

CITY OF CUYAHOGA FALLS
2014 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

MAYOR DON WALTERS

Wednesday, February 25, 2015

Fellow citizens of the great City of Cuyahoga Falls, members of City Council, employees of the City, and members of the Chamber of Commerce: thank you all for joining me here today. Serving as your Mayor is an honor and a privilege, and I am grateful you have taken the time from your busy schedule to attend this State of the City Address.

I would like to begin by recognizing my dedicated and beautiful wife, Stephanie, and my family, all who give me great support and mean the world to me. Thank you for standing beside me throughout this exciting time in our community.

My most sincere thanks to the Cuyahoga Falls Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event, and for your ongoing work to help small businesses in our city grow and prosper.

I would like to recognize the hard-working CEO of the Chamber, Laura Petrella. Last year, Laura and I became very well acquainted, and for good reason. Together, we attended *sixteen ribbon-cutting ceremonies*, and set a new record as we welcomed a wide range of new businesses to our community. These events are always happy occasions for the City, as they highlight the fact that Cuyahoga Falls is a desirable place for businesses to locate; however, I will admit that there is one aspect to the ribbon-cutting ceremonies that I find to be particularly challenging: the scissors provided are inevitably right-handed, and I am simply not. So, towards the end of the year, I acquired a real pair of large left-handed scissors for me to use as we celebrate the opening of more new businesses in the months ahead.

These ribbon-cutting ceremonies serve as an appropriate illustration of the tremendous success we experienced last year in the areas of job growth and economic development.

So, I am pleased to report that business was booming in Cuyahoga Falls in 2014!

When I became Mayor thirteen months ago, Menards was no longer planning to open a location in Cuyahoga Falls. The talks had ended and there was nothing in the works. I instructed my team to resurrect the project and, fortunately, with the cooperation of business leaders and council, we turned the situation around. We secured the \$600,000 it took to purchase the properties containing the old Graham Road Giant Eagle and the adjacent Mill Pond. As a result of these efforts, ***Menards plans to break ground in 2015*** on their first location in Summit County. This private investment of \$20 Million will create 120 new jobs in Cuyahoga Falls, with an anticipated annual payroll of over \$2.2 Million.

I am also extremely pleased with the significant progress made on the long-delayed redevelopment of the State Road and Portage Trail area.

After overcoming numerous challenges, collaboration and persistence brought forth ***a Portage Crossing project we can all be proud of.*** To date, nine new businesses are thriving and five more are slated to open throughout the upcoming spring months.

Furthermore, an agreement between the City, County, and SGS Tool kept this instrumental company within our City limits, saved 75 full-time jobs, retained an annual payroll of \$3.7 Million and will bring an additional investment of \$10 Million to Cuyahoga Falls. Better still, the property vacated by SGS Tool will soon be the future home of Harbor Castings and 70 new manufacturing jobs. This means an annual payroll of \$2.8 Million and an additional investment of \$3.3 Million for our City.

All in all, four tax incentive agreements and nearly \$59 Million were invested to expand commercial and residential development in Cuyahoga Falls. We leveraged close to \$35 Million in private investments to create and retain 289 jobs.

So, from the opening of new local small businesses like the Harps & Thistles Yarn Emporium, Babysitters and Beyond, and Sisters Scented Candles, to the national franchises at Portage Crossing, and the tremendous success with Menards, there is simply no question that ***Cuyahoga Falls is open for business!***

I would now like to take a moment to thank my partners in the legislative branch of our local government, our dedicated City Council. Having served twelve years as a ward councilman myself, I know full-well that our Council members offer a first line of communication between residents and City Hall. I appreciate the unique contributions that each Council member brings to the table, and I am grateful for their willingness to work together with my Administration in a productive and collaborative manner. This has greatly benefited the citizens we all serve.

During my time as a Councilman, I was often frustrated by the lack of information provided to City Council by the executive branch, and by the lack of inclusion of City Council in matters that of vital importance to the City. As such, I have made it a top priority of my Administration to keep Council up-to-date on all relevant issues, and to seek their input and perspective on the full range of matters we are collectively charged with overseeing.

There can be little question that twelve heads are better than one, and that philosophy can be seen in the teamwork-oriented approach that has defined my open, working relationship with City Council. So, I thank each of you again for your contribution to the process, and for your service to our community.

