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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

JOE A. SMITH
MAYOR
mayor@nlr.ar.gov

PHONE (501) 975-8601
FAX (501) 975-8633

CITY HALL
P.O. BOX 5757
NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS 72119-5757
website: www.nlr.ar.gov

State of the City of North Little Rock
Mayor Joe A. Smith
March 28, 2016

To the distinguished members of the North Little Rock City Council, City Attorney, City Clerk, and my fellow residents of North Little Rock, thank you for the honor of serving as your Mayor.

As we chart the course and continue our work through 2016, it is important to remember that we are always planning for next year and the many to follow. Our elected terms as city officials may be four years, but it is incumbent upon us to govern with little thought to the next election, but rather to the sole benefit of our residents, businesses, and visitors, current and future, well-being.

So, it is with an eye to the future that we review the past year in order to build upon our success, and take a new path where we find opportunities for improvement. As I hope you will find in this review, thanks to a hardworking, dedicated City Council and the professionalism of the best employees in the state, the future of North Little Rock is in great hands.

This short report should serve you well in summarizing the areas of our city government where we have most focused our attention this past year and how we are laying a foundation for our future. We address city finances, public safety, infrastructure, partnerships, economic development, and public trust.

Finances

As we all understand, the public places their faith in us to be good stewards of their tax dollars. It is one of our most sacred responsibilities as public servants. Three years ago, my administration prepared a 5-year outlook regarding the city financial situation. We faced some harsh realities at the time, as we were on a path to exhaust our reserve fund within three years. The threats of a sales tax increase or implementing a sanitation fee were all too real possibilities in discussions following that report. Thankfully, in 2016 we no longer feel the weight of those threats.

Through good management, some department reorganizations, investing in efficiencies, and a thoughtful, involved Council budget process, our reserve fund balance stands at a healthy $12.5 million. As many of you and our residents know, it was not an easy or painless process, but last year we continued to follow the path we set three years ago, and that has lead to a much improved and secure financial position for our city in 2016. Amazingly we did this without raising taxes, forced layoffs, or cutting services. I truly believe we offer a better value for our residents' tax dollars today than we have in some time.

Public Safety

As public servants entrusted with investing the public's tax dollars we are tasked with our most important expense: the public's safety. The first priority of my administration is providing our police and fire departments with the tools and support they need to secure the well-being of everyone in the City of North Little Rock. After we ensure a professional, competent response to emergencies and security situations we then look to maintaining the public health with sanitation services and code enforcement.

- Police – As police departments around the country continue to be held accountable, both rightly and wrongly, for policies discouraging community trust, the men and women of the North Little Rock police department have cultivated a deep partnership with our neighborhoods, faith organizations, youth groups, and social service institutions. This relationship with the community serves to open communication, which in turn leads to public trust. Becoming a leading example of a municipal police force did not happen by accident.

  A conscious decision to focus on community policing has helped the public build personal relationships with our incredible officers and understand the vital service they provide to our society. A combination of this policy direction and our professional, highly trained officers, has led to a decrease in both property and violent crimes. The number of reported property crimes is now 38% less than it was just 3 years ago. Reported violent crimes have decreased by 12% in the same time frame.

- Fire – The inauguration of our eleventh fire station on the East side of our city and the purchase of three new fire trucks in 2015, highlight our dedication to equip the men and women of the North Little Rock Fire Department with the tools they need to keep us safe. We certainly have more to do as the overall state of our facilities and vehicles continue to deserve our attention. For 2016 it is our intention to purchase an additional fire truck, and we will be proposing a budget for 2017 that continues our commitment to replace our aging fleet of firefighting apparatus.

- Public Safety Unions – Following a period of six years without our city being able to come to agreeable terms with IAFF Local #35 or the NLR FOP, 2015 was the second consecutive year we have worked together with both unions to reach an agreement on a new contract. The relationship with our public safety unions is an important one to maintain and foster. I am proud of my administrations ability to do so, and thankful for the professionals in the unions with whom we negotiate.

- Code Enforcement – I have always held the philosophy that it is possible to fight crime with code enforcement. Maintaining clean neighborhoods for the enjoyment of the residents, encouraging everyone to be neighborly, and ridding our community of blight are tools to use to our advantage in our continuing efforts to discourage criminal behavior.

  With the Council's guidance and cooperation, we do better than most cities in combating the endless problem of foreclosures and abandoned, neglected, and overgrown properties. But we are going to do more. A foreclosure registration process will be implemented soon to help us keep track of properties that have a higher

possibility of becoming nuisances, and provide some revenue towards the inevitable cost of maintaining many of the yards and structures.

