Mayor’s 2013 State of the City Address

Good afternoon, and welcome to the historic Hippodrome Theatre. Thank you for joining me today in looking back at this year’s accomplishments and ahead to what the future holds for our great city. Before we begin though, it is my honor to present the winner of our Fourth Annual Gainesville Photography Contest.

The winner is… “Eye of the Sun” by Josh Milliken!

I particularly enjoy this year’s choice because it combines two of my favorite things about Gainesville: our wonderful natural environment, seen in the photo, and home-grown technology, represented by the photo’s presentation as a Fracture.

Thank you Fracture for being a part of this year’s contest, and congratulations to Josh.

To begin, I would like to thank my colleagues on the City Commission for their dedication to our community this past year. Thank you Commissioners Bottcher, Chase, Hawkins, Hinson-Rawls, Poe, and Wells.

I would also like to thank our Charter Officers and their respective staffs for their hard work over the past year. Thank you to City Manager Russ Blackburn, GRU General Manager Bob Hunzinger, City Clerk Kurt Lannon, Auditor Brent Godshalk, Equal Opportunity Director Cecil Howard, and thank you especially to our new City Attorney, Nicolle Shalley.
It’s easy to find yourself putting together a speech like this one by building a list of our accomplishments from the past year. These moments – both big and small – can be found in our annual Citizen’s Report. I encourage you to pick up a copy as you leave today, and I want thank the Communications Office for their hard work in compiling this year’s successes in such a beautiful format.

But even more impressive than our individual accomplishments is how they fit together to become more than the sum of their parts.

As a municipal government, we’re tasked with providing a high quality of life for our citizens, and ensuring public safety inside of our city’s boundaries. Over the past year, we have excelled in meeting these challenges.

But as history has consistently shown us, a go-it-alone approach will only get you so far.

In many ways, I’m reminded of the tradition of “barn raising” that still continues today in some rural communities. Historically, barns were too costly and time-intensive for a single family to construct, so the whole community would come together over the course of one or two days to pitch in and do the work necessary to raise the barn’s four walls.

Today in Gainesville, we have four walls of our own that need to be raised in order to build the kind of environment necessary for economic growth.
Those walls are our environment and neighborhoods, the arts and education, public safety, and equality for all citizens. And like the barn raisings of times past, they will require a community-wide effort. Constructing these four walls will be more complex than any eighteenth-century barn, but the same concept applies. Without the shared commitment of our local partners, we would not have been able to build the framework necessary for this year’s extraordinary economic growth. And make no mistake: the stories of growth this past year were truly extraordinary. While there are many I could mention, I want to touch on a few of the ones that really stood out.

The biggest story of the year was MindTree’s decision to locate its first US Development Center right here in Gainesville and their promise to create more than 400 new jobs over the next four years. This is just the first step in what will undoubtedly be a long journey, but it represents a watershed moment for our community.

Since my first State of the City Address, I’ve said that Gainesville is experiencing an employment renaissance and that we’re becoming a hub for high-paying jobs. As mayor, I think people expect me to say things like that. But MindTree’s decision to invest in our community represents something completely different. It shows the confidence of a leading international technology firm in the common vision we share for our community. It says we’re headed in the right direction.

Since moving to Gainesville, MindTree has been an excellent partner in our effort to keep moving forward. Just recently, they have been working with a
number of local partners to attract a company called Mobiquity to our city. Mobiquity is an app developer interested in creating 260 new jobs in the coming years. Just last Thursday, the City Commission approved a performance-based incentive to help lure Mobiquity to our community as part of an overall effort that includes our local Chamber of Commerce and Council for Economic Outreach. I am confident that we have done everything we can to put our best foot forward, and I firmly believe that Gainesville is where Mobiquity belongs.

Another major success of the past year, and a concrete example of our commitment to growing Gainesville’s jobs base, was our success in retaining Prioria Robotics and helping them create an additional 40 jobs. Soon, Prioria will move into their new headquarters: a building a few blocks away from here in east Gainesville that was left vacant after GRU’s move to the new Eastside Operations Center.

