 2002, the 2008 budget also restores capital equipment for each of the Police, Fire, and Public Works departments.

These are tough economic times, and we must be vigilant in controlling costs, but we must also deliver excellence. We must invest in our future.

Last year, we did just that when we invested in our MetroCentre and entered the American Hockey League. So, how has that turned out?

First, we saved hockey in Rockford. The former league, the UHL, no longer exists. The IceHogs revenues are up 22% over last year at the same time and they have already enjoyed three sellouts this season. To demonstrate the skill of our players, 18 IceHogs players have played with the Chicago Blackhawks in the NHL. In fact, IceHogs goaltender Corey Crawford, shutout the defending Stanley Cup champion Anaheim Ducks in his first NHL start with the Blackhawks, making news throughout the hockey world.

Some people thought the MetroCentre was headed for extinction. How ironic that “*Walking With Dinosaurs*” recently grossed over \$1 million, a MetroCentre record. And despite being closed for four months during construction, the partially renovated building is 16% ahead of last year in sales and has hosted eight sellouts in total, making building history.

Our commitment to improving the MetroCentre demonstrates that we are moving forward with our downtown redevelopment projects. We will continue this forward momentum with improvements such as the River Walk and Main Street.

Ladies and gentlemen, we came up with a way to renovate an old building. We saved and improved hockey in Rockford. ***This is Excellence In Action.***

Several other 2007 projects should be mentioned:

- The City issued \$3 million in bonds to open a new northeast branch library, with no increase in property taxes.
- The City issued \$1.1 million in bonds to expand jobs and clean up an old industrial site for a major steel plant expansion for Liebovich Brothers, Inc.
- The City assisted Ingenium in expanding its plant and adding 67 high-paying jobs into the Rockford economy.
- The City assisted a \$25 million entertainment development featuring Rockford's own Real, Original Rick Nielsen. The complex will include a hotel, restaurant and a one-of-a-kind guitar museum.

- The City installed over \$1 million of water main and completed Logistics Park Roadway to serve the Chicago Rockford International Airport for new air cargo development and job creation.
- The City issued over \$1 million in bonds to install sanitary sewer in the northwest side of Rockford to spur residential and commercial growth.
- The City partnered with Winnebago County, the State of Illinois, Rock Valley College, and the Northern Illinois Minority Contractors Association to host the first diversity enterprise-training program.
- We worked with RMTD to provide bus service to the Cherry Vale Mall, which was the top request of our RMTD customers.
- We are aggressively pursuing incentive programs for residential, commercial and industrial development for our central city.
- We continued moving forward on downtown and riverfront improvement efforts to further spur job creation and a higher quality of life.
- And we continued state and federal passenger rail efforts to make sure we grow local jobs and create transportation options in our regional economy.

As Angelous Angelou, the prominent site selector and economic development expert said right here in Rockford in 2007, "companies no longer take care of cities. Cities take care of companies."

At the very least, we must create a place where businesses want to invest and people want to live. We're working to improve in both areas.

We're playing a vital role in attracting and retaining talent. Our future workers, leaders, and residents are Gen X and Gen Y people – ages 25 to 40. These groups, of which I am a part, choose where to live first, and where to work second. In fact that's why we undertook the multi-year task of rewriting our city's zoning ordinance. Our old code was not building the type of competitive community we need to have.

To grow our economy, we're working to provide a healthy environment for our businesses and our people. We're making intelligent investments. We're investing in our quality of life. We're investing in technology and management. We're marketing tax incentives. We're building strong infrastructure.

In short, we're supporting the growth of our people as well as improvements in the places where we live, work, and play.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is *Excellence in Action*.

VI: EXCELLENCE IN ACTION: EDUCATION

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no higher test of the virtue of our society than the legacy we leave our children. In our hearts we know we have to do more. Our community has told District 205 we must do more. We're taking unprecedented steps to enter the debate about education.

First, we've drawn the line on truancy. Truancy is directly related to crime, poverty, and misery. By now, the community has heard these numbers repeatedly. Last year, as a result of our strong partnership, the District's truancy rate dropped nearly 30%. That was great work and great news.

Unfortunately, this year the District's lack of execution halted our momentum and reversed our results. Thousands of our children have skipped multiple days of school without consequence. The District must refer these students to the City immediately so that we can intervene. And we can't let any excuse get in the way. We must put our children first. If they've referred one student, then refer them all.

We've offered to help the District to streamline the referral process and we will continue our Community Education Partnership with Winnebago County and the United Way to get more kids in the classroom. But this community must keep the pressure on the District. These are not the "District's schools" these are OUR schools.

