

**STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS**  
**Hon. George K. Heartwell, Mayor**  
**January 17, 2009**

INTRODUCTION

As I deliver my sixth State of the City address we find ourselves in times unparalleled in the lifetimes of most of us in this room. The world has plunged into the steepest and deepest economic decline since the Great Depression. America, the leading economic engine on the planet, has this time provided the fuel for a global decline that has pushed much of our middle class closer to poverty and thrust the poor into a steel-hard time unknown since the dust bowl days and soup lines of the 1930s.

It feels like the worst of this global decline has fallen on Michigan. Our unemployment numbers lead the nation, our homeowners are among those most likely to lose their homes to foreclosure, and many of our citizens have been forced to leave the state they love to find work to support their families.

Grand Rapids has fared better than the state as a whole. We know that and we are thankful. We have worked hard to make it so.

Our net job growth continues to lead the state. Our downtown construction is the envy of every Michigan mayor. We are making a transition away from an old, rust-belt manufacturing economy where a strong back and company loyalty would guarantee a middle-class life and a comfortable retirement. We are rapidly becoming a city with a new economy characterized by research and development, design, knowledge, advanced manufacturing, human medicine, education and the adaptation of new technology to solve 21<sup>st</sup> century problems.

At the same time, we know how precarious our hold on economic normalcy is. Far too many people have spent far too much time fruitlessly looking for work. Those who have found jobs often settle for lower wages and are even now struggling to make the house payment, feed the family and hold on until a better time arrives.

This is our reality. Dickens prefigured this moment in A Tale of Two Cities:

“It was the best of times it was the worst of times, it was an age of wisdom, it was an age of foolishness...it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...”

Ladies and gentlemen, it is exactly for times like this that we were put together in this time and place. Grand Rapidians are nothing if we are not compassionate; and mean times call forth the best in our compassionate spirit. Grand Rapidians are nothing if we are not innovative; and confounding challenges bring out the spirit of creativity in all of us. Grand Rapidians are nothing if we are not hopeful, if we are not forward looking; and this hope is rooted in our experience and in our faith. This deep and abiding faith –

understood in so many ways and trusted by so many people – is the foundation of our hope in a future which is better, brighter, fairer, and more just.

## CHAMPIONS OF LIBERTY

In this city, we have models to turn to, mentors to learn from, and deep veins of wisdom to mine. When times are bleak we look to our elders. They have endured hard times. They have fought for our freedoms. They were the trailblazers and now they are the assurance that hard times call forth leaders whose actions and words can change the landscape. The wisdom of our elders represents a wellspring of hope.

For the past two years I have used my State of the City address to award the Champion of Diversity to individuals who have advanced the cause of racial equality in our city. In 2007 the Award went to the members of the Monday Group, minority and white contractors who work tirelessly to ensure business opportunity for minority firms in the construction field. Last year's Champions were Public Schools Superintendent Bernard Taylor, GRCC President Juan Olivarez, and GVSU President Tom Haas. In advancing educational opportunity for diverse young people these three men are preparing for a more equitable future.

It dawned on me this year that it is past-time that I recognize those elders who are still among us who assumed leadership roles in Grand Rapids during the civil rights movement. They are revered elders who have shown us the way to go. Many are still with us, encouraging, guiding and, occasionally, prodding. Every one of them has known hard times and has taken those hard times and used them to advance liberty for all.

This morning I want to call forward twelve Champions of Diversity who are truly champions of liberty. Allow me to read their names and a very brief statement about each then join me in applause as we welcome them to the front.

Introducing any one of these Champions could take much more time than we have...I simply can't afford to buy you lunch, too! So I will provide just a nutshell description of their deeds and invite you to speak with them after the speech to learn more about their lives and contributions.

Maurila (Molly) Blakely in 1970 was the founder of the Hispanic Festival. She said "I wanted to show my children as well as the people here that we do have a culture, a heritage." Molly was the coordinator of the Neighborhood Education Center at the Hispanic Center, the founder of the Hispanic Institute and she worked with the Catholic Human Development Office managing their homeless shelters.