Some claimed that we would not be able to move quickly enough to meet Prioria’s tight schedule, but the City of Gainesville, GRU, and especially the CRA put all hands on deck in this effort to grow and retain these jobs in our city. Thanks once again to collaboration between local government and the private sector, we’ve managed to keep this innovative product of University of Florida graduates right here in Gainesville, and create highly-sought light manufacturing jobs at the same time.

Another example of the assets of our community matching perfectly with the needs of the moment was Silver Airways’ decision to relocate their fleet
maintenance facility from Fort Lauderdale to Gainesville Regional Airport. The benefits of this move were far-reaching and immediately felt.

First and foremost, Silver's arrival in Gainesville meant the creation of 100 new jobs in east Gainesville that pay an average salary of more than $50,000 per year and don't require a college degree. Secondly, the Gainesville Regional Airport has begun offering flights to three additional locations. In fact, since October 2010, Gainesville Regional has doubled the number of airlines serving our city and tripled the number of destinations served.

This impressive level of growth is not an accident – it's thanks to our community's dedication to the mission of Innovation Gainesville and our focus on creating jobs with a high multiplier effect. It's thanks to our willingness to build the four walls of economic development in collaboration with other agencies, our local Chamber and Council for Economic Outreach, the private sector, and citizens who care deeply about where we are headed as a community.

But even with so many partners at the table, there's only so much we can do. In light of this fact, it's important to ask: how can we maximize our limited resources for the greatest benefit to our citizens? The answer is simple. We can focus on creating jobs that create jobs.

My friend Greg Johnson is the president of Quality Cleaners here in Gainesville and he's observed on multiple occasions that these tech-company employees will inevitably go out to eat at local restaurants,
eventually spill something on their clothes, and finally bring those clothes to one of his dry cleaning locations. At the end of the day, he doesn’t need to hold a high-tech degree to benefit from our concentration on creating high-tech jobs.

Now, after having toured many of the large and small tech companies that dot Gainesville’s economic landscape, I’m disappointed to tell Greg that I don’t think they wear many things that require dry cleaning. But he is correct: by focusing our limited resources on creating jobs in the innovation economy, we all benefit.

Our collaboration with the private sector was a major highlight of the past year, and I firmly believe that we have left behind any ideas of a business-unfriendly environment that have been suggested in the past. Let me be clear: the City of Gainesville stands willing and ready to work with anyone in this city to grow and retain jobs at all income levels.

And when we’re able to do that, it’s easy to come together and celebrate our success. But it’s equally important that we come together in times of adversity. In good times and bad, collaboration is the key to moving Gainesville forward.

We saw the necessity of this approach during the tragic accident on Interstate-75 that struck our community last January. Amidst smoke and fog that reduced visibility almost completely, 11 people were killed and 21 more were injured in one of the worst traffic accidents in recent memory. Our local law enforcement and medical teams reacted swiftly and
professionally, as they always do, but the extraordinary circumstances of this accident required additional resources. Seeing the need that existed, and recognizing its own capacity to respond, RTS sent buses to the crash site to keep those who were stranded and uninjured warm as temperatures outside dropped to around 40 degrees. I’m proud of the role we were able to play in working with other local and state-wide agencies to respond to this tragedy just outside our own municipal boundaries.

Our community’s reaction to terrible events is an example of when we can all quickly identify a problem and marshal our resources to solve it, but sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where the answer is not as clear. This was the case in the years-long dispute between the City of Gainesville and the School Board of Alachua County over stormwater treatment.

Though we are all advocates for our community’s children, honest disagreements sometimes arise about how to best secure their long-term wellbeing. With this perspective in mind, I sat down with former School Board Chairwoman April Griffin and we found a workable solution that met our legal responsibilities, provided for the continuing education of our children, and ensured the ongoing protection of our environment through stormwater treatment. Thank you, April, for sitting down with me and collaborating on a solution.

