The 2016 State of the City Address
Mayor Ed Braddy
January 20, 2016

We all know what brings us together – why we are all here today: None of us won last week’s Powerball jackpot. But we all know if anyone in our community could have won the jackpot, his name would be Clovis Watson.

It's good to see everyone here, and it's especially good to hear the remarks from our two charter officers and from my colleagues on the Gainesville City Commission and the more than 2,000 men and women who work hard every day for Gainesville. The love of this city is evident not just in the actions we've taken but also in the passion of our pursuit.

In preparing this year’s remarks, I went back and read my comments from that last two years - and then I couldn't resist - and revisited how States of the City were handled before I became mayor. One person - speaking the entire time - in an uncritical display of self-congratulation. Not my style. It's not our style. We are in this together.

We should speak with pride at the good we are doing, but we should also respect our citizens by candidly and directly addressing the challenges we still face. So how is the state of the city?

Well, the evidence is all around us. It's hard not to feel good about our future when driving through and seeing all the activity taking place. New buildings being constructed; new businesses opening up; new parks being built; community partners fulfilling their missions; areas of town - long neglected - now integrated into our plans for growth and prosperity; college students and senior citizens and veterans - fully engaged in our community. To sum it up, Gainesville is cooperative, focused, and strong.

Here would be the part where - unsure of my leadership or our collective decision-making - I might inundate you with a litany of statistics to underscore this point. But we don't need to do that. Okay - maybe just a little: Gainesville has among the lowest jobless rate in the state and the lowest since before the Great Recession; Gainesville is ranked as a Top Ten college town by American City & County and ranked 5th in another national ranking. But, again, we don't need to do that.

Certainly, there have been businesses that have opened before this period, UF has broken ground on expansions, and dirt has been turned at new parks and pathways. But for the honest observer, there has been an unmistakable acceleration of activity. Those who are politically skeptical or politically motivated will remain so regardless of the facts, and those professionally skeptical have actually published the facts of our remarkable turnaround in their own papers or news programs ... even if they have yet to connect the dots to see why we come so far in such a short amount of time.

This level of activity is even more impressive when we consider the where we were. In my first State of the City Address I noted a report that said despite Florida's population growth set to overtake New York (this is 2014), Gainesville's population had actually declined. This wasn't Ed Braddy's assessment or a partisan talking point; it was the measured condition identified by the
Bureau of Economic & Business Research and reported by our local media ... with the unmistakable conclusion that people were seeking opportunity elsewhere.

We should all be very proud that this trend has been reversed. Gainesville is growing again. And with it, Gainesville moves closer and closer to becoming a true City of Opportunity for All. We are doing this not by simply applauding the efforts of others to improve our economic climate but by being fully engaged partners with all our major stakeholders in improving this community.

Again, here is where I could cite recent headlines of new companies moving in, the hundreds of new jobs or even the increase in business licenses filed in our city, which obviously points to the significant growth in small businesses. This is due in part to our deliberate and focused effort to be more welcoming to businesses and also in part to the supportive role we now play in partnering with other stakeholders like the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce, the University of Florida, Santa Fe College, CareerSource North Central Florida and others. We had good partnerships before, but they've never been as strong as they are now.

We’re a city that not only has its own city-sponsored small business incubator in partnership with Santa Fe College. But we also support the University's efforts. Even the Gainesville Housing Authority has launched a Small Business Incubator this past year to provide opportunity for entrepreneurship for low income citizens. This last one, of course, represents a concrete effort to address economic disparities and to narrow the income inequality gap.

I bring that up because I became mayor when it was reported that income inequality in Gainesville was among the worst in the country. That is a tough and persistent gap to inherit and, unfortunately, even the latest reports only use data gathered in 2013, which means our efforts this year and last simply cannot yet be measured. I'm reminded of the theme for this past week's MLK Jr events: Don't talk about it; be about it. We have tackled economic disparities in our community and we'll continue to do so.