Marshall Chavez is a local entrepreneur and businessman who twice brought Cesar Chavez to Grand Rapids, including his last public appearance before his death. Marshall was involved in the successful effort to name Grandville Ave. Cesar Chavez Blvd. He pioneered events to honor Mexican Independence Day and his restaurant, El Sombrero is *the* place to celebrate Cinco de Mayo.

Within hours of preparing the list of those I would honor today, I learned that one on that list had passed on. Dr. Julius Franks broke the color barrier in the early 1960s when he and two friends Joe Lee and Sam Triplett bought and developed twenty acres on the near northeast side and began the racial integration of Grand Rapids. I remember my own father talking about these three brave men who pioneered residential integration in our city. Accepting the Champion of Diversity award on behalf of her father is Beverly Grant.

Lillian Gill is a longtime respected civil rights leader and historian on the Grand Rapids civil rights movement. She has been a strong advocate of racial justice and a member of the GR chapter of the NAACP for more than 75 years. She recently donated her vast collection of articles and materials related to the civil rights movement to the U of M.

June Horowitz was known to every child in the 50's as "the magic lady" and, although her skills as a magician were unmatched in Grand Rapids it was her passionate advocacy for civil rights that endeared her to the community. June was a founder of the Panel of Americans, a local group that spoke out for racial justice when doing so was unpopular and dangerous.

Alphonse Lewis has been a trailblazer in the legal profession as an African American lawyer. He filed numerous lawsuits to push for equal opportunity and to open doors for racial minorities in Grand Rapids. Furthermore he mentored and provided opportunities within his practice for young African American lawyers.

Rev. Lyman Parks made history by becoming the first African American to be elected Mayor of Grand Rapids. He played a major role in opening opportunities and board appointments for racial minorities. Mayor Parks worked to bring the community together after the racial strife of 1960. Rev. Parks's granddaughter the City Clerk of Grand Rapids, Lauri Parks, will accept on behalf of her grandfather who is wintering in Chicago.

Mary Roberts is a retired social worker who held the highest ranking of women employed in Kent County. She is an elder with the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa in lives on the reservation in Traverse City. While living in Grand Rapids Mary was on the board of the Inter-tribal Council and also served as President of the North American Indian Center.

Vernis Schad has long been involved in advocating for civil rights and women's rights in Grand Rapids. She served on a panel that studied desegregation in the public schools and, as an elected school board member, was involved in implementing the Grand Rapids desegregation plan.

Ella Sims has been a strong advocate for equality and social justice in the areas of education, employment and health services. She played a major role in securing federal housing grants in Grand Rapids in the 1960s. Dr. Sims was a founder of the Grand Rapids Housing Commission.

Francisco Vega has been a leading advocate for civil rights and a respected leader in the community. In 1959 he founded the first privately owned cemetery in Grand Rapids that did not have a racial restrictive covenant. For this he faced racial animosity from many in the business community. Mr. Vega was one of the founders of the Hispanic Center and Latin American Services. With June Horowitz he founded the panel of the Americans. Last month he was given the “Extended Meritorious Service” award by the international Institute of Mexicans Abroad.

Roger Williams is an Elder of the Pokagon Pottawatomie. He is a retired social worker with the Kent County Department of Social Services. Throughout his life he has advocated for the just treatment of minorities and he currently serves on the People of Color collaboration, an initiative of the Community Relations Commission

Ladies and gentlemen, if ever you may doubt that these hard times will end, if ever you feel defeated by forces that are larger than you; remember these faces. For this is the foundation of our hope. This is the surety that we will prevail.

Now, inspired by the example of these revered elders, standing on their strong shoulders, let us turn to the future.

It is a new day in America. In three days Senator Barack Obama will be sworn in as President of the United States. He will be a President for cities. As a community organizer Barack Obama came to understand the workings of a city from the neighborhood level. He knows what makes a city tick, what gives it its vitality, its energy. He understands, as a Senator hailing from a great American city, that cities are the beating heart of America; that if a city is failing, it is akin to a heart that is diseased. He also knows that any city is only as strong as its people and that its people depend on a healthy economy providing good paying jobs, ready access to affordable housing, good public transportation, and quality public schools.

In a campaign speech then-Senator Obama said, “Yes, we need to fight poverty. Yes, we need to fight crime. Yes, we need to strengthen our cities. But we also need to stop seeing our cities as the problem and start seeing them as the solution. Because strong cities are the building blocks of strong regions, and strong regions are essential for a strong America.”