One shining example of the many positive outcomes that came from working as a team is the favorable state of our City's finances. When I took office at the beginning of last year, my Administration inherited a projected budget deficit of \$1.5 Million. Drastic and costly cuts to local government funding recently enacted at the state level only made matters more challenging.

Fortunately, income tax revenues were up 3.6% over the prior year. We modified our investment policy to increase flexibility and a higher rate of return, resulting in a 57% increase in interest revenue. We

also moved the budgeting process up by one month in an effort to increase transparency, and to give City Council more time for review and input.

Ultimately, the financial policies of this Administration and Council were able to turn that projected deficit of \$1.5 Million into a surplus of \$200,000. By working together, *we saved taxpayers \$1.7 Million and stretched our resources to do more with less.* The budget for this year was passed unanimously by City Council on December 8, 2014, far earlier than in previous years.

Some, smaller budget line-items may not pack a big financial punch, but serve as a symbolic gesture and speak volumes about the priorities of those in charge. Along these lines, I am proud to have fulfilled my promise to eliminate the longstanding mayoral perk: a city-provided vehicle. Instead, I am happy to drive my own car and pay for my own gas, just like everyone else here today.

Speaking of maximizing resources and doing more with less, I am always particularly pleased when we are able to implement *programs that cost little or no money, yet pay huge dividends* for the residents we humbly serve.

I am extremely proud of the great deal we have accomplished in fewer than fourteen months as we worked together for the good of the community. Now, I will highlight a few examples of these low-cost, high-impact programs.

The *“Not Me, I’m Drug Free!”* program has been an unqualified success. The Cuyahoga Falls and Woodridge school districts, our Police and Fire Departments, Western Reserve Hospital and many local businesses all joined forces with my Administration last year to launch this anti-drug initiative. The program uses positive reinforcement to secure a commitment to remain drug-free for life. To date, we have educated over 1,000 fifth grade students about the dangers of drug use through this innovative program. I would like to thank everyone who has helped make this program a reality. Most recently, IROK, Falls native Robert Heeman, and even Mic Fleetwood of the world-renowned rock band Fleetwood Mac have chipped in a combined \$10,000 to support this important project.

To further keep drugs off our streets, our Police Department was awarded a grant from CVS Pharmacy to install a *Prescription Drop-off Box* in their lobby. Now, residents can safely and easily dispose of unused or expired prescriptions, minimizing potential drug abuse and keeping unwanted chemicals out of our water supply.

Two additional programs were rolled out through our Police Department. The *Citizens’ Police Academy* offers residents an opportunity to learn more about the challenges and daily work of our fine police officers. The first was held last December, and brought police departments from Cuyahoga Falls, Munroe Falls, Stow, and Tallmadge together to educate the public about the issues facing law enforcement in today’s age.

The second program sends criminals the message that crime doesn’t pay in this city, but we do. The *Cuyahoga Falls Crime Fighters Anonymous Tip Line* is a proactive tool that targets criminals by offering cash in return for anonymous tips that help solve crimes.

The tip line is funded solely through donations and is managed by the Fraternal Order of Police, Lodge 49. Tips to the hotline have already resulted in several arrests that quite possibly would not have been solved otherwise. A recent example includes the bomb threats that forced Cuyahoga Falls High School to close in 2013.

In an effort to show solidarity between our community and the dedicated women and men who serve and protect us on the police force, I initiated a **blue ribbon campaign** last year. Nearly a mile's worth of blue-and-black ribbon was distributed for free to residents, and is now proudly displayed around trees at homes, and businesses throughout the City.

I was happy to foot the bill personally for the cost of this ribbon, and I would like to thank Steve Amos, co-chair of the *Cuyahoga Falls & Silver Lake Memorial & Honor Guard Foundation*, for furthering this project, as well as Tony Villemain of *Falls Flag & Banner*, who was inspired to donate flags at-cost in support of our Police Memorial. I know that this show of support means a lot to the people who work daily to keep our families safe.

Of course, our superb team of professional fire fighters and paramedics also put their lives on the line to ensure our safety every day. After providing residents with impeccable service on nearly 7,800 calls, with a response time that is 60% better than the national average, we saved \$4.1 Million in property value. With zero lives lost, our top-notch Fire Department helped to make our residents safer yet.

