Mayor’s 2009 State of the City Address

Good morning… and thank you for joining us on this cold winter day for the 2009 State of the City Address. As Gainesville’s citizens, staff, and elected officials, I know you rightly share pride in the success and progress of our city, and also share a sense of responsibility and concern for those goals we have yet to achieve together. Today we’ll talk about how Gainesville’s long term commitment to embracing change and striving toward sustainability put us on the leading edge of today’s green revolution.

But first, please join me in acknowledging my colleagues here this morning, Mayor Pro Tem Jack Donovan, and City Commissioners Craig Lowe, Scherwin Henry, Jeanna Mastrodicasa, and Thomas Hawkins. Commissioner Lauren Poe is unable to join us because of his teaching schedule, but asked me to share his best regards. Welcome also to each elected local government official and representative from the offices of our local State and Federal delegations who are here today.

Thanks also to our dedicated staff and charter officers, and to those of you who voluntary serve on our various Citizen Advisory Boards and Committees and who work diligently to provide the City Commission with valuable recommendations that help to make Gainesville a better place to live. Of course I thank you who are here simply because you are interested in what is being done to continue the quality of life that we enjoy as a City.

It’s also my pleasure to thank our always gracious host, the Hippodrome State Theatre for their assistance in making this wonderful community treasure available for the State of the City. It’s a change in venue for us, and the site of the largest crowd produced in the U.S. for any campaign stop by soon-to-be First Lady Michelle Obama this fall. On that note, I am energized to recognize “CHANGE” as the word of the year.
After a contentious and hard-fought election season, in just a few days our nation will embark upon an historic change in the Office of the President of the United States. It is the sincere hope of countless millions that with this change we will turn a page in our national history, and move from being red or blue, and black or white, to being a more perfect union, and a more United States of America. Please join me in congratulating and pledging support to President-elect Barack Obama and Vice-President Joe Biden as they embark on a journey toward what we hope will be a respectful, bipartisan, inclusive and sustainable future for our great nation. The significance of electing our nation’s first African American President speaks volumes about our ability as a united people to embrace change as we seek a better future for every American.

I will return to themes of change and sustainability in a few minutes, but first I’d like to quickly note that while some things may change, others remain very much the same -- and that’s not necessarily a bad thing. For example, as always, isn’t it great to be a Florida Gator?

For example in 2007, the Gator Basketball team made history by repeating as national champions and success came to the Gator Football team in the form of the Heisman Trophy Award to UF quarterback Tim Tebow. This year, the UF football team again upheld its tradition of excellence both on and off the field, beating the Florida State University Seminoles 45-to-15 and the Crimson Tide of the University of Alabama 31-to-20 to win another SEC Conference Football Championship, before vanquishing Oklahoma to win our third national football Championship. The night before the game, though not expecting a particularly informed answer, I asked my three year old, Evy, “Exactly what is an Oklahoma Sooner, anyway?” Without hesitation she said, “It’s a person who doesn’t win a football game.” Gators are born, not made, folks.

This same drive and passion for excellence permeates our community and is reflected in the civic engagement of Gainesville’s citizens, and in the capable, “can
“do” spirit of our citizens, neighborhoods and businesses. This is same commitment to excellence that led to Gainesville’s 2007 recognition by the publication, Cities: Ranked & Rated, as the top-ranked city, out of more than 400 cities in North America.

Building on this honor, in 2008, Gainesville ranked number 22 in Forbes.Com’s list of the top 25 Smartest Cities in America. We were also honored by Smithsonian.Com in an article entitled, Where to Live Next as one of 15 communities included in its Guide to Cultured Retirement. Black Enterprise Magazine ranked Gainesville thirteenth in its top 20 list of Best Places to Retire. And, Smart Money Magazine designated Gainesville as the number one location to retire to in an economic downturn. These rankings tell only a part, but nonetheless, an important part of our City’s story and reflect our proud tradition of public and private partnership to build a better and more diverse community.

This year, as has become our tradition, we are again releasing our annual Citizen’s Report in conjunction with the State of the City Address. Change was the clear message in this year’s Presidential election. And this theme of change is manifesting itself here in Gainesville as well. Gainesville’s city government is proactively meeting the challenge of providing exceptional service to our citizens during the current deep and damaging economic downturn.