The question about the viability of US cities has been answered. The journey to suburbia is over...it turns out that the American Dream was not to be found there. Not that we didn't seek it. For 50 years America turned to the suburbs; but in the end suburban dwellers experienced traffic congestion, long commutes and a photocopy similarity of neighborhoods and shopping districts. In the end, the ephemeral suburban dream could not be sustained.

Now begins the modern era of great American cities. Grand Rapids is in the forward ranks.

Young people and empty-nesters are returning to cities. They find a multitude of affordable housing choices there. But more important they find walkable communities, efficiency of operation, good transit services, plentiful and varied entertainment, stimulating social networks and interesting neighborhoods, parks and streetscapes.

It is a new day in America and Grand Rapids is poised to rocket to the top of the short list of great American cities. Already we are celebrated as one of the twelve most sustainable cities in the US... and the one most rapidly advancing. We are known for our health care delivery systems and are seen as a regional health care destination that is now receiving exciting national attention. We are recognized for having more green buildings per capita than any city in the country. We rank high in the world on the Global Knowledge Competiveness Index as a center of research and development, with an extraordinary number of patents per capita produced each year. Our thirteen colleges and universities are delivering a world-class education to more than 50,000 full-time students, preparing our people for a prosperous future. Together we have mastered the elusive art of public/private partnerships. An on-line publication recently cited Grand Rapids as the greenest city in America. Our transit system was awarded best-in-class in the country two years ago. We lead the Great Lakes states in our use of renewable energy with 20% of the municipal supply coming from green power and are listed by US-EPA as among the 20 most aggressive municipal renewable energy purchasers in the nation. We have become a convention destination surpassing most cities our size and more than a few that are larger.

There is a reason we are weathering this economy better than most. We have positioned ourselves to lead. And lead we will!

We have not only been guided through these transitions by the wisdom of our elders, but we are, right now, banking wisdom with our young urban pioneers, with our eager young students, and with our trail blazing green developers. They are becoming a new resource, one that will not fail to draw interest as we move to take our place among the greatest cities in the U.S.

Also in that bank is a set of indicators by which we now measure everything we do as a municipal government. These indicators are publicly accessible from the City Homepage. When you visit the site you will be struck by two things. First, you will be impressed by the sheer number of indicators we are tracking to ensure that our delivery of municipal services is meeting the needs of our citizens. Second, you will note – beginning immediately on the title page of the report – that we cluster our work under one of three headings which we call the triple bottom line: environmental sustainability, economic viability and social capital and equity.

Today, in setting forth my vision for 2009 and beyond, I will use the same three categories.

## ENVIRONMENTAL:

First, we look at our environmental sustainability. I already mentioned that Grand Rapids is today considered one of the nation's twelve most sustainable cities – and that by no less an authority than Dr. Kent Portney of Tufts University who holds national prominence for his work in tracking and measuring sustainability among cities. I also told you that Grand Rapids was recently cited as America's greenest city. That was by FastCompany.com the hip, electronic business publication described as “the Forbes of the internet.”

This hard-earned national attention has – among other benefits – resulted in many more organizations choosing our fair city to hold their national or regional conferences. A great example of this is the 2009 World Conference and Exhibition of the Religious Conference Managers Association which will be here in ten days. This conference is known as the “Super bowl of Religious Conferences” not because its 1,200 conference attendees set any records but because every one of those attendees is responsible for planning the annual conference of her/his denomination or religious organization. The very fact that RCMA chose Grand Rapids has already resulted in enormous interest from meeting planners who in the past had not considered Grand Rapids as a viable convention destination. It is estimated that more than \$15 million of future economic gains will come as a result of hosting RCMA, in addition to putting Grand Rapids on the national radar of many new national meetings of all types for many years to come.

I'm proud of the fact that my church – the United Church of Christ – will be here this summer with 4,500 members from all over the world.