There is still time this year to get back on track in our truancy efforts. And we must because there are plenty of good things happening in our children's lives. In fact, there are many bright examples of education successes:

In 2007, our city's Head Start program teamed up with local volunteers and corporate sponsors to build a memorial playground at Fairgrounds Park dedicated to Head Start employee Sandy Hobson who passed away after 20 years of service with the City. Last summer, our Mayor's Youth Advisory Council worked with other local partners and sponsors to create Water Street Live! a mini weekend summer festival designed to keep our youth engaged in positive activities and away from violence.

This year, our MYAC team, partnering with the Salvation Army, Heartland Church and other community agencies will launch the nCenter, an outgrowth of the nFactor movement. This will be the City's first one-stop shop for teen educational programs and activities during the summer and after school.

There are also good things happening in District 205.

Just last week, Auburn High School won the State Scholastic Bowl. The Rockford IceMen won their 12th straight Illinois Combined High School hockey championship: Twelve in a row! And the Junior Varsity IceMen won their very first State Championship.

The move to zone schools for the high schools has been well received and the freshman foundation program has shown positive impact in its first year. But we have far too many children that are still dropping out. We can and must do better.

As our students and our community change, doesn't it stand to reason that our teaching methods may also need to change? We need to "look at the results". We need to adapt. This might mean different classes, different approaches. It may mean different ways of engaging families. It may mean longer school days or longer school years.

But faced with what we now know, I cannot come to any conclusion other than *it is time for dramatic change in how we approach education in Rockford.*

Recently, our Community Education Partnership led local citizens to visit charter public schools in the City of Chicago. These are schools with creative and relevant classes, high expectations, and deep relationships between staff, student and family. They have consistent discipline, creative advising, experiential learning, and, most importantly: outstanding outcomes and accountability.

I support quality charter schools because they have a proven track record in providing real results with at-risk students in urban school districts like Rockford. We expect our efforts to result in partnerships between local leaders and charter school operators.

We know it can be done successfully. It has been done successfully. This is an absolutely critical moment in our history. We must do it for our students. We must do it for our children. We must do it for our future.

But we must have ambitions beyond a quality high school education. The future health of our community relies on more of our people getting college degrees. Right now, only 13% of Rockford's people have a 4-year college degree. This is unacceptable.

Last year, I spoke to you about the concept of building a flexible education network to offer more higher ed choices. I encouraged leaders to come together to design a network of higher education partners. Collectively, they could offer more four-year degree options right here in Rockford.

I am still committed to this model. But I have come to the conclusion that we must build it using a different approach.

Our community is rich in many aspects of a post-secondary education. Institutions such as Rock Valley, Rockford College, and Northern Illinois University along with programs found at

Rockford Business College, Judson College or Rasmussen College offer programs for many disciplines. We were also excited to learn that Embry-Riddle Aeronautical, The "Harvard of the Skies" recently began making plans to move to Chicago/Rockford International Airport.

But, having a lot of the pieces of higher education does not make a public university. In the past, we've settled for pieces and hoped Springfield might provide more. It's time that we take our destiny into our own hands. I believe that we have the resources within our local region to form a "City University".

This year we will work with local education leaders, other civic leaders, and the business community to move this concept forward. We must be creative. We must include private partners. We must be honest when we evaluate the cost of investment against the cost of inaction.

If you find all of this hard to believe: please don't. They're partnering with the private sector in Chicago to build dorms for DePaul and Loyola. The University of Illinois has announced it's global campus initiative taking its teachers and programs to the world.

Creating our own University is no more improbable than buying a hockey team or financing a flood recovery plan. We've done both and we've done them well. We can do this. We can make the City University of Rockford a model of *Excellence in Action*.

VII. CONCLUSION

My friends, as this year's State of the City comes to a close, forgive me as I state the obvious: change is inevitable. But *positive* change is an option. It's our option. We must work for it - passionately and with great resolve. We have the ability and the responsibility to shape it. It isn't easy.

But positive change must come for the sake of our precious children and the promise they hold in their young hands, minds and hearts. This is our solemn duty.

I promise you that my administration will continue to do its best, in every aspect of our day-to-day work to move our community forward: To be examples of *Excellence in Action*.

We do it for our children. We do it for our future.

And as we end tonight, I would like to extend my personal thanks to all of you who have helped us get through a very tough year.

Both professionally and personally we battled through a lot of challenges.

Let me especially thank you for your support, love, and prayers as you helped me and my wife Stacy and our daughter Seanna welcome our baby Michael Joseph into the world. You were with us every day during Michael's short life.

When we were sad, you brought us comfort. When we were weak, you held us up.

Yes, this was a very tough year. But I have never been more proud of our City. I have never been more proud of our people than I was this past year.

I will now join my wife Stacy in the audience and join you in watching a special video that we have prepared that highlights our community and highlights our future.