Collaboration between local agencies was also crucial to securing a long-held goal of our community: a library branch in east Gainesville. Today at Cone Park, that dream is a reality and it’s thanks to a partnership between
the City of Gainesville and the Alachua County Library District. We still have work to do in providing a more permanent building, but we've moving in the right direction.

Looking ahead, I'm excited about our opportunity to collaborate with the Alachua County Commission to map out our area's transportation future. And here I want to pause for a moment and say something about how this process unfolded earlier this year: it was not what I wanted, and it was not what our commission wanted, but we're ready to put all of that behind us. Let's work together, gather input from our citizens, and craft a plan that both maintains our roads and provides the necessary funding to secure our transit future.

What we must avoid is the false argument that roads and transit are an either/or endeavor. Our transportation network relies on well-maintained roads and sufficient public transit to serve all of our citizens. I look forward to working with our counterparts at the County Commission to successfully pass a measure that accomplishes these goals in 2014.

You see, innovation isn't just a buzzword we parade out at the many ribbon-cutting events for businesses in our area. Our commitment to innovation has permeated our local government and fundamentally altered the way we do business.

I'm proud of the collaborative spirit that has been embraced by our city employees. From Public Works to our CRA; from our planning department
to GRU, I see evidence every day of a renewed commitment to finding cross-departmental solutions to long-standing problems.

As I’ve said, it’s only by coming together that we will be able to build the four walls necessary for a sound economy. The first of these walls requires the protection of our environment and neighborhoods. Thankfully, we have many long-standing partners in this mission.

One of those partners is GRU. For the last hundred years, they have provided high-quality, citizen-owned service to our community. Now, they’re applying the lessons they’ve learned over that hundred years to go above and beyond in their mission to help us shape a better tomorrow.

Let me be clear: if GRU were not a citizen-owned utility, under the direction of the Gainesville City Commission, none of this would be happening. In fact, GRU’s status as a municipally-owned utility is what has allowed us to press forward with many initiatives of Innovation Gainesville and other programs that would not be available with an investor-owned utility provider.

The Solar Feed-In Tariff, for example has allowed our community to deploy forty times more solar than we had on the day it started. This program is both the right thing to do, and a hallmark of our community’s innovative spirit.

Having a citizen-owned utility has also allowed us to chart a better course forward when it comes to one of our most precious resources: our water.
Gainesville is already unique in that about 70 percent of our water is reclaimed and returned to the aquifer. This simple fact positions us well ahead of cities in our area like Jacksonville that see much of the water their citizens use flow into the ocean. In the coming year, the Paynes Prairie Sheetflow Restoration project will continue moving forward, eventually providing an important natural link in our community’s water treatment system.

Our citizen-owned utility also allowed the Gainesville City Commission to begin reducing our community’s carbon footprint in major ways, one of which is the Gainesville Renewable Energy Center. While some have attempted to re-imagine the facts surrounding this plant, three points have remained constant since the beginning of our negotiations to bring biomass to Gainesville: the plant will help create local jobs; it will provide long-term price stability; and it will move us away from our dependence on dirty, out-of-state coal. I, and the rest of the Gainesville City Commission, stand committed to ensuring that these facts remain constant and will work every day to be sure that the plant provides the best value possible to our citizens and ratepayers.

Another area where innovation and experience have successfully worked hand-in-hand is at RTS. I have to say, after last year’s success in breaking the 10 million passenger mark, I wasn’t sure we still had room to grow. But we did, and this year RTS carried more than 10.7 million passengers to work, school, restaurants, and retail throughout our community. They accomplished this astounding feat by a combination of creative thinking and old-fashioned experience.
Our partnership with Santa Fe College is now in its second year and is just one more example of how collaboration is benefitting our community. Thanks to this partnership and others, RTS was able to increase service by nearly 18,000 hours without increasing their budget.