Conventions from across the country coming to Grand Rapids are frequently asking for help in holding a new style of conference – a green conference – demanded by conference organizers and attendees as they become more savvy in ecology and conservation strategies. In fact, through recent client studies, nearly 50% of national convention managers surveyed indicated that green initiatives and sustainability programs have become serious differentiators when selecting destinations and meeting facilities for their conferences. They want to ensure that their ecological footprint is minimized and as a result are beginning to question how paper is used and what provisions are available for recycling. They want to eliminate wastes generated from bottled water, Styrofoam and plastic. They want to be recognized for their environmental stewardship and “green commitments”. And, increasingly they want to have a means of offsetting the carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that are generated by their members' travel to their convention destination.

With this growing interest serving as encouragement, I plan to explore the creation of a Grand Rapids Carbon Offset program so that, as a City, we can do our part in helping to promote and encourage a recognition about carbon's impact on our future and use the opportunity to fund some of our own carbon offset strategies. We will provide certified carbon credits for purchase by conference organizers or individual conferees. For example, a conference attendee flying from San Francisco to Grand Rapids generates

1.439 tons of CO2 which has a market value of \$51.80 based on myclimate.com carbon calculator for air travel. The Green Grand Rapids Carbon Offset program will be in position to receive the contribution of \$51.80 for this attendee's travel and issue a carbon offset "green tag", audited for certification. Some conventions will build this cost into the overall registration fees. Others will offer it as a voluntary option to their members. Funds received will be invested in an array of local options from tree planting, to alternative energy purchase, to recycling. Should conference organizers prefer to offer opportunities for participants to contribute volunteer hours while they are here – such as the United Church of Christ is doing this summer for their conference – our Parks and Recreation Department, along with other local environmental partners such as West Michigan Environmental Action Council, the Izaak Walton League, and the Sierra Club, will work with conference organizers to arrange for those volunteer opportunities.

Convention business is an important element of our economy and this service will help make Grand Rapids even more attractive to national and regional conferences.

Also on the environmental front, this will be the year we prepare for implementation of single stream recycling in Grand Rapids. Far-sighted leadership on the Kent County DPW Board has identified a site and is preparing to build a facility to receive unseparated recyclable materials.

The City of Grand Rapids is the largest customer of the Kent County recycling center. Each year we deliver approximately 5,800 tons of recycled materials picked up without fee at curbside all around the city. Presently 55% of our households put out recycling bins to be collected every other week.

With single stream recycling we will be able to make already attractive service even better. When the new Center opens you will give up your blue bins and replace them with much more convenient roller carts. No more sorting. No more carrying. There is still more good news. We are actively considering another cutting-edge enhancement that could further stimulate recycling participation. We have the ability to add bar codes to each of those recycling carts and our trucks could be equipped to both lift and weigh those carts. The bar code will automatically be read at the point of collection and data about the weight of your recycling would be wirelessly transmitted to your account at an accessible on-line service. You would be able to log in, read your cumulative recycling weight and, if local merchants buy in to the concept, you will be able to use recycle scrip – let's call it City Bucks – computed on your recycled volume, to receive discounts on your purchases.

Already I have received a strong expression of interest from the Board and leadership of Local First for their members to participate and three of their members – The Gilmore Collection, Schuler Books and Music and Celebration Cinema have already said they will sign on as soon as the program is ready. Our ground-breaking partnership with the Kent County Board of Public Works will produce these excellent results.

Staying on the environmental front, we continue our work toward the goals of 100% renewable energy by 2020. Although nothing is immediately on the horizon that will take us beyond our current level of 20% we have two very interesting projects underway that will contribute to achieving total municipal independence from fossil-fuel generated electrical power.

We are also well on our way to achieving total separation of our storm and sanitary sewers. We will launch a community-based stormwater planning process in partnership with WMEAC early this year. Legislation is being worked on in Lansing that would establish and clarify guidelines for the creation of a storm water utility. We are fully committed to a clean Grand River. Already the Grand is a top flight fishery; now imagine our river downtown with a kayak course, canoeing and pleasure boating. Think of the opportunities for development along the river with restaurants and cafes looking over the water while the river edges remain accessible for strolling in three seasons. The river has always been at the center of our community and, with its restoration it will again define us as the people of this place.

Public transit is yet another way that we can both create a vital urban environment and improve the quality of the air we breathe. Our ground-breaking Master Plan and zoning ordinance intentionally focus on “transit-oriented development.” Since I stood before you here last year both the federal and state funding for capital investment in the Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Kentwood Bus Rapid Transit line have been approved. A local funding component will be required and the ITP Board is exploring options at this time.