The current fiscal crisis will likely mean a decrease in expected revenues in Fiscal Year 2009 and beyond that are used to fund municipal services. That is why the theme of this year’s address is, Changing Today for a Greener and More Sustainable Tomorrow. The intent is three-fold. We are focusing our City government’s efforts toward sustainable practices to preserve our natural heritage and the air and water than sustain us, while enhancing our ability to navigate through fiscally challenging times, and improving the likelihood that all of our citizens will have the opportunity for a better life.
Progress toward these goals is documented in two streamlined printed reports that are available to you today, but will primarily be distributed through our websites, again, to save on fiscal and environmental resources. These documents are Gainesville’s annual Citizen’s Report, as well as a new GRU publication titled *Gainesville, Florida—One Community’s Strategy to Reduce Global Warming*. I’ll highlight what we mean by *Changing Today for a Greener and More Sustainable Tomorrow* by outlining the City’s initiatives and progress within three areas of focus: enhancing our environmental stewardship, increasing our human capital, and ensuring our fiscal sustainability. In shorthand, sometimes these are called the “Three E’s:” Environment, Equity and Economy.

Our community’s environmental achievements include:

- exceeding our goals for energy efficiency among our utility customers,
- retrofitting the Deerhaven Power plant to reduce air emissions,
- transitioning to less carbon-intense fuel sources,
- greening our municipal fleet and building stock,
- adding to our public lands and trail system, and voting again to create funds to do so through Wild Spaces and Public Places,
- continuing to remediate the Depot Avenue Coal-gasification contaminated site, and continuing to fight for cleanup of the Cabot Carbon/Koppers Superfund site;
- advancing the stormwater treatment system for sheetflow in Paynes Prairie;
- adopting the first solar Feed-in-Tarriff in the U.S.,
- installing a new traffic management system that will reduce congestion and tailpipe emissions, and
- entering our 25th year as a Tree City, USA, our fifth year as a Bicycle Friendly Community, and our first year as a Butterfly City.

- In addition, our long-standing and continuing commitment to urban infill and redevelopment contributes not only to fewer transportation and ecological impacts, but also to a stronger fiscal outlook for our city, and a more vibrant quality of life.
In the critical goal area of increasing human capital, we are:

- Continuing our efforts, in an increasingly difficult climate, towards helping our homeless citizens through cold night sheltering, support for the Office on Homelessness and homeless service providers, and commitment to implement the 10 Year Plan to End Homelessness in partnership with Alachua County government.

- Gainesville continues to implementing numerous other programs to improve substandard housing, and open housing accessibility to disadvantaged residents.

- We are working in cooperation with the School Board to improve area schools by continuing our “Raising Canes” Program at GHS, GRU’s adoption of Williams Elementary, growing our after school programs at our middle schools and Reichert House, and focusing attention on root cause prevention, early childhood education, and improving graduation rates and student achievement.

- The Gainesville Police Department is building new partnerships with the Alachua County Sheriff’s Office to analyze and proactively prevent crime.

- We are building a new fire station on North 34th Street to reduce fire and EMS response times; and

- Again, working with Alachua County, Alachua Conservation Trust, the Gainesville Sports Commission, ElderCare, the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce and, most importantly, through our voting citizens and their approval of Wild Spaces and Public Places, we will now have the funding to build our first-ever Senior Center at Northside park, and improve recreational facilities for all users across the community.

- The Gainesville City Commission is currently reviewing the vision and function of our Equal Opportunity Department, in preparation for a leadership transition as EO Director Jimmie Williams plans for his September retirement. Again and again Gainesville has confirmed its aspiration to be a community that does not accept any type of discrimination, whether on the basis of race, sex, disability, national origin, religion, age, sexual orientation or gender.
identity. We must not retreat in this regard, and I ask you to join me in opposing an ill-conceived and misguided charter amendment that will appear on the March 24 ballot, which would mark Gainesville, wrongly, as a place willing to tolerate intolerance, and forfeit our ability to decide our own fate when it comes to protecting disadvantaged groups of all types, no matter how easy they may be to scapegoat or exclude.

- As will be clearly evident at tomorrow’s city commission meeting, we are also raising the bar for bars… in coordination with the University of Florida and under Commissioner Jeanna Mastrodicasa’s leadership, Gainesville is seeking new and innovative ways to reduce alcohol-related problems, particularly among those too young to legally consume alcohol.

