

City of West Palm Beach Mayor Lois J. Frankel's State of the City Address  
Wednesday, January 14, 2009

Thank you to Chandra McGee and the West Palm Beach City Choral group. Aren't they terrific?

Chandra is the Chief Contract Specialist for the City's Division of Engineering Services.

She, and our Choral Group, represent our 1,500 extraordinary City workers.

Good morning West Palm Beach.

Once again, I thank Grand Bank and the Chamber of Commerce of the Palm Beaches for sponsoring this annual event.

I especially want to give my appreciation to Russell Greene and Grand Bank for being our great partner in the redevelopment of the Northwood Pleasant City area.

Even though financial issues dominate the news, we have not forgotten that our country is engaged in two wars and that more than 180 thousand men and women in the military remain separated from their families.

Their courage and determination inspire us everyday.

So it gives me great honor to introduce three members of West Palm Beach's own Fort Anglico US Marine Reserves: Gunny Anthony Bechtel, Staff Sergeant Brandon Francis, and Sergeant Jason Quinones.

Thank you and God bless you.

In this troubling time for many, our Vickers House staff, directed by Lela Jordan, does a giant job with a very small budget.

They reach out to our neediest including our homeless, poor elderly, and immigrant population.

Mrs. Jordan is here today with one very proud resident Sergio Menjivar, a recent graduate from our Vickers House Citizenship program, and now a new US citizen.

Please welcome them both.

For you 'Noles and 'Canes, this may be my most controversial part of the speech, but I must say, congratulations to the Florida Gators fans! What a great game and victory.

My favorite gator, my son Ben is not with us today.

He is back overseas in Iraq serving with his U.S. Marines unit.

However, once again, I am blessed to have with us today my lovely mother, Dorothy.

As I present my annual State of the City address, I know that we all have serious concerns about our economic future.

Friends and neighbors are losing their homes, their jobs, their life savings.

A credit freeze paralyzes our businesses.

Our country is in a protracted recession and we are but one cog in a world-wide economic machine.

But there is much we can do as we wait for the world to change.

Next week, we swear in our 44th president in what will be a historic moment for this nation.

I, like many of you, have great optimism that Barack Obama will lead us in a better direction towards a sustainable future that includes economic vibrancy and peace.

Without a doubt, it will take all of us, working harder, willing to sacrifice where necessary, and, most importantly, working together in order to keep our city moving forward.

In my report today, as we look back at the past year, and ahead towards our future, it will be clear that our ability to create alliances plays an important role in sustaining the quality of our life here in South Florida.

Even with the bad news of falling property values and stock prices, I have a lot of good news about City business initiatives, public safety, and services.

As we all know too well, the national recession started in states like Florida with the decline in the housing market.

In West Palm Beach, we realized our citizens could not wait for federal relief.

So, last April, the City's Housing and Community Development Department sprang into action by joining forces with lenders and consumer agencies.

On the screen you see our Fern Street Foreclosure Assistance Center.

It's been called a "model for the nation" by CNBC, CNN and Time Magazine.

At this one-stop shop, city homeowners threatened by foreclosure, can get credit advice, low interest loans, and assistance with mortgage negotiation.

Let us hear from Kevin and Denise Rooney who sought and received help.

The City's Foreclosure Center has thrown a lifeline to the Rooney's and more than 200 other families.

That's 200 plus families who have been given a fresh start and their neighborhoods spared of another vacant property.

Now, new monies are flowing into the City from Washington that will allow us to buy and rehabilitate foreclosed properties that will be then offered to the public as affordable housing. We will focus efforts in Coleman Park, one of our most struggling neighborhoods, now targeted for revitalization.

The recession started in the housing market and quickly spread like wild fire into our job market.

Florida's unemployment is dire; at its highest level in 15 years, and finding work is no easy task.

Just ask Jeremy King, a local iron worker who recently attended a job fair where 300 people showed up for just 10 positions.

His last job ended in May.

Since then, he's found no work.

Sadly, Jeremy is one of the 680,000 persons in Florida, 11-million nationwide, currently without a job.

