

Making Tucson Work
February 14, 2012 State of the City Address
Mayor Jonathan Rothschild

Introduction

Good afternoon. Thank you for being here. Thank you to the Tucson Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce for hosting today's luncheon and for donating a part of the proceeds to the Community Food Bank, Casa de los Niños, and the Educational Enrichment Foundation. This is the kind of creative partnership that needs to be applauded.

The state of our city is getting stronger. City revenues are up 4.6 percent this year. That's good news. It tells us we're beginning the slow climb out of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. As our economy recovers, it will be tempting to go back to how we've done things in the past. It is imperative that we not fall into that trap.

We have an opportunity to remake our city government—to address our long-term concerns, assert our role as the largest city in Southern Arizona, and fulfill our commitments to our citizens.

In short, to make Tucson work.

This means: putting people back to work, making city government work, and establishing partnerships to find creative solutions to our long-term challenges.

It is appropriate that we are here on February 14, 2012. On this day, 100 years ago, Arizona was admitted to the Union. This past Sunday was the birthday of Abraham Lincoln—perhaps our greatest example of courage and wisdom in government. And today is Valentine's Day—a time to recognize the most important partnerships in our lives.

To make Tucson work, we will need to have an honest sense of our history. We will need the courage and the wisdom to make the right decisions, not just the easy ones. And we will need to work together—keeping in mind that each of us loves Tucson, and wants it to be a vibrant city.

Putting People Back to Work

Tucson must be a place people want to stay, and a place where they can stay. We must make sure there are jobs for Tucsonans today, and that there will be jobs for our children tomorrow. Therefore, we must focus on economic and workforce development.

Economic Development

The best way to make our city stronger is to grow our local economy, so we can provide good jobs to all our people. That is also the best way to ensure effective city services—by securing adequate funding with a strong economy.

When it comes to economic development, we must resist the false choices that have divided our community in the past. We need strong businesses—large and small. While it's true that the needs of different size businesses are different, we must do our part as a city to help all our businesses succeed. Local businesses of all sizes employ our people. Retail and restaurants, aviation and optics, solar and biomedical—all are necessary if we are to compete in a knowledge-based global economy.

Over the past 60 days, my office has worked to establish a process where business knows it's being heard and can work in partnership with city government. Keeping that dialogue open will make us a stronger community.

I have held multiple business roundtables since taking office. At each one, I listen to concerns, but I also ask the business community for its help in rebuilding the Tucson we all love. I am excited to see so many reach out and not just talk about problems, but also suggest solutions.

I know we will not agree on every issue. However, if we begin our conversations from something we agree on—a goal, values, or a set of facts—then the final outcome is better understood and often better supported. I have seen this happen as the City Council recently amended the Sign Code, the Lighting Code, and as we are about to pass a group dwelling ordinance with the input and consensus of both the business community and concerned citizen groups. Dialogue works.

Workforce Development

Creating jobs is part of the equation. But only part. We must prepare our children to compete for those jobs. We must commit to improving our education system. That's how we ensure a strong economy. Why would a company set up shop in a community without a skilled workforce? Why would a family move to a city if their children aren't guaranteed a good education? No matter what challenges we face, we cannot fail our children.

To that end, I will advocate for programs that prepare students to get and keep jobs. We must create a workforce that attracts new business and sustains existing business. We will go together with our business partners to the State Legislature and we will deliver the message: "Cutting funds to education is not good for business; it is bad for business." Policies that deprive schools of books, supplies and teachers—these policies are bad for children and families.

We will work to improve educational outcomes for our children. This means we will continue the dialogue I've begun with our early childhood educators, our School District Superintendents, our Pima Community College Chancellor and our University of Arizona President to understand their needs and address them as we can.

Finally, any diploma, from any regional high school, trade or technical school, college or university, must have value in the job market. Our private sector must work with the leaders of these institutions to be clear about what they're looking for in future employees. I am eager to move forward with all these partners to improve our children's opportunities to work here in Tucson.

Making City Government Work

Customer Service

Beyond putting people to work in the private sector, we must make Tucson's government work. My bottom line for the city is this: balance the budget, protect basic services and, now more than ever, focus like a laser on customer service. Customer service is the basis of every successful enterprise. We at the city must provide stellar customer service to every citizen, every business, every water ratepayer, every visitor, every person we serve every day. This is how Tucson competes. This is how we distinguish ourselves. We set the bar high. And we reach it.

Customer service is something I will continue to preach, focus on, and, where necessary, enforce. And I have to say that the city employees I talk to are excited to give their best. They take pride in their work and in our city. To city staff who are with us today, I look forward—Tucson looks forward—to seeing your best. And I look forward to seeing your best recognized by our community.