To further this theme, the **Envelope of Life program** encourages residents to have a filled medical information form in their home and car. EMS crews will be able to easily access pertinent information in the event of an emergency, when every second counts. Over 900 people have taken advantage of this lifesaving measure since the envelope was made available a mere six weeks ago and thanks to Western Reserve Hospital, it will be fully funded without taxpayer money in 2015.

Another great program that has made a real mark without impacting our bottom line is the ***New Homeowners' Welcome Packet***.

New homeowners aid in the reduction of vacant housing and increase property values; so, we are pleased to greet these new stakeholders in our community with an incentive package containing over \$2,800 worth of free and discounted goods from local businesses and City amenities. Since the inception of this program in September of last year, we provided 153 new homeowners with this warm Cuyahoga Falls welcome, and I always enjoy the process of greeting these new residents with their packets.

The Law Department also brought a helpful new program to fruition last year. The ***Neighborhood Mediation Program*** was created to provide citizens with an objective avenue through which to resolve conflicts that may arise between neighbors, at no cost to taxpayers or participants. This new service was made possible by collaboration between Cuyahoga Falls, Stow, Tallmadge, and the University of Akron School of Law.

Additional programs were added to increase energy efficiency is in everyone's best interest, and the City is pleased to have implemented four new programs last year that offer residents a chance to save money while at the same time, we reduce our carbon footprint:

Textile & Small Appliance Recycling has been made easy for residents through a joint effort with ***Simple Recycling***. Curbside recycling of unusable clothing, textiles, and small appliances will save the City roughly \$48,000 per year. The ***Home Energy Audit Opportunity Program*** provides residents with a free energy audit to identify ways to increase energy efficiency and decrease utility bills. The ***Old Appliance Recycling Program*** and the ***New Appliance Rebate Program*** provide incentives for residents to use energy efficient models. These combined efforts saved taxpayers \$375,000 last year alone, all while making our city greener.

Another example of creative and cost-effective collaboration is the Cuyahoga Falls Partnership for Parks. We all recognize that our parks system is a true gem within Cuyahoga Falls; however, operating twenty-eight parks facilities nestled throughout the City is a costly endeavor. This Partnership brings business leaders and parks enthusiasts together to raise private funds in support of our neighborhood parks. Just last week, this new organization received tax-exempt status, so they may begin to raise charitable funds and apply for grants the City would not be eligible to receive. I am optimistic that this new tool will allow us to improve and expand our outstanding parks system without burdening taxpayers.

Yet another new program underway aims to help engage our young people in the civic process. The ***Mayor's Youth Advisory Council*** offers High School students the opportunity to participate in an eight-member youth council that meets twice a month prior to City Council meetings. Participants learn about their local government, while offering our City leaders a youthful perspective on the issues of the day, and multiple opportunities to "Pay it forward" in Cuyahoga Falls.

Rounding out this list of new low-cost, high-impact programs now offered by the City is the reinstatement of the popular ***Senior Snow Removal Program***. Income-qualified seniors and disabled citizens once again have help to clear their driveways. Plans are already underway to expand eligibility in future seasons.

The vast array of programs, services and amenities that the City provides to our citizens ensures that *"life is better" in Cuyahoga Falls.*

I can say with certainty that none of these beneficial programs or services could have been provided without heavy doses of both teamwork and collaboration.

I am tremendously proud of the dedication and ***teamwork put forth by our employees*** who serve the residents of Cuyahoga Falls, day-in and day-out. They go the distance to get the job done for our citizens, and I am continually pleased to witness the positive attitudes with which they perform their duties.

While public servants should be expected to perform their jobs to their fullest, what many residents may not know is the extent to which our city workers go the extra mile. In 2014, City employees collectively donated over \$37,000 and supported eight nonprofit organizations. I commend all of our municipal employees for their dedicated service to the community, both on and off the clock.

Now, our municipality does not exist within an isolated bubble. We share challenges with neighboring communities and the plain fact of the matter is, problems simply do not recognize the dividing lines that separate municipal jurisdictions. As such, regional solutions are sometimes the most desirable, and allow us to maximize resources and efficiencies across communities with shared interests.

Throughout my first year in office, I have made the point to continuously engage in *collaboration that delivers results* for Cuyahoga Falls families.

Successful examples of our collaborative efforts include work with the County of Summit to secure land bank funding, and joint mutual and automatic aid agreements with the City of Akron which allow both communities to act quickly should large, unexpected emergencies strike.

