

State of the City
January 11, 2006
Presented by Mayor Mike Fahey

Good morning. I'm proud to be at the University of Nebraska-Omaha for this special presentation of my State of the City address. This great University, the flagship of the system, in fact, if not in name, educates a tremendous number of people – teachers, engineers and contractors, business executives, and public servants -- who are the backbone of our wonderful city.

I'd like to thank Chancellor Nancy Belck, Vice Chancellor John Christensen, the faculty, staff and most importantly, the students here today, for your hospitality. Special thanks to Dr. Jody Neatherly-Castro and her political science class – just consider this a social science experiment!

Over the last few years I have relied heavily on the expertise and community spirit of the UNO faculty and administration. You have always been there when I needed help or advice, and the people of Omaha are better for it.

Omaha's institutes of higher education, from UNO to Creighton, to the College of Saint Mary and our Community College, provide the next generation of business and community leaders with the tools they will need to face the challenges of tomorrow. It is the responsibility of city government to lay the foundation for your success and protect the bright future I envision for our great city.

The past year has brought challenges, but with it, greater opportunity. We've seen the economy show signs of recovery and our strict budget management pay off. Economic development can be seen across the community and we've placed a new emphasis on how we market our city to the nation. And to ensure Omahans continue to enjoy the great quality of life our city provides I continue to stay focused on our neighborhoods and make public safety our greatest priority.

But we stand today at a crossroad. Having been reelected last summer to a second four-year term, it is natural to reflect back on the first term and, at the same time, wonder what the future holds.

We could claim to have had a successful first four years, restate our accomplishments, and resolve to make the next term more of the same. That would be a reasonable goal, and one that few would argue with. But frankly, it is not good enough. There is much more to accomplish, and maintaining the status quo would short-change the people of our city.

With this in mind, I will dispense with the usual recitation of the last few years' accomplishments and go directly to the topic that really matters – namely, where do we go from here. What should our city look like four years from now, ten years from now, even fifty years from now? What kind of city will be here for the students in this room after graduation? Can

they find fulfilling work? Can they live and raise their families in safe, clean neighborhoods? Will they be able to live a satisfying and happy life in Omaha?

The answer is yes to all those questions, but it will not come easily. In fact, it will take hard work and the commitment of this and future administrations, as well as the City Council and all our citizens.

There are a few broad concepts that I intend to concentrate on over the next several years. If successfully implemented, I believe they will insure our future success and make Omaha the kind of place young people from here and around the country will be proud to call home.

First, we must continue to develop new neighborhoods and, at the same time, maintain and improve our existing ones. There is nothing more important than believing that your neighborhood is safe and can provide a stable environment for your children. The streets must be in good repair, the garbage must be picked up quickly and cleanly, and police and fire personnel must respond rapidly and professionally to any emergency. These basic city services must never be taken for granted and should always remain the focal point of City government.

Because thriving neighborhoods are the backbone of any great city, my top priority will continue to be public safety. With the support of Chief Thomas Warren and police management, we will enhance our Community Policing initiatives. Over the last few years community policing has made a tremendous difference in police operations, as well as how our citizens perceive their police department. Officers routinely attend neighborhood meetings, and most neighborhood leaders are on a first name basis with their precinct commander.

Omaha's crime rates continue to decline, and lower crime rates mean a better lifestyle. When I took office I ordered the reinstatement of our Gang Unit, and I will continue to grow and improve it over the next few years. The unit is designed to suppress gang activities, and while we have work left to do, our problems would be much greater were it not for the highly trained professionals in this specialized unit. We will add personnel and enhance training, allowing us to meet our challenges head on. The citizens of Omaha can be assured that we will not allow gangs to threaten our way of life.

Our Fire Department is as good as any in the country, and I will continue to improve it with the help of Chief Robert Dahlquist. Over 75% of our fire and rescue calls are for medical emergencies. For the first time ever, all members of the two fire classes we hire in 2006 and all firefighters hired there after, will be trained and certified paramedics. This will guarantee that ultimately there will be at least one paramedic on every rescue squad, pumper, and aerial in the city, on every shift. In a medical emergency, no matter what neighborhood, a firefighter-paramedic will only be a few minutes away.

Neighborhoods stay healthy when there is a strong inspection program that guarantees houses are built to code and remain up to standards. Two additional housing inspectors and one electrical inspector will be added in 2006, and I will continue to develop innovative programs like SCAN, which empowers the neighborhoods to monitor and document housing conditions.

The second concept I want to touch on today is the importance of making certain Omaha stays a development-friendly city – both for neighborhoods as well as new and existing business districts.

Our country is replete with examples of communities that have restrictive, or even hostile development policies -- and in my opinion, they have suffered for it. We certainly need rules and standards, and the bar must be set high. But that said, planned, high quality development is in the best interest of all our citizens. And it is the job of city government to see to it that our development process is rigorous and demanding, yet not overly restrictive and bogged down by pointless red tape. I believe we must send the message that we are pro-business and pro-development, and we will continue to do so as long as I am Mayor.