But sometimes, additional funding is necessary for success, and that’s exactly what we found when we looked at the transportation system in East Gainesville this year. Since becoming mayor, I’ve heard from numerous residents about the need to reduce wait times between buses and expand service in the eastern part of our community. This year, the City Commission approved an additional $150,000 to cut headways in half on one East Gainesville route. I’m proud that we were able to take this first step and look forward to finding additional creative solutions to improve our transit system throughout our community.

And as I said last year, we should never have to choose between high-quality development and environmental preservation, and I stand by those comments today. Gainesville’s unique natural beauty was one of the qualities I fell in love with when I moved here over thirty years ago, and it’s still one of my favorite parts of our city.

Today, thanks to the hard work of our planning department and dedicated citizen-activists, I am proud to say that Gainesville’s environment has a bright future.
Earlier this year, we passed an Environmental Protection Ordinance that brought our preservation standards up to par with the county. These new standards will prevent our city’s natural areas from becoming victims of sprawl and help promote infill development.

Thank you to everyone who played a part in allowing us to take this major step forward.

Preserving our neighborhoods and environment help promote our residents’ physical health. The second wall of economic development relies on that health to improve upon citizens overall well-being through arts and education.

It was a pleasure to unveil the winner of our photography contest. I always enjoy chances to showcase our creative artistic community. The arts give us an opportunity to expand our knowledge and think in many ways that we wouldn’t otherwise. But the arts contribute so much more than that to our community. Visitors to Gainesville who are here for, say, an athletic event, often will take in a play here at the Hippodrome or perhaps at one of our community’s other theaters. Or they may enjoy Artwalk on a beautiful Friday evening, or hear a performance of great music at any number of venues. Our arts scene is a crucial component to our economy, employing many people, and playing a major role in attracting visitors to our city. But even more so an active arts community contributes greatly to the quality of life that many businesses look for when considering where to expand or relocate.
One of the agencies that helps to expand the arts in Gainesville is the Community Redevelopment Agency. And now, we’re doubling down on that commitment: Anthony Lyons, who typified the merging of experience and creative thinking during his previous tenure as Director of the CRA will be returning to Gainesville to re-take the helm of that organization. Welcome back, Anthony!

Some of the CRA’s contributions to our community are easy to see. The new 13th Street bridge, which you can see on the cover of this year’s Citizens Report, is one of these. Since opening, the bridge has received rave reviews from pedestrians and cyclists. More broadly, the bridge connects our community’s history with our high-tech future. It is a fitting gateway to our city.

Another area where our past and future are merging is at Depot Park. Construction of the historic train depot is now complete, and in the coming year we’ll continue developing the park around it. Thanks to the collaborative efforts of the CRA, GRU, Public Works, and Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs, this site will soon be a signature feature for our community and a catalyst for redevelopment as a stormwater receiving facility.

The CRA also responded to the needs of our community in less-obvious ways. As I’ve said before, Gainesville is competing nationally and internationally when it comes to luring companies and jobs to town. With this fact in mind, the CRA proposed a new economic development tool – a performance-based incentive for companies that create high-paying jobs in
one of our city’s four redevelopment areas. Thanks to the CRA, we now have one more way to help attract jobs to reinvigorate our community. And the CRA isn’t our only department using the combination of experience and innovation to make our community a better place to live. Throughout our organization, departments are implementing cutting-edge programs and collaborating in new and exciting ways.

The Department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs is well-known for providing access to many fine amenities here in our community, and these active, passive, and nature parks add immeasurable value to our quality of life. But it’s the administration of some of the functions at these parks that I found so interesting. You see, they’ve instituted a volunteer program that recruited nearly 3,500 volunteers last year to provide 33,000 hours of community service valued at almost half a million dollars. Without our community’s dedication to parks, without the commitment by staff to keep our parks up and running, and without the herculean effort of these extraordinary volunteers, quality of life here in Gainesville would undoubtedly suffer. Thank you for fighting to be sure that doesn’t happen.

The third wall we need to raise is in the area of public safety. Strong neighborhoods, a healthy environment, a thriving arts scene, and high-quality education are important for creating well-rounded citizens, but we must ensure that our citizens are safe in order to see them reach their full potential.