In partnership with the Alachua County Commission, we’ve open up three free Wi-Fi areas in East Gainesville to address the digital divide. I myself signed the Alachua County Education Compact to ensure our children get the support they need to achieve a high degree of education and skills that are ready for the workforce. We've expanded the reach of job fairs, inviting new participants and beefed up recruitment efforts in the city’s hiring process. We are providing a model program for integrating Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts and Math at the Reichert House which not only serves at-risk youth but also, disproportionately, minority kids from low income families. And I've initiated a discussion, and we'll be announcing it tomorrow, to provide a seat for a Reichert House graduate to enroll with the Gainesville Dev Academy, which is in many ways the "tip of the spear" in our efforts to build the Innovation Economy from the ground up. And I'm proud to have established the City's first-ever committee to promote minority-owned and minority-oriented opportunities.

Regarding Innovation, we simply do not have time to discuss the many efforts we've made, the partnerships in the community, and the meetings I've convened both here and around the country to leverage our local talent for greater opportunities. But I'd like to comment on how innovation, facilitation, and partnerships intersect not just for economic benefits but also for a higher Quality of
Life. And it's also illustrative of how we - as a Commission - have worked together to achieve buy-in from all officials - what I like to call getting everyone's fingerprints on the final policy product.

We are blessed as a college town with many bright students. And more than a year ago, they brought to my attention the desire to have the innovative transportation company Uber operate in the city, but we had burdensome regulations written for taxi cab companies.

Well, instead of the highly prescriptive approach of forcing a square peg in a round hole - and in the context of other cities picking winners and losers by using the regulatory code as a cudgel, we instead actually listened to what people wanted and re-wrote our entire regulatory code to accommodate both transportation entities. But here's where the magic happens. In addition to college students in a college town, we're home to a growing senior population that has its own unique set of transportation challenges. And our mass transit model that works so well for UF students simply does not work for this important group of people.

So in partnership with Uber, and ElderCare of Alachua County and the Chamber of Commerce, our city is now the first in the nation to offer discounted Uber rides to low income seniors. I'm pleased to report our 6 month pilot period is complete, and we are ready to expand enrollment throughout the city. I ask you, under our old top-down approach locked into a transportation paradigm of centrally planned fixed routes and fixed schedules, could something like this have ever happened?

It's amazing the progress that can be made when we listen to our community partners and act in ways to facilitate their ambitions rather than telling them how they can fit into our bold, prescribed plan. The theme - lest it be called a vision - of facilitating the hopes of the city rather than prescribing them has been enormously successful.

The difference between that which facilitates and empowers rather than prescribes and imposes is the difference between a toothpaste with Baking Soda and a toothpaste with Bacon and Soda. The former fortifies while the latter sounds great but doesn't achieve desirable results.

And it can only happen with a board that works together, so I want to again thank my colleagues for their efforts this past year (and before) to find common ground for the good of our city. This is even more remarkable given the predictions of dysfunction by so many since taking office. To show you how far we've come, it's important to show you where we've been.

When I mentioned a desire to address income inequality in 2014, the editorial the following week said it was "disconcerting" that I might echo a concern raised by President Obama. Let that sink in. If you want a singular statement that sums up the partisan blinders of those who shape public opinion and the tug-of-war politics that did, in fact, define the City Commission of not-too-long-ago, you can't do much better than saying it is "disconcerting" when people with different philosophies and different approaches to problem-solving want to set partisan identity aside to get something done.

But how far we've come. The Gainesville City Commission today is a far more politically diverse board than it's been in a long time, but for any honest observer, the act of setting aside partisan
differences in order to identify and tackle common problems is Gainesville's new standard operating procedure. And we should all be very proud of that.

Do you know when our last split 4-3 vote was? I went through the minutes - cause, yes, I check the minutes (after being reminded to by one of our activist citizens, Jo Batey) - we have to go all the way back to March 19, 2015 on an item about the Boundary Adjustment Act to see a 4-3 vote. And we've only had about a dozen 5-2 votes since then. The vast majority of our decisions are 6-1 and 7-0. I'm sure that horrifies some people ... but they're probably the same people peddling the false narrative that the city is gripped by a radical tea party agenda.