I would also like to offer a special thanks to Stow Mayor Sara Drew and Tallmadge Mayor David Kline, and Silver Lake Mayor Bernie Hovey, all of whom have joined us here today, for their ongoing efforts to improve all four of our communities through collaborative efforts.

Additional collaboration occurred across local governments and business; one of many examples is the successful Not Me, I'm Drug Free! program. I would like to recognize our local leaders Dr. Kent of Western Reserve Hospital, Cuyahoga Falls Schools Superintendent, Dr. Todd Nichols, as well as Woodridge Schools Superintendent, Walter Davis who have also joined us today. Your ingenuity is of great service to our community and I look forward to further joint ventures in 2015.

Of course, the past year did not come and go without delivering more than our fair share of formidable challenges, many of which were weather-related. The **2013 to 2014 winter** brought a 23% increase in snowfall over the previous season, as a whopping 94.5" piled up over 40 snow events. The City used over 16 tons of rock salt and 2.3 million gallons of salt brine. We kept our roads as safe and clear as possible during one of the harshest winters Mother Nature had thrown our way in some time. On the up side, the use of Epoke salt spreaders did save the City roughly \$723,000 in reduced salt usage, though I doubt that is what most residents will remember about last winter. This winter has thus far proven to be every bit as harsh as last; let us keep telling ourselves that spring is only 23 days away!

I am pleased that our top-rate City services continued despite the weather. This fall, we collected and hauled away close to 14,000 cubic yards of leaves despite the 7" of snow.

The **historic flooding of May 12, 2014** will long be marked as notorious, for many Cuyahoga Falls residents, as we experienced four inches of rainfall in a matter of 45 minutes during a "1,000-year storm." Creeks, streams and rivers crested, storm sewers were over capacity, and widespread flooding

occurred throughout most of the city. City Hall itself saw three feet of floodwaters, which took out our computer and phone systems.

I immediately assembled a team of staff and first responders to monitor the unfolding events and provide whatever assistance possible to affected residents. Our dispatch center received 681 emergency calls from residents over four hours; an average of one call every fifty seconds.

The flood left widespread damage in its aftermath, with many homes severely damaged and numerous roads suffering extreme base failure. The cleanup process was long and involved but we prevailed. The City acquired \$190,000 in County land bank funds to go toward the purchase of flood damaged homes deemed unlivable. These properties will serve as new water detention areas which will mitigate the effects of future calamitous storms.

Most fortunately, no lives were lost in the storm, though tragedy was narrowly averted on Dwight Street when members of the Hammonds family were trapped in the basement as rushing waters rose. Their children were thankfully able to flee from the raging waters to call for help. Nearby citizens Don Molesky and John Underwood were joined by Lieutenant Rubin and his Ladder Two team, who helped open the floor and pull the couple to safety. It is often said, the most trying circumstances can bring out the very best in people, and that certainly proved to be the case in Cuyahoga Falls on that fateful day in May last year. This amazing story of heroism is captured in the current issue of Reader's Digest, which is at newsstands now.

The unexpected twists and turns throughout the changing seasons did not prevent us from moving forward with much-needed *infrastructure improvements*, and \$9.7 Million were invested in public works improvements. \$1.5 Million were spent on street development, with \$210,000 of that coming from outside funding sources. Another \$1.5 Million were spent on water, sewer, sidewalk, and curb improvements. Our Street Department made over 9,700 surface repairs and filled more than 18,000 pot holes, a 76% increase over 2013.

Several *improvements to our parks* were also completed last year. We rebuilt a deteriorating retaining wall at DeWitt Elementary School Park, and invested \$80,000 into new play equipment at Richardson Elementary and Lincoln School Parks, ensuring that these facilities are safe for the kids who use them.

We also addressed the problematic and overly complicated membership rate structure at The Natatorium and Water Works early on last year. We revamped and simplified the rates to better reflect our community. I am proud to say that the *new household rates* are inclusive and apply to all residents at the same address, which allows for more Falls citizens to enjoy the benefits of discounted annual memberships and healthier living.

While I am immensely pleased with the progress we have made by working together during the 420 days since I took office as Mayor, I want you to know that we are certainly not resting on our laurels at City Hall.

With the season of renewal eagerly approaching, this is an opportune time to mention some of the new beginnings we have in store for the City of Cuyahoga Falls this year.

