

State of the City Address
Delivered by Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick
To the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce
September 16, 2010
The Biltmore Hotel

During the dark days of World War II, a little-known songwriter, Lightning Hopkins, borrowed from the theme of the ancient "Chicken Little" fable for these lyrics:

*"There're many people in this world just like old Henny Penny;
They panic when they listen to the news;
They think the sky is falling and we're all about to die;
I'd say they have the Henny Penny blues."*

Let me assure you that this Mayor is neither Henny Penny nor Chicken Little. The sky is not falling. We live in a great city with a promising future, and we need to give our best effort to fulfill our destiny.

It is fascinating to catalog the historic events which we have lived through during the first decade of the 21st Century. To highlight a few:

- the September 11th terrorist attack
- the longest war in American history
- the Katrina/Wilma storm season
- the "Great Recession."

These significant social, economic and environmental upheavals have significantly impacted the Coral Gables real estate market, the retail community, the tourism sector – the truth is they have had profound consequences for each and every one of us.

Despite all that, we are still here - and like the Timex watches of my generation, "we just keep on ticking."

Incredibly, for only 28 cents of every property tax dollar (plus a fire fee and a sanitation fee), your city government provides law enforcement, fire protection, emergency rescue, garbage and trash collection, recycling, code enforcement, parks and recreation programming, street resurfacing, traffic calming and the planting of trees and foliage in public spaces – each of these municipal services has a direct impact on the quality of our daily lives.

This past year, our management team has focused on actions which will lay the foundation for a fiscally sound municipality for decades to come: (a) by infusing new blood into top leadership positions in city government - people with tremendous qualifications, energy and commitment to excellence; (b) by restructuring the table of organization and realigning jobs based on the new economy and the demands of the future; (c) by reducing the number of employees where possible [It has truly been a challenging task to reduce the number of employees (thus far by

10%) without impeding the delivery of essential services or negatively impacting our renown quality of life]; and (d) by lowering personnel costs through painful wage freezes, benefit reductions, and the overhaul of the general employees' pension plan. These structural changes have required the close coordination between the City Manager and the Commission, the dedication of the employees and, in several critical matters, the cooperation of the unions.

Let me outline some highlights of your government's "track record" for this past year:

Traffic calming and safety

- Construction of more traffic circles and roundabouts - credited for slowing vehicles, preventing accidents and reducing fatalities
- Extension of the median and sidewalk improvements on Ponce de Leon north towards S.W. 8th Street
- Completion of the engineering plans and budget to move forward with the Segovia median

Historic Preservation

- Renovation of Venetian Pool now in its second year
- Refurbishment of the Country Club Prado entrance feature
- Restoration (LEED certified) of the 1930's Municipal Building known as the "Old Police and Fire Station"

Parks and Recreation

- Purchase of new park land
- Construction of new recreational amenities at Riviera Park, converting it from an underutilized open field into a useful family-oriented facility
- Renewal of the popular Salvadore Park playground equipment

Culture

- The Coral Gables Museum will open on October 10th. The Museum complex is a combination of the historic, recently restored Municipal Building and the newly constructed "Fewell Gallery." The Fewell family members are local heroes for making this magnificent cultural site possible with a two million dollar charitable donation.
- The Coral Gables Art Cinema, our first movie theater in Coral Gables for more than a decade, will open on October 15th. It is a handsome 150 seat auditorium equipped for movies, lectures and chamber music presentations. Together with Actors Playhouse at the Miracle Theater and the Museum, we will have created a cultural center designed to bring new energy to our downtown, which, in turn, will help support the economic wellbeing of our shops and restaurants.
- The adoption of the Public Art Master Plan which provides the game plan to produce attractive, interactive and up-lifting art pieces for the public spaces of our commercial district.

Major Projects

- The Biltmore Hotel lease agreement and payment schedule negotiations. This structure is a nationally recognized architectural treasure, the continued operation of which is critical to the “persona” of our community.
- The re-birth of the Coral Gables Country Club featuring a new, well-received café (with reputedly the best gelato in town), a health/exercise facility and refurbished swimming pool and tennis courts.
- The University of Miami Development Agreement - the culmination of at least seven years of negotiation, which creates a true partnership and a shared vision between the city and the administration of the university. This agreement provides financial reimbursement to the city for services provided of approximately \$22 million over a 20-year period. It includes a unique program created by the UM of special lectures, concerts, plays, and sporting events, made available to our residents for either no fee or for reduced price.

City Clerk’s Office

- The creation and implementation of a new software system which allows citizens to conveniently search public records online from the comfort of their home computer.

Public Education

[These new opportunities for Gables families were the product of a “Compact” signed by the city and the School Board four years ago.]

- The Coral Gables Pre-K to 8th grade Preparatory Academy created on the campuses of Coral Gables Elementary and Merrick Educational Center
- The new International High School @ the Gables based upon cooperative programming with the nations of Spain, France and Italy. Graduates will receive dual diplomas from the local school system as well as from the country which was the focus of their studies. The permanent building will be a modern, urban educational facility on Madruga Avenue scheduled for completion next year.
- The expansion of other innovative programs such as the Coral Gables High School Academy of Business and Management.

Ongoing Activities

- We continue our focus on public safety and security with exceptional police and fire departments, highly regarded for their professionalism and responsiveness...
- We continue to have one of the most open governments in Florida, thanks to our E-News, streaming video, webpage portal, emergency AM radio station and Channel 77/CGTV...
- We continue to provide great youth activities and senior programs...
- We continue to provide twice-a-week backyard garbage pickup, once-a-week trash removal and once-a-week recycling collection from your doorstep...
- We continue to provide free trolley service “to the tune” of 5,000 rides a day through our business center...

I hope you agree that is an impressive list of accomplishments, services and quality of life bonuses provided by our city government

As we push forward into this brave new world, we need to actively work on reconciling our differences, not exaggerating them through inflammatory rhetoric.

We need to end the ongoing cycle of incivility, negativity, and disrespectful actions and insulting sarcasm. We need to stop listening to it, stop repeating it, and stop encouraging it.

In his farewell address, George Washington made it clear that he perceived no greater threat to the American experiment than a demagogue who “agitates” the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms and kindles the animosity of one against the other.

I am hopeful that in our city’s upcoming election season we will discover candidates with positive views of their city and its future, and that the voters will have a wide range of choices ranging from youthful exuberance to the accumulated wisdom of hands-on experience.

A heart-felt “job well done” to my trusted colleagues and dear friends who have labored at my side for the past nine and a half years: Vice Mayor Bill Kerdyk, Dean of the Commission Chip Withers, Commissioner Maria Anderson and Commissioner Ralph Cabrera. You will not find more conscientious or dedicated public servants than these individuals.

Let me also “applaud” the talented and hard-working public officials: City Manager Pat Salerno, City Attorney Liz Hernandez and City Clerk Walter Foeman. They are the glue that holds our government together and guides it through the rocky narrows. A sincere “thank you” goes to the rest of the management team and to all of our city employees who comprise one of the best municipal workforces in this nation.

The past decade has been a joyful experience of community involvement for both Jeannett and me, and we are truly grateful for the opportunity for service which you have given us.

In closing, let me assure you that the “State” of your city is *healthy and vibrant*. I feel blessed by God, above, to be a part of this wonderful community.