None of this would be possible in a time of fiscal constraint if we were not also working to control our budget in the same way most of our households and businesses are doing the same.

- In 2008, general government cut nearly $2 million from our general fund operating account, enacted hiring freezes in all areas except public safety, and put administrative offices on a four day work week.
- We made very difficult but necessary changes to our retiree insurance plans,
- We worked to grow the tax base within the CRA districts by over $38 million,
- And we made it easier to do business in some areas of city government over the Internet.
- By annexing the Butler Plaza and SW 20th Avenue areas we believe the long-term provision of urban services will be delivered in a more cost efficient manner, and will allow more coordinated planning for future growth in this part of our city.
- Finally, despite a few years of financial challenges and sharply rising fuel costs, GRU has maintained its outstanding bond rating, and is moving into the future in a way that is both economically and ecologically sound.
With this overview, let me bring attention to a number of specific achievements that demonstrate our efforts toward Changing Today for a Greener and More Sustainable Tomorrow and implement the City Commission’s adopted Strategic Goals and Initiatives.

The City Commission’s first goal is Public Safety. Gainesville’s intent has long been not to simply react to calls for service, but to proactively increase community safety, reduce crime, and flatten the fast-growing demand for emergency response. Commissioner Jeanna Mastrodicasa is the sponsoring commissioner who champions initiatives in this area in coordination with Gainesville Fire Rescue and the Gainesville Police Department. The first initiative under public safety is to develop and continue programs to reduce the causes of crime.

In fiscal year 2008, the Gainesville Police Department started the second stage of a multi-year capital improvement project to renovate and enhance the capabilities of its 55,000 square-foot Patrol Operations Center. The Center houses the majority of our Patrol Operations and investigative functions of the Gainesville Police Department. The renovation has been funded by drug forfeiture and city bond funds, and was designed to help bring GPD even closer to the citizens of Gainesville, and to provide you with the highest possible service. This renovation coincides with the creation of a new Intelligence Center which will be located behind the Operations Center, and will house crime analysts from both GPD and the Sheriff’s office, increasing our capacity to share information and expertise, reduce costs and increase results.

The Intelligence Center is expected to be completed in 2009 and will put the Police Department in the forefront of intelligence-led community policing. The Gainesville Police Department is also involved in multiple, additional efforts to reduce crime. They range from the 40 illegal guns taken off the streets last year by its Tactical Impact Unit to the work of the Crime Analysis Unit which has been instrumental in
providing up to the minute information on crime occurring in Gainesville, as well as
the people involved in committing these crimes.

Here’s a glimpse of what that unit does, each morning crime analysts review all
incidents and status reports that occurred during the previous twenty-four hours.
This information is compiled into a Crime Snapshot and electronically distributed to
GPD officers and supervisors. This allows officers and supervisors to be aware of
what has occurred in their respective zones during the preceding twenty-four hours
on all shifts and it allows them to tailor their activity to combat any potential crime
issues. Crime Analysts will also provide a significant amount of information to the
Command Staff as GPD transitions to Information Led Policing. This concept
involves target resource allocation, a strategy used to deploy officers based
on analytical data developed by our Crime Analysts.

Our community policing initiatives continue as well. The Police Department’s active
support for at-risk youth in our community continues as evidenced by the number of
participants in Reichert House after-school programs, which has grown from 114 in
2007 to 140 in 2008.

Additionally this past summer, in response to a disturbance involving children at a
City pool, GPD and our Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department teamed
up to begin a program called Operation “Respect Yourself.” Its purpose is to educate
youth on how to recognize actions that can lead to violence, what to they can do to
diffuse potentially violent situations, and what action they should take when violence
seems imminent or does occur. By taking proactive steps like this we help to ensure
the safety of our community’s young people and create a safe, fun-filled environment
for everyone during the hot summer months. Three pool parties were held for
participating youth during the summer, and as a result, our juvenile crime rate
decreased by seven percent during the same time period.
Between the annexations of Butler Plaza and SW 20th Avenue, GPD will add a total of 13 new police officers, two police service technicians and a sergeant. This reflects the fact that these two annexations of nearly 1000 acres, with intense commercial and residential activity, compose an urban area in need of greater attention. The Butler Plaza annexation, which was completed in June of 2008, is a key part of our increased calls for police service, with 125,854 calls in 2008 compared to 124,012 the prior year. Overall, however, only the crime category of larceny, which is all theft and burglary to vehicles, saw an increase in 2008, with a slight decrease in categories of violent offenses.