Let us affirm that in this Hall of Heroes, there are no Republicans; no Democrats. Yes, we have our differences – as should be expected in a pluralistic society – but what unites us far outweights whatever may divide us. And what unites us is our desire to put citizens at the center of all we do. We have a good track record on this front.

In 2013 I called a special meeting to allow greater light to be shed on the GREC biomass contract. The tough questions posed by citizens - previously scorned - led to the departure of the general manager and created the opportunity for new leadership - leadership that fights for our customers, our citizens. We broadened citizen comment opportunities, eliminating hurdles like the pre-comment registration and strict cut-off of speech. We put commissioner emails on-line and improved the process for acquiring public records. We have a leadership and governance that respects and listens to the governed and empowers the citizenry rather than trying to "impose" a bold vision on them.

Of course, that is the ultimate recommendation of the recently retired Blue Ribbon Committee on Economic Competitiveness - to make Gainesville the most citizen-centric city in the world. But our attitude adjustment predates even that.

Even as the City Commission has become more diverse politically and by experience, there has emerged a common cause - that the City should been seen more as a helper rather than a hurdle. In virtually all of our efforts over the past few years - from fighting the heavy cost pressure of the GREC biomass contract so that we can pursue affordable and competitive rates ... to modifying our Land Development Code after seeking greater citizen input ... to fully engaging neighborhoods with our police in areas like Duval in order to reduce crime ... to establishing a unique partnership to provide door-to-door transportation service for low income seniors ... to the Blue Ribbon Committee recommending a City Government re-designed around its citizens - the unmistakable common denominator is a City Hall that facilitates the aspirations of the community rather than defines them; a government that listens to rather than lectures at its citizens.

This has been bold but not imposing. To suggest otherwise is not only disingenuous but dishonors the hard work of the two thousand-plus employees who have worked diligently to change the direction of the city. So where does that lead us? When your government is more centered on respect for its citizens, we can be more candid about the challenges we face.

Although we can point to a reduction in the utility's fuel adjustment charge - the first GRU rate reduction of any kind in many years - and our elimination of the family-unfriendly lowest rate tier,
our citizens still struggle with utility bills that are too high. The principal challenge of 2016 will be continued work at pursuing more affordable rates for both residents businesses.

When I became mayor, the effort to provide a place for the homeless was mired in a lawsuit. Had we not settled, there still would not be a place to provide shelter and hope. We should be very proud of our efforts to secure a place for the homeless, but now we need to make it financially sustainable. It is currently on a trajectory that will break the city's finances. We have to make sure we are following best practices and tie funding to performance so that those who truly need help can get the help they need. And we need to add another layer to it. We need to deploy teams of mental health experts who can work on the last dozen or so people who remain unaccommodated and, thus, unable to get to places where they can get the help they need.

We need to continue working on our infrastructure. Again, the data is there - we have more bike paths and sidewalks than before; we're paving more roads and patching more potholes; we're expanding routes into East Gainesville and elsewhere. But we need to make sure that we are tying them to our mission and doing them on time and on budget.

We need to deepen our partnership with the University of Florida. We've partnered with UF to improve street lighting around the UF context area, which has actually freed up resources to make lighting improvements in the Duval neighborhood and elsewhere. We need to look at 2nd Avenue as the physical manifestation of the Town-Gown Partnership that can provide not just housing for students but housing for preeminent faculty and a strategic transportation corridor that connects the university with midtown and then downtown.

And when we talk about our Blue Ribbon Committee, there are some immediate actions that can take place in early 2016. The establishment of Action Officers who can champion citizens and the Welcome Wagon that will have the City going out to the people instead of having the people come to the City.

Our approach is open, inclusive and accountable. It is an approach grounded in trust of and respect for the people of Gainesville. Our approach is bold but not imposing because it is facilitative rather than prescriptive. We have much work to do ... but much to be proud of. We didn't get here by chance and we're not mere observers to activities beyond our influence. A City of Opportunity exists to help its citizens achieve their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Our job is to steward those opportunities ... and we're doing it now better than ever before.