

State of the City January 20, 2009

By: James Van De Bogart, City Council President

If you were a food chemist working at Kerry Ingredients in 2008, it was a great year. Somebody built you a 40 plus million dollar new place to work. If you were a production worker for the same company here in Beloit, the end of 2008 was decidedly different.

Likewise, if you were a science professor or student at Beloit College it was a good year. You have a 32 million dollar new science center to teach and learn in. If you were one of the 30 or so persons who lost their jobs at the college, it wasn't.

The comparison holds up with the grocery store business. Bushel and Pecks, along with Beloit Country Market opening for business. Cub Foods announcing their closing.

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Charles Dickens used that phrase to open his novel, "A Tale of Two Cities." That image is perhaps an accurate way to describe our 2008 in the City of Beloit. The best of times—for some, the worst—for others. But either way it is our time.

Our ordinances dictate that the President of the Council make an annual report to the city. Custom places it early in the year. Opportunity gives me the chance to deliver it in on inauguration day for President Obama.

My presentation this evening is not a recitation of the progress or problems of last year. It is not a score card of pluses or minuses for what happened locally. For that, I'd refer you to two documents already published. The Report to the Community in the "*Beloit Daily News*" 12/31/08 and City Manager Arft's presentation at our last Council meeting on January 5, 2009.

I can't match the polished prose, nuanced elegance or soaring rhetoric that came out of our nation's capitol today, but it isn't necessary to do so. The call to positive action made by President Obama is one that can be talked about and acted on locally, because this is our time.

This evening, I'd like to highlight several events and people that I believe have made positive difference in Beloit.

First is the successful response to two natural events that could have been disasters. The snows of 2008 and the flood later that summer. Both were handled extremely well. The professionalism, dedication and quick thinking of our Public Works employees showed the way. The cooperation, help and assistance of our citizens kept the events manageable. You don't need to look far to see communities that suffered far worse. To be honest, we got lucky as well, especially with the flood.

Next, the upgrading of our bond rating by the Standard and Poor's rating agency for general obligation bonds from "A" to "A+" and for utility revenue bond from "A-" to "A." The next time we borrow money, the rates we pay will be lower. Many of us don't realize how extraordinary it was to get that change. We don't know how much it may save us.

At a more personal level, I'd like to highlight and compliment the initiatives taken by several City of Beloit employees. These are individuals who make a difference.

Heather Francis and Bryan Miller, two Beloit Police Officers took action last spring and organized a program they called "Project Alleycat." A citizen's volunteer day to go out and erase or paint over gang graffiti in some locations. They saw a need, got some resources and volunteers and

gave it a try. It didn't stop the whole problem, but it was a step and a start. I'm told, with assistance from Crime Stoppers, they may be back this spring.

Next, several people at Public Works.

Dan Lutz, one of the mechanics, is leading an effort to see how well or if hydrogen can be used in our fleet of vehicles. Hydrogen electrolysis, cleaner burning, better mileage, durability are some of the issues. I don't know if it will work, but they are giving it a try.

One thing that does work is the beet juice/salt brine treatment program used by Public Works to temper our snow events. Chris Walsh, Steve Woodard and others that work with them, saw the idea and its potential. They brought it here, tinkered and tweaked it and are now using it. It saves us money, less chemicals on our streets, bridges and in our water. They have mentored over 50 other communities nationwide in the use and application of program. Our folks even built some of the brine equipment themselves.

Examples of cooperation between our neighbors in the towns and county deserve mention. The fire services regularly respond to events outside their jurisdictions; recently the City and others helped out at a house fire at the Town of Turtle Fire Chief's parent's home. Police from multiple jurisdictions responded to an Amber Alert call at a local elementary school this fall. The list could go on and on.

Things coming up with the city; in this space tomorrow morning Chief Lathrop and the Police Department will be introducing the Shotspotter system. It is a triangulation type technology designed to pin point where shots are fired from. \$170k from the Feds, and a \$50k local match made this system available. This spring our electronic government initiative will allow for interactive communication with the City's web site. You will be able to receive customized e-mail referencing areas of need or interest to you. Electronic billing, vendor billing, electronic deposit and confirmation. All designed to save money.

As we look ahead, the only thing I can say for sure is that things will change. The challenge of local government will be to change as well. Are the old methods of providing necessary public services the way we should continue? Are service agreements between jurisdictions the way to cut costs to the taxpayer and reduce redundancy? I don't know, stay tuned.

I'd like to close with the thought that perhaps the salve of high living expectations has seduced us to think that we are independent of one another, that we can make it on our own, that we don't need one another.

But we all got here tonight crossing bridges built by somebody else. We need those neighbors and those neighborhoods. We need those community groups and the good that they do. We need to remember that great things come from collective action in a democracy, and we need to add our participation. We all have something to contribute, and it is our time to do so.

Just as our citizens were challenged in the past by a Civil War, Great Depression, World Wars, on and on, so, too, is this our time of challenge.

I don't know if William Shakespeare was right or not as he noted in his play "Julius Caesar," "The fault lies not, dear Brutus in our stars, but in ourselves."

But I do know where the fix lies; it lies not in our stars but in ourselves. How we respond is a measure, perhaps the defining measure, of today's America and today's Beloit. I have every expectation and belief that we will respond in an overwhelmingly positive manner.

Thank you.