Also, I am pleased to report that since I announced a streetcar plan for downtown Grand Rapids in my 2008 State of the City Address, The Rapid has convened a Task Force, secured funding for feasibility analysis and is moving forward swiftly to plan development of our first streetcar line. In an ideal world the construction of the streetcar would correspond with the construction of the Bus Rapid Transit line so that the two will integrate into the line haul bus system to form a seamless public transportation network.

All that is then needed to make us a transit-efficient region is a countywide system. This will require expanded partnerships that build on the foundation created by the founding communities of the Interurban Transportation Partnership. I invite the Kent County Board of Commissioners and our other partners in the Grand Valley Metropolitan Council to develop a framework for this discussion. Providing public transit services to outlying areas of Kent County will help connect people with jobs, health care services and retail outlets. It will reduce traffic on the County roads and make us a more efficient region. It will also enable us to provide more effective links to our regional partners in Ottawa County as together we study how we can connect those systems.

#### ECONOMY:

While you can see that every environmental gain, or goal, has an economic impact, let me turn specifically to our local economy and address the challenges before us today.

These are extraordinarily hard times for many in our city and throughout Kent County. For Grand Rapids, hard times call forth the very best in us and make us shine. This morning I call on you to shine as you have never shone before.

Hard times, as our elders can attest, call on us to rediscover the spirit of community. The best expression of community is that of neighbor helping neighbor. In every neighborhood of our city there are families who are struggling. Not enough food to go around. No presents for the kids at Christmas. Can't keep the car running. The mortgage payment is late. There is most likely someone like this in your neighborhood: next door or down the block. There is certainly someone you know – a family member, a friend from work, someone from your church or social club – who has been leveled by this economy.

During hard times those of us who are relatively comfortable have the opportunity – and, I would suggest to you, the responsibility – to reach out to those who struggling. Sometimes all it takes is a sympathetic, listening ear and a word of encouragement. Maybe it is nothing more than keeping their kids while they go out on a job interview, inviting them over for dinner, providing transportation to get to essential services.

Or perhaps the demand for personal sacrifice goes beyond time and encouragement. Perhaps out of our relative abundance we may be called on to give sacrificially to meet their shortfall. Philanthropy is a mark of compassionate community.

This morning I want to provide you with three opportunities to assist those who are facing great need.

The United Way is the community's response to economic crisis. All over this country United Ways are assessing the needs of their communities, seeking resources to address those needs and delivering financial support where it is most needed.

Our Heart of West Michigan United Way is no exception. Each year in workplaces all over our community United Way campaigns raise the dollars to meet the crying needs of our people. This year the needs are greater than ever before.

Unfortunately – because this year the workforce is smaller than it has been and because family financial resources are stretched to the limit – giving to United Way is down. That means that our United Way has fewer resources to spread among those agencies that are providing the direct care.

If your workplace participates in United Way and you did not pledge this year, I urge you to do it now. It is never too late to sign on for a contribution through payroll deduction to United Way. If you have already pledged to this year's United Way campaign, I urge you to consider giving just a little more. Not so much that you jeopardize your own family, but enough so that you can help another family.

To make it really easy for you, the United Way has set up a table in the lobby – right outside these doors – and will handle your request this morning to contribute or to increase a contribution level you have already established.

That’s what we do when hard times hit. We help each other.

Another way you can help is by watching for food drives. We have a couple of community-wide drives. The Postal Service “letter Carriers’ Drive” is one. The churches organize another. Watch for a food drive at your place of worship; at a neighborhood business; even at a rock concert or sporting event. If you don’t want to wait for a food drive then call ACCESS (All Community Churches Emergency Service System) at 774-2175 and find out where the nearest pantry is. Your canned goods and other non-perishable food items can help to make life better for a struggling family right here in Grand Rapids.

A third way to help is through a new fund that has been established for emergency relief in our community. This morning I am launching the Neighbor to Neighbor Fund in partnership with the Grand Rapids Community Foundation. Its initial funding comes from a modest surplus in sponsorship funds from this morning’s State of the City conference and a gift that Susan and I are making. It will be managed by the Grand Rapids Community Foundation in tandem with a fund that the Foundation has established with its own gift and gifts from several area corporate and family foundations for the purpose of emergency relief.

