

Mayor's State of the City view: Video format will better explain city's three main goals

By **Don Ness**, Duluth News Tribune

As I began to write this year's state of the city address, I recognized the limitations of the traditional format. My words alone could not convey the emotional impact of this year's flood and the challenges before us.

The goal of any state of the city address is to connect with residents, reflect on the past year and start a conversation about the direction our city is heading. Of course, even the most beautifully written address is not effective unless it's heard.

So, with these goals in mind, I'll be presenting the 2013 state of the city address in a video format.

Not only will pictures and video help tell our story, this format will allow us to reach a larger audience. The video will be online, copies will be available at the library and we're encouraging high school government teachers to present the video in their classrooms where discussions can be held about issues facing our city. I understand the value of tradition, but effectiveness must take priority.

Because of our partnership with PACT, we were able to produce the video at no cost to the city. There's nothing fancy about the video, but it's certainly better than hearing me stumble through a speech read at a podium.

In the video, we focus on three major narratives: flood recovery, recent economic development successes and our efforts to strengthen the health of city finances. While the video format provided tremendous advantages in more effectively telling these stories, we found it more difficult to outline the details on specific issues facing our city.

So I'd like to take a moment to provide a brief overview of some of the most pressing issues that will be our focus in the coming year.

Flood relief

Our primary focus in 2013 will be continuing flood-relief efforts. While we focused on emergency repairs during the last half of 2012, the heaviest lifting in our recovery will be done this summer. Rest assured it will continue to be the highest-priority issue for the city.

Casino revenue

We must come to a final agreement with the Fond du Lac Band regarding the casino in downtown. The \$6 million loss of revenue has been devastating to the city, and the ongoing conflict between the band and the city is both unfortunate and unnecessary. It is my hope we will be able to come to a fair

compromise with the band that will put this conflict behind us and allow us to work together for the benefit of both parties.

City streets

The condition of our city streets continues to be a massive challenge and concern. Without the \$6 million from casino revenue, the city does not have a revenue source to fix residential streets, and I oppose using debt to finance street construction. Rather than paying with property taxes, cities in Minnesota should have the option of a local gas tax to pay for much-needed improvements to local streets.

Last Place on Earth

The Last Place on Earth and the sale of synthetic drugs continue to be a burden on our city. We need the courts to support the rights of downtown patrons and downtown businesses who are forced to carry the burden of the negative effects from this business.

Schools' future

The health of our public schools is absolutely critical for the long-term health of our city. At a certain point, we have to put the divisive debate of the past decade behind us and commit to a more constructive conversation about doing right by these kids.

Efficient government

We'll continue our efforts to make city government a modern and customer-focused organization by reducing overtime consumption, further reducing our retiree health-care liability, investing in energy savings in our facilities, continuing to modernize the outdated systems that burden government and implementing new customer-focused tools like online services.

In the video, we highlight many of the exciting job-creation stories in our region. We are working with our private-sector partners to create a new economic development strategic plan that will help further our current success. We also must get serious about making sure we meet the skill-set needs of employers looking to grow and the housing needs of a growing work force.

I am continually humbled to have the opportunity to serve the city I love during such an exciting and dynamic time. Yes, we continue to have significant problems and challenges that will remain our top priority. But I also get the sense we are on the verge of starting a new chapter in Duluth's history in which we finally reach our potential.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. 2013 is going to be a year of doing the unglamorous work of flood recovery, problem-solving and working to make sure the economic-development stories we've announced in the past year are an unqualified success. That's our focus this year.