I want my administration to be known for communication and accountability. That is why I hold weekly press conferences and put out weekly newsletters. That is why I personally read and try to answer every constituent email sent to my office. I believe in leading by example, and as I meet with each department head and with city employees, I am pushing them to be equally open to feedback.

Customer service is why I've focused my early days in office on streamlining Development Services' permit review and approval process. It's why I've focused on revising the Land Use Code. It's why I've devoted one of my five staff positions to a person whose sole responsibility is troubleshooting and mediating business-related issues in the city. We cannot help in every case. But we can communicate. And we can learn where we need to improve.

Management

Our city departments can't run themselves. We need good leadership to ensure good service. We must invest in the city to make it work—with human capital as well as financial

capital. To that end, in 2012, we will hire our permanent City Manager. We recently hired a new HR Director. Her first mission will be to fill our funded but unfilled positions. We will hire a new Transportation Director. We will, for the first time in a number of years, hire a city Water Director to head our national-award-winning water department. We cannot let the strides we have made over the last two decades—improving our water quality and increasing our water conservation—slip away. We will hire a new IT Director. Many of the efficiencies we need in our city are directly connected to our need to invest in our information technology systems.

We must ensure that projects already underway are administered well. Just a few weeks ago, we opened the new TPD Crime Lab—a building that came in on time and under budget; that will, I am sure, receive Gold LEED certification, and that has room for the department to grow. That type of foresight should be the hallmark of city projects.

I will help ensure that the modern streetcar project is managed this way. We must make sure every dollar is used appropriately, and the project is delivered in the way businesses and residents have been promised.

Another part of making city government work is moving beyond our distractions. I have resolved, through settlement or otherwise, to put the Rio Nuevo dispute in our past. The development of downtown, as the economic heart of our city, is our future. We welcome partners who, in good faith, want to be part of our community team.

City Budget

A city's budget reflects what a community values most. This is especially true when times are tough, when tough decisions are required.

First and foremost, it is high time to get back to basics. We must fund our core services first: police, fire, street maintenance, parks, transit, water and sanitation. These are the people's priorities, and they are my priorities.

The city must do the basics well: keep our neighborhoods safe, fix potholes, clear graffiti, clean medians. In short, we must be the best at doing what we're supposed to do.

Moreover, we need a comprehensive accounting of what our shortfalls are and what it will cost to address them. What will it take to get all our streets up to good condition? What will it take to make sure TPD can respond to all property crimes and all non-injury traffic accidents? What will it take to make sure our firefighters and EMTs can respond to any life-threatening emergency within 4 minutes? The financial facts need to be on the table.

Once we know the costs of providing this level of basic services, I want to give our community the facts about our situation and the opportunity to choose a different future. This may mean asking the voters what services they want to pay for, and how—by dedicated revenue sources or city-issued bonds. You see, it really is our choice what kind of city we want to live in.

Long-term Funding Challenges

We must prioritize investments in infrastructure. I believe that fixing city roads is a first priority. Our State Legislature must return the funds it has swept for road maintenance from cities, counties and towns for many years. And as we fix our roads, let's be smart about it. Let's use environmentally-friendly engineering to limit rainwater runoff. And let's build more bike paths, so we incorporate our livability goals into original designs, rather than spend more later to make those improvements.

While city revenues are up, so are fixed costs and expenses. For the first time in several years, we should not need to cut our city work force; we should not need to implement furloughs, and we should not need to cut basic public services. But that does not address the long-term issue, faced by every city in this country, of rising fixed costs. Aging infrastructure, in both roads and transit systems, and rising pension costs, must be addressed. But let me be very clear—arbitrary large cuts are not smart public policy. Pensions are earned through years of service, and those for police and firefighters are the result of long careers where our public servants put their lives on the line every day for this community. We must honor that service. And, such benefits are one of the ways city government can attract the best talent in the future.

There is no simple solution. As a community, we must have the courage to address these long-term issues head on. Everything will be on the table: Charter reform, dedicated revenue streams, bonding, transit reform, compensation methodologies and annexation.

Annexation and Incorporation

We must address the fact that our model of unincorporated growth is neither smart nor sustainable. And let's be honest about our history—policies that got us here will no longer work. The governmental model we have lived with for 50 years has remained static as this valley grew from 50,000 people to a million. Let's recognize some hard facts. 84% of the people in this country now live in incorporated areas. Maricopa County is 93% incorporated. Contrast that with Pima County, which is 64% incorporated. This matters because the State shares revenue based on the percent of people living in incorporated areas. We lose out on our state-shared revenue.

We must correct this obvious imbalance. We must collect our full allotment of state-shared revenues. Our valley loses tens of millions of dollars every year to the state general fund—money that is not returned to us because of our refusal to incorporate. We can no longer allow our tax dollars to go to Phoenix. If we collect these monies, we can use them to address our long-term needs and lower our local tax rates. Lower local tax rates will lower the cost of doing business across the region. It will be good for all of us. But we must annex.

