

Members of the Common Council, Members of the Lockport Rotary Club and
Distinguished Guests:

I would like to thank the Rotary Club of Lockport for inviting me to give the Annual State of the City Address today. Though it only seems like yesterday that I became Mayor - seven years of steady progress has taken place. Redevelopment of critical downtown buildings, greater emphasis on housing and infrastructure, also more emphasis on tourism – including the Canal Concert series and most recently – the continued restructuring of City government have been the cornerstone of this administration.

Upon being elected for a second term, I pledged that this administration would focus on getting “back to the basics.” I knew that our payroll was too large, I knew that pension and health care costs were skyrocketing and I knew that we had to do more with less. I knew that we had to explore restructuring departments and explore privatization of certain services. The taxpayers of Lockport could no longer afford the status quo and the time had come to step up to plate and make overdue changes to City Hall.

Some of my close friends have said to me – “Tuck – why are you implementing these reforms in an election year.” I pause. I think. I pause again. Then I respond – “that is a great question.” But my friends – there is no greater time than now - we truly could not kick the can down the road any further. I am willing to take the risk – because it is my duty and truly the right thing to do.

Here are the facts: Last year – due to the increased cost of general living, necessary expenses, the outrageous increase in health care and pension costs; the Common Council faced an initial budget deficit of 1.2 Million Dollars and a proposed tax increase of double digits. The Common Council and myself recognized that this was not acceptable. The hardworking taxpayers of this City could not sustain such an increase, so we took action.

Today, I respectfully ask every citizen and city employee to be patient and open minded to the changes taking place. We did not make these decisions lightly – we studied and weighed them carefully. We recognize that some current services will be handled in a different manner and there will be a period of adjustment. Change is hard – but necessary to strike the balance to providing needed services while keeping property taxes down as much as possible.

There were two major changes that were addressed: Privatizing our garbage service and reducing the number of people that are employed by the City of Lockport. I will be spending much of this address updating you on them because it is critically important that a smooth transition occurs.

The City of Lockport currently has a fleet of 6 garbage trucks with an average 11 employees who collect refuse. Through the negotiations with the AFSCME union, my administration was able to successfully achieve that refuse collection could be privatized. What does this mean exactly? It means that City taxpayers will no longer be strapped with long term legacy costs such as employee benefits and the cost of purchasing and maintaining the equipment necessary to perform this service. An average family medical plan today costs \$18,000. One garbage truck costs \$300,000. On top of this, city taxpayers pay for the gas, oil, and cost of maintenance (just like your vehicle at home) for each of these trucks. It just did not make sense to have the City in the garbage business any more.

Now, in time, these 11 employees will not be replaced. Their salaries will no longer be in budgets down the road. For the time being, these employees will be transferred to other positions that have become open due to retirements.

Furthermore, if you survey the other municipalities in our region, almost none of them are in the garbage business, and for very good reason. I have spoken with fellow Mayors and Town Supervisors and they have assured me that once the transition occurs – residents will be extremely satisfied with the new service.

As a result of our decision, city property tax bills will go down 4.3% and a new refuse collection fee put in place. In some cases, the shift resulted in a zero net increase over last year for most residents. Now, looking long term – why did the city implement the fee.

Currently, almost all property in the City has their refuse picked up by the City. This includes churches and non-for-profits. These entities, which make up about 15% of our properties, are exempt from paying property taxes. In essence, they are having their refuse picked up for free under the current system. However, under the new plan, they will no longer be exempt from the refuse collection fee – similar to their current responsibility to pay a water and sewer fee. Therefore, this spreads the cost of this service among all users.

Now, how is the new service going to be implemented? We are currently meeting with companies under a very unique bidding process and a company will be selected.

It is anticipated that the start of the new program will begin around June of this year. It will be phased in. Currently, there is refuse pick up once a week for residential properties with five routes (one for each working day of the week). Two routes will be changed over per month until the whole city is on the new system. This will permit the City and company to iron out issues and concerns along the way. City residents will purchase a bin – they come in three sizes based upon your needs. The larger the bin – the more it will cost. The smaller the bin – the less it will cost. Again – I believe this system – is fair and the cost is spread out among what you actually use.

Also, this new system will address additional recycling opportunities – to recycle tin, glass and plastic at the curbside. Large items will be properly addressed through this bidding process and will be picked up in an established manner.

Fellow citizens – change is hard, but necessary to survive. I am confident – once this process is place – and the minor glitches are worked out – that we all will be pleased that the new system is in place. Through this transition though, I want you to feel free to communicate with me – give me a call anytime – to ask me questions or address concerns that you may have. By working though this together, it will go much smoother.

Last year, Governor Paterson and the State Legislature provided local municipalities an opportunity to opt into an early retirement program. The City of Lockport did and as a result – 24 employees retired. To maximize the savings, we were required to not fill all these positions. I have chosen to replace just one. Again, we evaluated this carefully and recognized this opportunity to further our goal of “doing more with less” and restructuring and consolidating services within city government.

To better coordinate our departments and services, we intend to hire a Director of Community Services to lead the Community Development, Building Inspection and Assessor Departments. Furthermore, we are continually upgrading our computer services to provide the more efficient and effective means at City Hall.

There is no doubt about it – City Hall and City Government looks a lot different than when I first entered office just over 7 years ago. We have worked with Mayor Rob Ortt and the North Tonawanda City Council to share our Director of Water and Wastewater Services. We have restructured the services at Highway and Parks.

We have increased the role of our Building Inspection Department to tackle the blight in our City and to work with our City Prosecutor and Housing Court Judge to ensure success in cleaning up our City. And we have 24 fewer employees today than when we started.

Though reforming city government has been my main focus during my second term, I would like to ensure City residents that the Flight of Five, Canal Street, Harrison Square, the Ice Skating Rink at the old Jubilee, and other business development at all corners of our City remains a priority. I continue to work with the Common Council, Greater Lockport Development Corporation, Corporation Counsel and others to retain and bring good paying jobs, economic development and tourism opportunities to our great City.

I know this has been a trying time on our city – but I would like to thank City residents, employees, business leaders and community board volunteers for their patience and cooperation. These difficult economic times have given us pause to address and try new things. It is long overdue and we must give these changes a chance to succeed. And we must continue working together because our work is far from done. There is so much more we need to do – in order to preserve our City for generations to come.

Thank you and I welcome your questions at this time.