City government must be in a position to serve as the catalyst for new development. We will continue to aggressively attract new development and work to redevelop existing areas. And we will continue to work with our strong and able partner, the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, to keep growing businesses here and to attract new ones from around the country.

A perfect example is Omaha's North Downtown. The area is becoming Omaha's newest urban neighborhood and will be the home of the nationally known and locally grown Saddle Creek Records. Their project, which includes a concert venue, housing, a restaurant and independent movie theater symbolizes the energy and opportunity of this area and will provide an impressive link between the Qwest Center, Creighton University, our North Omaha redevelopment and downtown.

And while we work on new and existing neighborhoods, we can not forget longstanding business districts like Benson, Dundee, Florence, Millard, and the Vinton Street area, just to name a few.

We must do for all existing business districts what we have done for the North and South 24th Street Corridors. They have undergone transformations and now celebrate the rich cultures and histories of their distinct areas. The new streetscapes and expanded parking already encourage more people to stop and visit. From North 24th Street's Dreamland Plaza to the thriving business district on South 24th Street, business owners and residents are pleased by the improvements to these historic parts of our city and each are popular new destinations for the community to gather.

We've embraced a citywide initiative to strengthen our design codes and this year we will take the recommendations of Omaha By Design and officially incorporate them into our building codes. We've added the tools, defined a structure, and rallied consensus to ensure desirable outcomes. It compliments my vision as it embraces neighborhood planning and empowerment and tailors unique economic plans. This effort is the largest initiative of its kind ever undertaken by a city in the United States and will forever impact future building in our city.

Third on today's list of topics is the importance of diversity and tolerance. The great city of the future will be a place where people of all races, religions, and sexual orientations are comfortable and welcome. Omahans have always had a "live and let live" philosophy, and the continuation

and enhancement of this philosophy in the future will be necessary if we are to reach our full potential.

The makeup of our population has changed over the last few years. Right now, over forty languages are spoken by the families of OPS children. And the Hispanic student population of the district has more than quadrupled in the last five years. The African American population in Omaha is about 13% and the Hispanic population has grown from 7 1/2% in 2000 to over 11% today.

In the future, we must keep our homegrown talent, but also attract bright new people to our city. And as Professor Richard Florida notes, talented people seek an environment open to differences. Many highly creative people size up a new community by evaluating its levels of diversity and tolerance. Creative-minded people enjoy a mix of influences. They want to hear different kinds of music and try different kinds of food. They want to meet and socialize with people unlike themselves, trade views and spar over issues.

I will continue working to insure that Omaha is the kind of place that judges people on their merits and welcomes smart, talented achievers, regardless of their ethnic background or sexual orientation.

Finally, I want to mention a few of the “big ideas” that we are thinking about – really more like dreams today that may turn into reality tomorrow.

A streetcar system or some other form of mass transit is under consideration. It would transport people to work and downtown entertainment venues, and would also be the catalyst for large-scale redevelopment in the areas through which it travels. There are no guarantees, and lack of money is a constraint. But when Omahans put their minds to accomplishing an objective, we can usually get it done.

And a new home for the Omaha Royals is possible in North Downtown. If the Royals can work out the financing, the project could be a great economic anchor and would spur further development within the area.

I am also in the preliminary stages of assembling a package of incentives that will encourage continued development downtown and on the riverfront, particularly in the areas of housing and commercial development.

Many challenges and opportunities lie ahead.

We will have to determine a plan of action to satisfy the unfunded Federal mandate involving the Clean Water Act, which could cost the city and surrounding communities hundreds of millions of dollars.

Later this year, I expect the courts to once again uphold Omaha’s annexation of Elkhorn. The team I’ve formed, including many of my department heads, continues to meet regularly to create

a seamless transition and I want to continue to assure that the residents of Elkhorn will be provided with excellent city services and public safety.

In May, Omahans will be asked to approve an important bond issue for our city. This bond issue is the first since 2000 and will replace previously paid off bonds. This issue is critical to the enhancement and strengthening of our city's infrastructure and will pay for future road construction, building improvements and park enhancements. With the support of business, labor and neighborhoods, I want to reiterate the importance of approving this bond issue and securing our ability to maintain our all-important infrastructure.

And over the next few years, I will continue to work with our neighboring cities to help them grow and attract new development. What's good for one is good for all, and a strong metro area means a strong city of Omaha.

Four and a half years ago, Omahans believed in my vision and put their trust in me to serve as their mayor. They believed in what my administration could do. Last May, voters paid me an even greater compliment when they reelected me to another four-year term. It reaffirms what we have accomplished and lays the groundwork for what we will seek to do over the next four years. I am up to the task and look forward to the future with excitement and optimism. Together we can create an even stronger Omaha, and with hard work, secure our city's future for the students here today, as well as our children and grandchildren.

I wish you all a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year and thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.