

February 28, 2012

State of the City Address

It is with great confidence and pleasure that I issue this State of the City report. Despite all of the fiscal, administrative and infrastructure issues we have faced, the City of North Adams is a strong and viable community, and holds significant promise for both social and economic growth.

While the continuing recession has had deep and lasting effects from our global economy right down to the City level, we have been able to contain our local situation. This was not easy and came on the heels of severe budget cuts coupled with increases in taxes and fees.

My approach, that of cutting spending while considering revenues was sound, but at the same time not so very popular. But as a community, we rallied around tough decisions and preserved our commitment to our citizens, to provide services and sound processes. Our work this year has closed our budget gap and grown reserves..... accomplishments we have all shared in and should be proud of.

I have always said that when you look at our City from the Western Summit of the Mohawk Trail, it looks like we are in the palm of God's hand. The reality is that our fine City faces the same urban challenges of many communities in the Commonwealth. With that said, we have amenities that are not only positive influences on our City but also cornerstones of growth and initiative.

This year was busy as we continued the implementation fiscal practices as recommended in both state and third party audits. As part of these processes, we held a sale of City owned property and have issued a Request for Proposal to lease the Heritage State Park to the private sector. While the City has managed and facilitated this entity for many years, it is in need of significant investment, money the City just does not have. Additionally, owning and managing property in my opinion, is not a function of municipal government but rather that of the private sector. The City's role is to "facilitate" growth and investment. As many may recall, privatization was the intended model of HSP when developed back in the 80's.

Divesting ourselves of the park and subsequently other properties such as the Windsor Mill and Notre Dame Church, will allow us to bring in cash from the sales and do away with the management and marketing issues that we deal with almost daily. Most importantly, this plan will put these properties back on the tax roles while creating new businesses and jobs for our residents.

In 2010, I appointed the Community Economic Development Advisory Board (CEDAB) as an advisory board to my office to discuss, recommend and promote economic growth opportunities.

From the initial discussions came the realization and understanding that the City needed to engage in a formal planning process. With this, we have received funding from Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) and we are well into the planning process, one that has not been done in over 40 years.

Under the guidance of our Community Development Director and CEDAB, this Master Plan when completed will be our roadmap for growth and economic recovery. I am certain that as the plan develops, low hanging fruit in the form of opportunity will be recognized and that many small projects will begin as a result.

Most of our road projects came to an end and the Hadley Bridge is getting closer to completion, although it will not be finalized until 2013. While this is happening, Develop North Adams (DNA) has been working very hard to grow our small business community, create new and renovate old green space and grow community events. They have been very successful. This past year alone, several small businesses in the downtown have expanded into larger retail space, new businesses have filled the vacancies created and we have seen several new restaurants open.

We continue to pursue green initiatives to include Massachusetts Green Communities designation, installation of a small solar array on Drury High School, implementation of our large scale solar projects on our former landfill, waste water and airport sites.

We have made significant project and financial commitment to Windsor Lake and the Campground to include new restrooms at the campground. This coming spring, we will begin bringing sewer to many of the RV sites, installing new playground equipment at the public beach and beginning a new concession and rest room facility.

I continue to work tirelessly on the Mohawk Theater project. The past 18 months have been spent in discussion with the design firm, MA Development, MCLA, MASS MoCA and other partners. The new model that I will be proposing in the near future will be one of collaboration, development that will have a ripple effect, utilization of solid partnerships, provide for community theater and events, relinquish the City of management and ownership responsibilities, generate tax revenue, and breathe significant life into our core. I am meeting now with folks in the development of a sound fiscal model and business plan that will serve to advance the acquisition of new market tax credits and financing options. This model is built around one driving criteria....sustainability.

Larger local businesses have done well and most continue to hold their own despite the global economy. This was due to their good management and timely business decisions. Excelsior Printing Company has made major acquisitions, Excelsior Process & Engraving has remained in the City and the Holiday Inn completed major improvements. Carr Hardware has recently opened through solid vision and investment in its new and greatly improved location expanding their footprint and adding jobs. I thank them all for their commitment to our City and to their employees.

Super Walmart is slated to begin construction in March which will add a much needed boost to our tax base and will provide many new jobs. And the Center for Science and Innovation project at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts is on the move.

We continue to boast a strong public school system that offers excellent academic selections and comprehensive after school programming. And while our system is great, our infrastructure is problematic and overcrowded. As a City, we continue to discuss our options through our School Building Committee in conjunction with the School Committee, the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA)and the general public.

These discussions are coming to a head and we should know tomorrow night the preferred option of the School Building Committee. That decision will be brought to the MSBA on March 14th for their continued consideration. Upon approval by the MSBA, we will once again come together as a community to discuss affordability.

I continue to maintain and grow relationships with our Northern Berkshire neighbors knowing full well that what is good for one of us is good for all of us. We have supported one another with our Regional Veterans Services with the addition of the towns of Clarksburg and Florida as well as sharing municipal and public safety services when practical.

Our opportunities and thus, our future, are embedded in collaboration with our North Berkshire Neighbors, MASS MoCA, MCLA, a strong commitment to formal planning, connections with local, regional and state economic development agencies and efforts, and a strong marketing and re-branding effort.

We continue to push forward knowing that to be well positioned through good management and thoughtful planning, a more vibrant and successful North Adams will emerge over the next several years.

The things that have been accomplished this past year did not happen solely because of my efforts but rather through the combined efforts of an extraordinary staff at all levels within the City and our school system. I thank each and every one of them for their professionalism, loyalty and dedication.

In addition, the energy, vision, leadership, and enthusiasm of many of our residents have brought a new life to our community. Folks like Rico Gaspardi who brought us the wonderful flags at our Veteran's Memorial, Phil and Gail Sellers who with a team of volunteers, beautified our crosswalks in neighborhoods all over the City, Glenn Maloney working with Spencer Moser at MCLA to promote our community clean-up days, Al Nelson, Mark Lincourt, Mark Rondeau and others who began the Interfaith food project, just to name a few. I am most appreciative of their hard work and the work of all and I know these efforts will continue.

I would like to thank the City Council and School Committee for supporting me through some very difficult issues and decisions.

I thank our volunteer boards and commissions for their service to their efforts and to our community.

Finally, I am very grateful for the support of the residents of this fine City and my commitment to you is that I will continue to be accessible, open and trustworthy.

As we move into the new fiscal year, we will continue to face many challenges. Commercial growth and good jobs are our only way to attain long term financial stability, sustainability, and the ability to rely less on state aid. No doubt this will take time and we will find many bumps along the way.

I am confident that with sound fiscal practices, long term planning efforts, investment and growth through the private sector and the utilization of our human capital we will be well positioned for the better days ahead.

Thank you....

Richard J. Alcombright
Mayor