The situation is urgent and it is obvious that we cannot rely solely on market forces to maintain and create jobs for those who want to work.

While businesses must strive to adapt and endure, government must step up to the plate in order to inject new life into a sinking economy.

That's why I've joined Mayors from across the country in lobbying federal leaders to pass a significant capital stimulus package that will get people back to work quickly, while at the same time build needed infrastructure.

But, once again, West Palm Beach is not waiting for action from Washington.

With the dramatic loss of 5000 construction-related jobs in Palm Beach County and at the urging of your Chamber of Commerce leaders, our City is advancing 110 capital improvement projects valued at \$126 million dollars.

This will create an estimated 1,000 plus jobs with an immediate spin off of \$228 million into our local economy.

We are doing this with no new taxes.

Instead, we are utilizing capital dollars already appropriated and cutting in half the time it takes to get a project to contract.

We are repairing roads, building new fire stations, enhancing community parks, revitalizing our municipal golf course, improving our storm water system, and making major upgrades at our 100 year old water plant.

Working with private industry, we are putting people back to work.

The City will make sure that our local, small businesses get their fair share of work from these and other City purchases because there is no better way for us to stimulate our hometown economy than to support local commerce.

It is small businesses that create most of our new jobs.

It is local business owners who make long-term commitments to our community and who care the most about our quality of life, supporting charities and civic events.

Family businesses like Pioneer Linens, Sewell Hardware, and Coleman Funeral Home know the success of the boom times and the pain of the busts.

Their families have endured hurricanes, depressions, wars, and fires in order to stay in business here in West Palm Beach.

Working with our Downtown Development Authority and Chamber of Commerce, we are spreading the message to "Buy Local," so that these businesses and your businesses may carry on.

This is what it means to work together to get through the tough times.

I hope that each of you will support this effort.

But there is so much more that we can and must do.

As part of our plan to sustain the local economy, I am announcing this morning a new business retention initiative brought to me by Kelly Smallridge, the President of the County's Business Development Board, and endorsed by Chamber C.E.O. Dennis Grady and the county workforce development chief, Kathryn Schmidt.

Starting next week, a team made up of Smallridge, Grady, Schmidt and myself, will begin visiting local businesses.

We will ask owners what they need in order to adapt and grow in this challenging economy and then connect them to technical assistance, grants, and training.

Working together, we can preserve the essential components of an enduring economy, the businesses that are already in our backyard.

While existing businesses are our lifeblood, we are also aware of the importance of new and diverse economic opportunities.

Although we have suffered our share of job loss like other communities throughout America, West Palm Beach remains an attractive place for new business.

Some examples: this past year, medical giant Cleveland Clinic and financial giant, Intech, moved into the new office tower at City Place;

A downtown Hyatt Hotel, Wal-Mart and Target will open this year bringing 600 new jobs to our area;

And, the Palm Beach Mall will be overhauled and redeveloped.

We will be working with our partners at The Convention and Visitors Bureau on a new tourism package and with the Business Development Board on a strategy to recruit corporate headquarters.

The mandate to reduce our carbon footprint, improve conservation and reach towards sustainable practices is creating the potential for millions of new jobs in America. The City's Office of Sustainability will work with our business partners to create a green business plan for our local area.

We look for spinoffs from the County's efforts to create a bio medical industry.

In that regard, I am thrilled to remind you that Max Planck is bringing its phenomenal Science Tunnel to our own South Florida Science Museum in Dreher Park, opening this Friday.

We expect thousands of visitors to be wowed by the wonders of science with this first time U.S. exhibition that has won rave reviews from all over the world.

And you will be able to enter this exhibition from our new Dreher Park entrance on Southern Boulevard made possible by generous donations of Science and Zoo museum benefactors.

Laying the groundwork for a vibrant future in blighted and economically challenged areas is the job of the City's Community Redevelopment Agency, also known as the C.R.A.

We have an impassioned staff and dynamo director in Kim Briesemeister who, as President of the state-wide association of C.R.A.'s, is widely recognized as one of the best in the business.