In that spirit, Gainesville Police Department has also been hard at work this year, and thanks to their efforts, we have seen a 3.5% reduction in crime since January 2012! The role that Chief Jones has played in managing the
department cannot be understated, and I never want to see anyone minimize the sacrifices our officers make to keep our city safe. Thank you, Chief Jones and thank you GPD. Our community can’t say that enough. But there’s another person that I want to single out as responsible for this crime reduction, and that person is you. Yes, each one of you.

As I attend neighborhood meetings throughout the city, I’m consistently impressed with the diversity of people who have come together and made a commitment to keep our community safe. They’re young and old, black and white, homeowners and renters. And they’ve all stood together and pledged to work together to make our city the best place it can be. Without their efforts – without your efforts – we could never have achieved this reduction in crime.

But today, we need a new effort, and new partners to reduce violence and crime.

At the national level we see a growing terrible trend. We reel with grief at the news of one mass shooting after another. A month ago our nation saw the agony of the horrifying and cruel murders of 26 children and adults at a school in Newtown, Connecticut. One of the children had been shot 11 times. And just months before we saw a horrifying shooting in Aurora, Colorado, killing 12 people and wounding 58 others. Both of these massacres were made possible due to the capability of an assault rifle to fire a large number of bullets in an extremely short time. The need for a gunman to reload gives others the ability to stop him.
I recently met with mayors from across the country, including the mayor of Blacksburg, Virginia where a gunman staged a grisly massacre on a University campus, Virginia Tech. I spoke with the mayor of Albuquerque where a 15 year old killed his family with a gun. Mayor Berry had just been to Gainesville the week before to learn about our economic development strategies. What these discussions brought home to me is but for the grace of God that would be Gainesville, our city.

I heard the mayor of Oakland, California who told me of the proliferation of high capacity clips in drive by shootings in her city. Thankfully, we have not seen that here.

So when I hear someone say that it’s too late for us to act, I must disagree. In the coming days I will propose that the Gainesville City Commission establish a concrete position on sensible regulation to promote public safety.

The last wall we need to construct may also be the most difficult. Inequality and discrimination have deep roots in our society and cannot be eradicated overnight, but we must do everything in our power to continue pressing forward toward a more just society.

The work must start somewhere, which is why I’m proud that the Equal Opportunity office came together this year with General Government, GRU, and the private sector to present their largest career fair yet. The event was an overwhelming success, and I look forward to seeing it grow even larger.
next year. I want single out and thank my colleague, Commissioner Yvonne Hinson-Rawls, for her amazing effort to bring new partners into the fold. Another pioneering program that’s been undertaken by our Equal Opportunity office is the yearly employment law seminar designed to present the law to ensure that every employee in Gainesville is given an equal chance for success. In its third year now, this seminar has hosted over three hundred participants.

These programs won’t eliminate the many inequalities that we see in our everyday lives, but they are a step in the right direction. This time last year, I said that we’re changing from a college town into a university city. Our ability to leverage our top-flight university and cutting-edge medical facilities into additional employment opportunities is a hallmark of that change.

It’s true, challenges still remain. We must fight to ensure that the benefits of our community’s growth don’t come at the expense of our environment, and work to expand those benefits to everyone in our city. But with the progress we’ve made so far, I’m confident that we have the tools and resources here in our community to meet them.

This year, we took major steps to grow our local economy and collaborated with local partners in and out of government to improve our residents’ quality of life. The progress that we made on those two fronts will have long-term and lasting positive impacts on our community.
We worked with many of those same partners to come together and build the four walls of economic development: environmental and neighborhood preservation, arts and education, public safety, and equality.

These are exciting times to be in Gainesville. We have faced great challenges and excelled. By continuing to work collaboratively we can keep achieving great things for all of our people.

Thank you for joining me here today, and for your commitment to moving Gainesville forward. And thank you for the honor of being your mayor.