First, starting in April, residents participating in the City's natural gas aggregation plan can look forward to a **20% reduction in their natural gas bills**. A new contract with IGS Energy was recently negotiated, locking in the lower rate through March of next year. Residents enrolled in the City's program will automatically receive the reduced rate.

We have partnered this year for the first time with *Neighborhood Development Services* to offer a **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program** to Falls residents. This venture provides free, basic income tax return preparation by IRS-certified volunteers for qualified residents who need assistance with filing their tax returns.

Anyone who has driven around town over the past few years knows that we must continue to **reinvest in our roads**. I am pleased to inform you that we have increased our budget for street paving by roughly \$500,000, and plan to spend \$2.2 Million on street resurfacing this year.

I know that many residents will also be pleased to learn that the **Graham Road construction** project is on-track to be completed this spring. I know that this is welcome news for Councilman At-large Paul Colavecchio, who used to represent Ward Five, and who has shared with me on many occasions the extent to which this project has caused headaches for his constituents.

Additional **infrastructure improvements** slated for this year include the completion of the State Road widening project, Portage Crossing Development expansions, restorations at Babb Run and High Bridge Glens parks, and improvements to Chestnut Trail.

We are also excited about the upcoming development of the **Front Street Park & Boat Launch**, which will offer easy upriver access to the newly revealed rapids. Our Parks Department acquired a grant for \$116,000 from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources that will fund the development of a walkable, ADA-compatible path to the riverfront. The new kayak and canoe launch will allow thousands of residents and visitors to enjoy unfettered access to one of Ohio's historic waterways.

A study of the Mill Pond property is underway. This study explores possible residential development and expansions to the **Summit County Greenway & Trail Plan** and the **Mud Brook Trail**.

Planning will continue this year for long-term **community development** of our City. We have dedicated **Historic Districts** along the Riverfront and in Northampton to allow for additional tax options. To further our relationship with the business community, we have designated the City as a **Certified Local Government**, which makes federal and state tax incentives available and has played a large part in the future development on South Front Street. This year, we will roll out a **Shop Locally** program to support our neighborhood businesses.

Our ***Riverfront Mall festivals*** and recreational opportunities were the source of a good deal of news last year. Residents may rest assuredly as the popular annual festivals you have enjoyed for years will continue to thrive, and exciting entertainment opportunities are being planned for this coming summer.

The new Riverfront Concert Series, will be put on by a group led by Mike Thomas and comprised of organizers involved with two of our most popular events, the Riverfront Irish Festival and Oktoberfest. This resulted in the name of the committee: IROK. While the work of the committee is still underway, I have every confidence that they will produce a lineup of concerts that all of our residents can embrace. It is important to note that this time around, ALL of the proceeds from concerts will be directed toward local charities.

Before I conclude my remarks, I would like to reaffirm my commitment to making ***transparency and open, frequent communications with residents*** the hallmark of my Administration. Any resident is welcome to meet with me personally on the *First Tuesday* of the month by simply calling my office to schedule an appointment.

As part of our new *Take Ten* program, I will “pop-in” to visit with a random resident or business once a week. There, we will discuss how City services can impact their lives for the better.

I have also made it easy for residents to follow City news and events via social media and *CFO Alerts*. I plan to update our City website, to make it a far more user-friendly resource and a tool to attract new businesses to Cuyahoga Falls.

In addition to the return of the popular annual calendar, residents will be kept informed by an Annual Community Report & Citizen Update, the first of which is at your table, and was recently delivered to homes and businesses citywide thanks to *The Falls News-Press*. Updates from City Hall will follow each quarter.

As we reflect here today, we prove without a doubt, that the state of the City of Cuyahoga Falls is strong. We will continue to build upon the current momentum that will keep our community moving forward.

Business is booming in our City, as we utilize partnerships and collaboration to create and retain the jobs that are so essential to a vibrant future.

Responsible budgeting and fiscal discipline are enabling us to stretch resources to do more with less, and we are expanding services for residents through innovative programs with minimum cost and maximum impact.

We are poised to bring the “Falls Pride” back to our neighborhoods, and allow our community to reach its full potential for generations to come. As I have stated before, my goal as Mayor is to ensure that there are only two groups of people; those that live in Cuyahoga Falls, and those that wish they did!

Thank you.