Four years ago, Briesemeister put together a finance plan and pushed the C.R.A. for stand-alone credit.

She and her team have joined with the Downtown Development Authority and our north end community board to bring a new vitality to our city.

Last year, I showed you pretty pictures of proposed projects.

Today, our dreams are coming alive! Let me take you on a special tour.

(Video plays)

Aren't these all great projects? We are investing public money and leveraging millions more in private investment.

The promise of City Center and the Waterfront revitalization project, combined with financial incentives offered by the C.R.A. and our Downtown Development Authority has the Clematis Street area buzzing again.

Shortly, our docks will be ready for use and City Center will open this March.

All of you are invited to attend the festivities.

And mark your calendars for next New Year's Eve when together, we will celebrate the grand opening of our new Waterfront Commons along Flagler Drive.

I have already acknowledged our City Center team and there are a few others who also deserve recognition.

Whiting Turner for its superb workmanship on the new City Docks, and Joan Goldberg for her brilliant guidance on our Waterfront Commons project.

Our Community Redevelopment Agency and Downtown Development Authority led by Melissa Wohlust for their outstanding work in challenging times.

To our businesses and investors for your confidence in our city.

As the national economy recovers, West Palm Beach will be poised to surge.

None of this would happen without the foresight and courage of my very special partners.

So please help me give special thanks to the West Palm Beach city commissioners who fought hard on your behalf to get these projects done.

Keeping our city fiscally sound without sacrificing important services that you expect and deserve is a high priority.

We are managing declining property values and mandated revenue cuts by tightening our belts and reorganizing departments. Even as we face more budget challenges, there is still good news.

The city's double A bond rating is at its all-time high.

The City's emergency fund balance and contingency budgets are solid with millions in reserve.

Our move to City Center will consolidate our operations making us more efficient and customer friendly.

And we continue to modernize, listen to this: last year, in partnership with the National League of

Cities, the Center for Digital Government recognized West Palm Beach as the second most technically advanced city in the country for a city our size.

Reacting quickly to our citizens needs is important to us.

And, we are using technology to advance this goal as well.

On the screen you see call takers at our new City Hotline Service Center where operators work seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, responding to customer service requests and answering city related questions.

You are our best partner in keeping the city in good working order.

If you see a traffic light blinking, a pothole, or have a question about a city matter, you can now call 822-2222 any time day or night for non-emergency issues.

If you see something, say something.

There is no better example of a community working together then our efforts to increase public safety.

Under the leadership of Chief Delsa Bush, last year, we saw an unprecedented decrease in crime to almost 20% in all parts of the city and an even greater decline downtown; the largest drop for a city our size in the entire state.

Our crime rate is now close to 60% lower compared to 10 years ago as documented by Florida Department of Law Enforcement statistics.

We have accomplished this by adding more police to the streets, using innovative tactics, and forging important partnerships with other police agencies, private security, and you, our citizens.

Last year, we shut down nuisance motels in the south end and put a lid on crime in Northwood Village.

We continued to reach our youth at our Teen Empowerment Center, the Police Athletic League, our parks, and our library.

But, the big news is about our downtown.

Four years ago, a typical weekend night on Clematis ended with fights and shootings.

It was like the Wild West.

Police reports described the downtown corridor as "out of control".

City leaders knew we could not let the violence continue.

So we kicked into high gear and implemented new strategies.

Some were controversial, like expanding curfews and banning minors from entering clubs that served alcohol.

We created a police unit assigned specifically to our entertainment district, and the Downtown Development Authority hired the private security firm, I.P.C., to join forces.

Today, there are no more roving groups of teens and drunken brawls to scare our families away.

Our police reports are scant, crime down 47% in two years alone.

Just last week, our Downtown Neighborhood Association recognized two of the leading men behind our safer downtown for their extraordinary dedication and excellence.

Please join me in thanking police Lieutenant Randy Maale, head of our Downtown Entertainment unit, and I.P.C. Regional Manager Willie Perez.