Here’s how it will work.

The Kent County Essential Needs Task Force closely monitors the areas of critical need in the county. They track 211 calls for help coming in to United Way. They monitor housing demand through the Salvation Army. They receive reports of foreclosures and evictions through Home Repair Services and they track food demand through Second Harvest Gleaners and the food pantries of ACCESS. The Essential Needs Task Force has now established a subcommittee to work with the Grand Rapids Community Foundation to direct the resources of the Neighbor to Neighbor Fund to the agencies best equipped to handle the most pressing human services needs in our area.

How can you help?

First, watch your water bill this spring for an opportunity to add a few dollars to your payment. You have had that option on your Consumers Power bill for 26 years...the chance to make a payment to the People Care Fund. In the last two years alone Consumers has provided over one-quarter million dollars of emergency relief in Kent County alone. If you don’t want to wait until your water bill comes you can simply drop a check in the mail to the City Treasurer and mark Neighbor to Neighbor Fund on the notation line.

In fact, I wouldn't be a good Mayor (or a preacher worth my salt) if I didn't offer those of you who are here this morning a chance to give. When you leave today, members of the Mayor's Youth Council will greet you at the doors with receptacles to make your contribution. Remember, you don't have to pay for your breakfast. You won't have a \$7 charge to get your car out of the lot. Please be generous. \$10, \$20, or \$100 dollars – cash or check payable to City of Grand Rapids – every cent will go to meet human need here in our community. Please be as generous as your circumstances allow. Hard times are on us. The test of our community's resilience is in how compassionate we are during hard times.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EQUITY: YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Finally, let me turn to a continuing theme of my tenure, development of our youth and the importance of education.

We recognize that our children are our future. Oh, we've always said it...it has even become trite. But today we realize, in a profound new way, that without an educated, innovative and competitive workforce we will not compete with the emerging global economic strongholds of China, India, and Indonesia. We are already a step behind. We cannot afford to waste a moment...or a child...in our efforts to reassert America's place of prominence in the global economy.

Of course, that means that every child, in every school, in every city of every state must receive the best education possible. At an early age all must become readers. They must be immersed in – and become proficient at – mathematics and science.

I applaud the progress that Superintendent Bernard Taylor and the Grand Rapids Board of Education are making by creating innovative environments where world-class education can be delivered by seasoned and skillful professional teachers. The Detroit News said this about our city's public schools on November 24<sup>th</sup> of last year:

“Eight years ago the Grand Rapids Public Schools district was facing Detroit's challenges, including a persistent decline in enrollment and dismal student performance.

Flash forward to today: the fiscally-sound district just posted its best Michigan Educational Assessment Program test scores in years. Its violent incidents have declined for three consecutive years. And its new student count showed it improved its rate of enrollment decline, losing just about 450 students – its best count in a decade.

Grand Rapids' pathway to success has been painful, no doubt. But it is seeing the fruits of years of persistent disciplined strategic work.”

The system is ready, it has adapted to current needs and circumstances, now it is up to us as a community to see that our children are confident that there is a bright future for them.

Five years ago I announced at this forum that I would pursue an initiative I called Education Renewal Zones. This effort would create a citywide tax capture zone that would return a portion of the growth in our tax base to instructional programming in the GRPS. The premise behind this tax capture was that strong public schools do more than anything else to raise property values in a city and the modest loss of revenue from tax capture would be more than compensated over time through a strengthening tax base. I met with Governor Granholm who expressed her enthusiasm for the concept. I met with Michigan legislators who were slightly more wary. I underestimated the opposition I would encounter from within my own ranks as two City Commissioners – neither serving on the Commission today – publicly challenged the concept. And I was naïve in not anticipating external opposition from those who might “lose” tax revenue in the near term and who did not buy my argument about future tax revenue potential.

Well, good things are worth waiting for. The Kalamazoo Promise proved that investing in the education of youth has a dramatic effect on people’s perception of urban public education...and on property values and the vitality of the community. And the Governor, drawing on the early work we had done on Education Renewal Zones and on the Kalamazoo Promise, promoted legislation called Promise Zones and signed it into law early this week. Promise Zones Program requires both tax capture and philanthropy and give the children of a community the assurance that if they work hard and get good grades they can go to college.

