

State of the City Address

It is an honor to be the Mayor of the greatest city in America. Ours is a City of vision, passion, and exceptionalism in everything we do from inventing Coca-Cola, to starting Aflac and Carmike, to attracting NCR and BRAC, to building the RiverCenter, the Ft. Benning Gateway, and now the longest Class 3/Class 4 Whitewater rapids in an urban setting in the world. Whitewater has the potential to change the way the world sees Columbus and the way Columbus sees itself.

As I come to deliver this State of the City Address, I draw on the experiences, accomplishments and observations of the past year. I have had the opportunity to attend events throughout the year and ask citizens what their perception is of the current course the city. One person recently responded: “we are stronger than we think we are”; “we are smarter than we think we are”; “this is not your parents’ southern town”. I found that observation genuine and particularly perceptive.

Stronger Than We Think We Are

First, we are stronger than we think we are. In the midst of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, Columbus, Georgia has been a bright spot. We are fiscally sound with a balanced budget of \$260 million, and we hold in excess of 60 days in General Fund Reserve. We have not had to resort to the layoffs or furloughs suffered by other cities across country.

In 2011, we went a long way toward addressing some “sacred” cows in our budget because we understand that government is different now than it was in the 1970’s, 80’s or 90’s, even. We have paid subsidies to quasi-governmental and other non-profit organizations for years. The better course is to have those entities develop sustainable business plans and if the city is going to partner with them, let us partner with available resources. Let us partner with successful and sustainable organizations. This year you will see credible proposed alternatives to long-term subsidies that will begin to redefine and restructure our city’s relationships with these entities.

You will see us propose workable solutions: 1) in our unfunded capital replacement plan because you can’t run a city if you don’t have dependable vehicles to provide city services; 2) in our Integrated Waste Fund because we need to start looking at providing the appropriate level of service, not just that level of service we have always provided; and 3) in our rocketing pension costs because in fiscal year 2013 we will pay \$30.7 million (or 12% of our city budget) in annual pension costs.

That \$30.7 million is 25.5% of our payroll as compared to an 8% norm in the private sector. This increasing annual pension obligation cannot be sustained if we expect to continue to provide the services our citizens deserve and the jobs our employees depend on. We have made great strides this past year in working with employees to strike the right balance of a responsible pension plan, and we look forward to bringing those suggested improvements to the Pension Board and City Council in the coming months.

Conclusion

Our present economic condition is good. Our economic indicators are promising. Our standing in the state and regional area is remarkably strong. We have made great strides in firming our budgetary and administrative foundation. We have once in a generation opportunities coming our way, and we have important challenges to address. We stand well positioned to take those opportunities and meet those challenges.

Columbus, Georgia continues its tradition of exceptionalism, and I am honored and humbled to be its Mayor.