I can proudly tell you that due to the efforts of these two gentlemen and the men and women that work with them, we now have one of the safest entertainment districts in the nation.

Please bring your family and friends to downtown West Palm Beach and help us spread the word that our downtown is safer, cleaner and better than ever with dozens of new restaurants, shops and businesses.

Last year, West Palm Beach Fire Rescue handled 20,000 emergency calls.

With the addition of Fire Station 8 near Ibis, we have reached a milestone.

For the first time in the City's history, our award-winning Fire Rescue department is now the first responder to all West Palm Beach neighborhoods, 24/7.

This fulfills a long-time promise made to our western communities.

Please meet our newly appointed Fire Chief, Phil Webb.

With him is his newly appointed Battalion Chief, Kim Smoke, who is the first female chief in our fire department's 106-year history.

It's about time!

You've heard the expression, "...it takes a village to raise a child." Here in West Palm Beach, we are blessed to have many community partners that are helping us to raise our children.

I want to recognize three of them today.

Last year, each received a special distinction for their work with our youth.

First, the Florence De George Boys & Girls Club in West Palm Beach won the top honor for program excellence out of more than four thousand clubs nationally.

Next, the Norton Museum of Art was recognized by the White House for its community outreach programs, taking top honors out of 27,000 libraries and museums.

And finally, the Dreyfoos School of the Arts and neighboring Suncoast were again named in the top 100 high schools by *US News and World Report* out of 23,500 high schools nationally.

There is no more important ingredient for life than water.

We learned the hard way that when there's a problem with water, it's a problem for business.

Last year, I promised you that I would get our current water system in good working order and develop a plan for a state of the art system for our future.

Working with U.S. Water Services Corporation, we are taking unprecedented steps to upgrade our water service with new equipment and procedures, worker training, and independent oversight.

We have installed an advanced computerized maintenance system that ensures timely upkeep of the 3,000 parts required to keep our plant running smoothly.

With confidence and pride, I can tell you that our water quality is better than ever.

And a citizen task group is working with professional engineers evaluating the latest technology and conservation strategies. Our mission is simple: we want a modern water system and smart conservation practices to provide the quality and quantity of water needed to sustain a good life for generations to come.

Cheers! This water is good to go!

Finally, I want to turn your attention to the grassy center piece on your table, generously provided by the newly expanded law firm of Gunster.

It's there to call attention to an effort that requires everyone's participation.

Let us be remembered as a generation that met our own needs without compromising the ability of our children and grandchildren to meet theirs.

I am proud to report that throughout the community we are taking steps in that direction.

Kudos goes to our own Chamber for taking the Marathon of the Palm Beaches "green" by incorporating electric cars and motorcycles along route, increasing recycling and reducing waste.

Hats off to Navarro Lowrey for building EcoPlex, the city's first\_Leeds certified multi-tenanted office building, and to our own Palm Beach Zoo for its cutting edge leadership in energy and water conservation.

West Palm Beach has adopted strong policies\_to protect our historic neighborhoods, and we are fighting the county's plan to build Roebuck Road across our water preserves.

This past year, the City underwent an audit of our carbon footprint that will be used to measure our progress in the fight against climate change.

Which leads me to my final exciting news for today.

This effort will be led by our new Office of Sustainability directed by Penni Redford.

Working with our City Green Committee and other community partners, the city will hold our first ever Sustainability Summit on February 25th at the Harriet Himmel.

You are all invited\_to help us create the blueprint for sustainability within ecological, social and economic contexts.

That plan will help us set the agenda for this new office.

Working together, sustainability can become a way of life for all of us.

It has been quite a year in the city and in the world around us.

It remains difficult for many, but we are a vibrant city\_with great potential, poised for opportunity.

Working together, we are getting safer, improving our infrastructure, our services and our water system.

We are cleaning up blighted neighborhoods and putting people to work.

By supporting each other and our local economy, we will get through these challenging times together, as a community.

And when the recovery comes, West Palm Beach will be ready to boom!

I've said it before, and will say it again: on a beautiful day in January, where would you rather be?

Thank-you and God Bless Our City.