This tool to help our children still has some soft spots. Superintendent Taylor has pointed out to me that any program that takes tax dollars from the State Education Fund has the potential of reducing State support for instruction. Further, our philanthropic community reminds me that they are already heavily involved in funding education and early childhood initiatives.

Notwithstanding these valid concerns it is important that we explore the potential for using Promise Zones in Grand Rapids. I will initiate a meeting with foundation directors and the Board of Education and I will be urging them to seriously consider this tool to give our kids a shot at a great future and to give our city a competitive edge.

On another front: a number of years ago the GRPS and the City set a joint goal to have afterschool programming in every school in the City. Opportunity for kids to expand the learning day, to keep them off the streets or out of empty homes until Mom or Dad arrived at the end of the workday. Working through Our Community’s Children, the joint initiative of the City and Schools, we have now secured the funding and implemented the programming so that every single elementary and middle school in the Grand Rapids Public School district has academically-based after-school programs.

Last year at the State of the City I told you about a Youth Master Planning process that we were initiating with a mix of national and local funding. I am pleased to report that the planning process is underway. Youth Commissioners are sitting side-by-side with adult Commissioners. They are surveying their peers and they are studying models gleaned from around the nation. Some of the best and brightest from our community are developing a Youth Master Plan that will open the doors to further opportunities for our young people.

Also last year I challenged the business community to work with me to provide 500 new jobs for young people. This initiative will provide youth with opportunities to practice what they are learning in school, to experience life in a workplace environment, and to develop relationships with adults outside of their homes and schools. I am pleased to report that we have secured the first 100 of those jobs during 2008. One of those youth internships took place at the Grand Rapids Times. Dr. Patricia Pulliam is not only committed to putting positive articles about youth in her newspaper, but she is committed to giving work experiences to young people. Marcel Gamble is a case in point. He began an internship with the Times and now has his own column called “Teens Talk” and he is enrolled in college with a major in journalism. I also applaud Spectrum Health for the innovative partnership with the GRPS to create health science internships for our students.

My Mayor’s Youth Council members have taken on the exciting project of creating ways to link youth looking for jobs with employers looking for youth. We have made a good start on youth job creation. We need to continue making that investment; an investment in our kids, an investment in our future. I need 50 more businesses to step up – like the Grand Rapids Times and Spectrum Health have. If your company has not yet made arrangements for taking on youth interns, please consider doing so in 2009.

## CONCLUSION

As we welcomed the New Year two weeks ago the pundits were universal in saying that 2008 would go down as one of the worst years in memory. War. Economic collapse. Shrinking incomes and shrinking tax bases. A Governor attempting to sell a Senate seat, a long-time Senator convicted of graft and a major city Mayor sentenced to prison. These are things that are burned into our consciousness.

So this morning I am glad to have reminded you of several good things that we – all of us here today and many others in the community – made happen in Grand Rapids in 2008. Now we turn toward 2009 with a renewed sense of optimism and a hope born of the spirit of this place and this people.

For you see, although we’ve been damaged we are not defeated. And we will not be defeated.

Although we have ample cause to be anxious we are not without hope and we are not without resources. We have no shortage of resolve. We are prepared. I know of no more resilient, more capable community than ours.

This can be – no, it must be – the beginning of our next golden era; one in which we claim our place as a great American City. We know ourselves well...our emerging opportunities and our historical limitations. We are a people who value place and respect difference. We are a compassionate people who will not abandon our neighbors when times are toughest. We are a people who respect the wisdom of our elders and who invest in those who will follow us as the next generation of our City's leaders.

Most of all we are a people who believe that in every challenge is an opportunity; and the greater the challenge the more potential exists.

Grand Rapids, our potential now is enormous! If we do not lose our focus on the things that matter most – our children, our environment, and our growing economy – if we continue to work collaboratively throughout the region, then our future will certainly be prosperous and our place on the list of America's Top Cities will be assured.

We must help each other discover that future. Join me today. There is hard work ahead. No one can do it but us. Now is the time to come together, to roll up our sleeves and to be about the serious work of building our great American city one child, one tree, one job at a time.