For years, we've heard the reasons for annexation, but we have not heard how we go about annexing. It's simple; we have not put the necessary resources into the project.

Annexation requires 50% of the property owners in a qualified area to sign a petition. We will look at where annexation makes sense—where revenue sources exist to meet service area needs. We will train a small staff and a core of volunteers who will go door to door and make the case that will help bring this valley back to economic viability. I have invited the Mayors of the satellite cities in this region—Marana, Oro Valley, and Sahuarita—to join in this effort.

And for those areas that are currently unincorporated, I can tell you now that it will be cheaper and far better to join a city with an award-winning police department, fire department, water department and parks department than to strike out on your own. If you do not want to be part of an existing municipality, I invite you to consider incorporation. Incorporation is required for our economic and business survival.

We ask our county government to be a cooperative partner in this effort. Regionalism is important to our community. But regionalism will not work until we get the government structure that gives us the best chance to succeed economically. That is an incorporated valley.

Establishing Partnerships

Finally, we must have the courage to break down the silos that have existed for too long between government and everybody else. We must create public-private partnerships. Like any relationship, these partnerships will take work, trust, and a true passion for success. We can learn a lot from similar partnerships formed around the country. For example, many successful park systems in this country are now working aggressively with the private and non-profit sectors to provide and maintain vibrant recreational spaces. We must do the same.

We are at a time in our history where the private sector cannot do everything on its own, the public sector cannot do everything on its own, and the non-profit sector faces increasing demands with fewer funds. We are all being asked to provide more with less. To paraphrase a recent headline in the Tucson Weekly, it's not a choice of pools vs. pachyderms. It's a choice to have pools and pachyderms. But only if we work together.

Earlier, you saw a PSA promoting a simple way to save lives. Just making this PSA brought together the public and non-profit sectors. I want to introduce the man who spearheaded this change in medical protocols, Dr. Ewy—Director of the Sarver Heart Center and Chief of Cardiology at the University of Arizona. Dr. Ewy, would you please stand. Thank you, Dr. Ewy, for continuing to ask, “How can we do better?” —and for sharing your discoveries with the world.

Public-private partnerships cannot be limited to individual programs—they must also tackle the largest challenges in our community. I hope I do not have to remind anyone in this room that nearly one in four children in Pima County lives below the poverty line. That rate is the highest of any county in Arizona, and Arizona ranks as the second poorest state in the nation. These facts have not changed since I took office 60 days ago and I do not expect them to change

quickly. However, I do expect them to change. I expect us to come together as a community to address the issue of poverty.

My office has created a Mayor's Commission on Poverty in the Tucson Area. Peggy Hutchison and Patti Caldwell have agreed to chair this commission, and they are committed to bringing together leaders in the private and non-profit sectors with city and county workers to develop tangible, defined strategies for addressing poverty in our community. This group will look to adopt low-budget, high-impact programs that can work in Tucson.

This effort must have an impact—and I am committed to ensure that it does.

There are a number of ways we can be good stewards of this city. I will see that we continue to support the arts, because a city without a strong emphasis on the arts is in danger of losing its soul. I will continue to push for environmental protection—not as a separate goal, but as one of the core guiding principles in all our policies and programs. And I will continue to promote the unique and wonderful culture and history of our city. We are a city of compassion and civic-mindedness. I am honored to be an ambassador to the rest of the country as I represent this great city.

Conclusion

Some of what I've talked about today is not new—many of you have heard me speak repeatedly about my 180 day plan and I have provided each of you with a copy today. But completion of the 180 day plan is just the beginning. It sets the stage for restoring confidence in our city. It sets the stage for the bigger, more fundamental initiatives I've shared with you today.

Recently, I visited Tucson High School—a school older than our state—and the alma mater of my father and my daughter. The entryway at Tucson High School showcases a Wall of Fame, representing some of our city's history.

On that Wall of Fame is a picture of Cress Lander, who is with us today. Cress attended Tucson High before integration was the law of the land. He went there after attending the segregated Dunbar School. Some years ago, Cress worked with the city to restore a dilapidated Dunbar, turning it into a community center, a neighborhood center, and an incubator for small businesses. At 87 years young, Cress still comes by nearly every day to tend to Dunbar. To do what needs to be done in this city we must all embrace his sense of history, his courage, and his love for this community.

In closing, I ask you to join me and commit to making Tucson work. Let us honor those who worked to make our city strong during our first 100 years of statehood. Let us honor the spirit of Lincoln by rising to meet the challenges of our time. And let our Valentine's Day promise be one of service to our community. Let it be a promise to turn the love we all share for our city into the hard work needed to strengthen it.

Thank you for listening, and thank you for allowing me to serve as your Mayor.