Infrastructure

Streets are the arteries of our community. When a city's infrastructure is in poor repair, the life of the community is depressed. As many of you are aware, since taking office my intention has always been to spend $500,000 to $1 million on repairing the streets of North Little Rock.

In 2014 we focused our efforts on the main thoroughfares of our city and continued those efforts in 2015. The great efforts of our Engineering, Street, and Traffic departments in 2016 helped build a new Main Street from 13th to 26th and complete all of McCain Blvd. The feedback we have received from residents on the $1 million project has been universal in their praise for the improvements. Our staff efforts are underway now identifying the projects for this year, and we plan on continuing the financial allocation to street improvements for the next several years.

Partnerships

Our residents work in many different cities. Many of our business owners live across the river. Our visitors often take advantage of our river. Our children's schools are not governed by our City Council. All these facts of life encourage us to have substantial, friendly, and influential partnerships with our neighboring cities, state agencies, and other governmental organizations.

- The beautiful, new pedestrian crossing on Main Street by the high school is a direct result of our great working relationship with the North Little Rock School District.
- We are prepared as any city can be for the Broadway Bridge replacement project, because we work well with the Highway Department.
- Downtown continues to blossom, literally and figuratively, thanks to our support and partnership with the dedicated Argenta Downtown Council.
- Our Park Hill Merchants Association, organized three years ago, and the Levy Merchants Association, formed just two years ago, are going strong and bringing much needed revitalization to these historic neighborhoods. This year, we are looking forward to forming the Rose City Merchants Association to try and replicate the success we have seen with the other organizations.
- Three years ago, my administration created the Neighborhood Leadership Council. The purpose of the Council was to educate our neighborhood leaders on how to be effective in their mission of forming active, productive community groups. This project has been exceedingly successful.
- We have seen an increase in the number of neighborhood organizations and have graduated more than 30 neighborhood organizers from our leadership training courses.

Economic Development

The world economy is always changing and we must adapt to these new realities or risk becoming obsolete to future generations and miss opportunities to provide employment for our residents. Our usual practice of recruiting businesses to locate or expand in NLR is being expanded to include a focus on preparing our young minds for the next big thing and fostering small businesses.

Our Council's continuing support of the Arkansas Innovation Hub in our downtown is educating and inspiring hundreds of students every week. The business accelerator program HubX, a part of the Innovation Hub, is bringing in startups to our city on a regular basis. This investment in

the future is paying off already as the Hub continues to receive state and federal grants that bring even more growth and commerce into our community.

Public Trust

The measure of all government transparency can be judged by the public's trust. I ask our staff and myself on a regular basis if we are doing enough that our residents feel comfortable with how we are conducting the affairs of their city. The minimum standard for any municipality is to never hide the public's business. The standard we strive for in North Little Rock is much higher; we encourage participation and engagement with our residents by promoting our daily activities and challenges, requesting public feedback, and offering great "customer service."

Our website continues to provide easily accessible day-to-day information for residents to get answers anytime they find it convenient. Social media sites, like Facebook and Twitter, have experienced double-digit growth and foster citizen engagement where our employees and council members can not only offer information but also listen to the community's opinions. Our NLR Report and Repair system, available on our website and as a mobile app, is growing and providing a high level of customer service.

Conclusion

Of course, execution of the many decisions we make would not be possible without the bravery and dedication of the people who make up our city work force. We have the best employees in the state and I am reminded of that every time my inbox fills with emails praising our police, fire, sanitation, street, electric, and many other departments. At my staff meetings I am constantly surprised by the reports from our department heads at the sheer number of projects and daily responsibilities our city undertakes. As a resident, I am thankful. As Mayor, I am bursting with pride.

I also must point out the thoughtful and purposeful advice, opinion, and direction from a great City Council. I want to make sure all council members know how grateful we are for their service. Our residents might not realize, but the council sacrifices more than just one evening, twice a month. They are ambassadors for our city every day. The hours of research they do prior to our meetings can sometimes be daunting and overwhelming, but they have never failed to bring great ideas and discussion to the council chamber. Being a liaison for the public to our government is a 24-7 job and I appreciate all they do for our city.

Thank you for the honor of serving as your Mayor. I hope the information presented has been helpful and is used to promote discussion and questions. As always my office is available to answer any questions or address any issues or concerns you might have.

Sincerely,

Joe A. Smith
Mayor

TIME 2:11 P.M.
BY via email
DATE 3-28-16
Diane Whitbey, City Clerk and Collector
North Little Rock, Arkansas
RECEIVED by Thomas