

State of City Address by Council President James E. Van De Bogart
Tuesday, January 19, 2010

To my fellow Citizens in Beloit and the surrounding communities, this is my view of the State of our City.

The State of the City is cautiously optimistic. In Roman mythology the God of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings was Janus. He was most often depicted as having two faces or heads facing opposite directions. January, the month named after Janus, gives us a natural point at which we can look back at the year just past and look forward to the year 2010.

I say cautiously optimistic for a number of reasons. First, the cautious: 2009 was a heck of a year for negative news; the worst economic circumstances many of us had ever seen; the closure of General Motors, Alcoa, Leer Seating; the highest unemployment rate in Wisconsin; the list could go on. Our local circumstances mirrored the national condition, very tough stuff. Likewise, we experienced similarly hard times on the crime scene: gun violence and drug activity continue to affect our City, as well as our neighboring communities and nationally. As a former prosecutor, I can't let the observation go by that a few witnesses willing to talk to the police and cooperate with the prosecution of these criminals would go a very long way toward reducing the problem.

In spite of the negativity, the City moved forward on a number of fronts, and at one of our meetings in February, City Manager Arft will outline in greater detail some of the points that I'll now highlight. I expect he will talk about the efforts of the Greater Beloit Economic Development Corporation, the founding and activities of Rock County 5.0, as well as other activities. We opened the new library and the state of the art facility is being used at rates far exceeding prior levels; we maintained our A+ bond rating; I know this is a bit of a yawner for most folks, but in the course of borrowing millions of dollars for many years, it saves all of us tremendous tax dollars; this happened in spite of the bad economic news locally. Groups and individuals continue to receive recognition and awards. In May, Lamar Pulliam and his Fatherhood Initiative Program received the Governor's Excellence Award in Community Action. Also in the springtime our Department of Public Works received a National American Public Works Ice and Snow Removal Award, and the positive goes on.

During one week in June, Turtle Island II opened, the rejuvenated Fairbanks Flats were officially opened and dedicated, the old library was given to Beloit College for renovation and reuse, and Kerry Ingredients had an official open house, all during one week, but events that reflect years of joint public/private efforts. Construction wise, work started on the extension of Gateway Boulevard, and when done next year, roadway infrastructure from I-90 to I-43 through the Gateway Industrial Park will be complete, positioning us when the economy turns to market that park and grow the local economy. The bus transfer station and Riverbend projects which started during 2009 will be completed next year.

Looking ahead, as Janus does, in addition to finishing the three projects I just mentioned, 2010 will feature the reconstruction of US Highway 51. What sort of parking along that route will be decided by your Council probably later this evening. The last subject I would like to bring up this evening is perhaps a more challenging one, the one that gives me reason for optimism as well, and that subject is local finance. This budget

year was the most difficult one any of us has ever seen, increasing costs over which the City has no control, decreasing revenues from the State of Wisconsin, unfunded mandates from the State and Feds, continued demand for high service levels from our citizens, coupled with unwillingness, or in some cases, ability to pay for those services, all led to a process that ended up with a balanced budget with few service cuts, this time. This time we cut four positions, we had early retirements, we had a tax increase, we cut services a little bit and the biggie, and we had unprecedented cooperation from our unionized workers. Without the coming together of these actions, but again especially, with the actions from the unions, we would have had a much different outcome.

What we are doing is not sustainable; the demand for services is at one level while the willingness or ability to pay for those services is at a lower level, and support from the State or Federal government can dry up almost instantly. We have to be prepared to think and act differently. Last year, in this State of the City address I made reference to providing services in a different way. This year I'll be more direct. The duplication and redundancy in municipal services is not sustainable. In an age when technology can unify business operations across the world, I can drive to Janesville speeding all the way, and get arrested by six different police agencies: the City of Beloit, the Town of Beloit, the Town of Turtle, the Rock County Sheriffs Department, the Wisconsin State Patrol, and the City of Janesville. They all have cars, chiefs, radios, garages, and costs to the taxpayer that are increasingly unsustainable. That is in fifteen miles folks, I use that only as an example to make my main point, which is the financial wreck that is coming is an opportunity, an opportunity to find new ways of doing what cities, towns, and villages do.

I realize this won't be easy; we all have a lot invested in preserving the status quo. We like things the way they are, our communities want their independence and we want to keep our jobs. The resistance to change can be almost monumental, but the failure to change will be worse. We may be able to borrow to build a building but if we can't afford to staff it what good have we done. I'll close with this thought. The financial pressures all local units of governments are facing can lead to positive change in the way we think, act and move forward. Local politicians who understand this can step up and lead or they can ignore the reality that is upon us. I'm optimistic. People change especially when it's in their best interests to do so. Now is the time to change. Thank you.