I want to personally congratulate GPD for its outstanding management of last week’s national championship celebration. I am sure the families and friends of our police officers held their breath, as did I, until their loved ones were safely home, given that these otherwise joyful events will always remind us of the crushing loss of Lt. Corey Dahlem. It is at times like these that we are forced to remember that police officers are human beings, whose flesh and bones are nearly as fragile as a normal person’s.

It would be an oversight to fail to address the fact that GPD has suffered tremendously this year from a very different kind of loss, resulting from the intolerable actions of a very small number of employees. These actions were identified and investigated in a timely fashion, but that doesn’t compensate for their occurrence. When you wear the badge you subject yourself to a higher standard of expectation, and more than 99% of our officers meet and exceed that expectation every day. That said, our management team is taking strong and unambiguous actions to reinforce core values, code of conduct, professionalism, ethics and integrity. All supervisors attended training in Discrimination, Harassment and Conduct. All Department members attended training in Organizational Professionalism, Ethics and Integrity. Supervisors are currently attending training in Preventing and Addressing Inappropriate Behavior. Again, the vast majority of GPD employees live out their high moral values every day, and it is of substantial pain for
all of us that the actions of a few brought negative attention on such a fine Department.

The second initiative under our public safety goal is to ensure that there are appropriate staff levels for police and fire and to review the deployment of staff. The Southwest annexations will affect the Gainesville Fire Rescue Department as well. Each month during the past year, Gainesville Fire Rescue, or GFR, responded to more than 900 medical calls and 300 non-medical calls. The call load was handled utilizing department staff located at seven fire rescue stations including an airport fire fighting station and by operating five engines, three aerial trucks, a two person quick response squad and three aircraft firefighting vehicles.

However over time, gaps in fire coverage response times have developed due to the city’s expanding boundaries. Beginning in October 2005, GFR proactively reported this finding along with recommendations to solve the problem. Their recommendations included the addition of a new fire station in NW Gainesville. In 2006, the City Commission approved this recommendation. GFR staff worked together with City staff from Budget and Finance, the Building Department and Public Works on a major capital improvement construction project for Fire Station 8, which will be located at 3223 NW 42nd Avenue. The GFR design team also worked closely with the project architect this year to ensure that the new fire station building will take advantage of cost-effective technology and green design components. We expect it to open in May of 2010, to meet LEED Silver green construction standards, and to be about 30% more energy efficient than the typical fire station.

This station will improve service levels in northwest Gainesville and will provide a location for crew training on the west side of town. The ability to leave newly staffed units in west Gainesville will maintain citywide response times, while saving fuel costs. When operational, this fire station will insure that Gainesville maintains an ISO rating of 3. This means that your home insurance rates will continue to reflect the city’s excellent fire protection rating.
I also want to say a bit more about a new piece of equipment that will be deployed at the new station. GFR has worked with the fire vehicle provider E-One of Ocala to design and build a state of the art aerial fire truck, Quint 8, which includes a low-sulfur emissions motor. This is a further example of how the various departments of your City government are supporting efforts to reduce our carbon footprint and develop sustainable solutions for Gainesville’s green future.

The City Commission’s second goal in our strategic plan is to foster economic development and encourage redevelopment. Our initiatives in this area are informed by the hard work of citizen volunteers who serve as members of CRA advisory boards and on our Plan and Development Review Boards. They dedicate long hours toward ensuring that our community develops in a way that reflects our desire for sustainable grown patterns and our community’s sense of appropriate design aesthetics. Examples include recently completed residential development projects such as Jefferson on Second, a large-scale urban multi-family development with almost 300 student apartments, the 185-unit University House development on Northwest 13th Street, and The Palms development on 2nd Avenue.

The first initiative under this goal recognizes the importance of planning for economic prosperity in areas of our City that have not fully benefited from past development patterns. In May 2008, a new Wal-Mart Super Center located at 1800 North East 12th Avenue on Gainesville’s East Side, opened its doors for the first time. In doing so, this 206-thousand square foot store also ushered in a new chapter of redevelopment for this part of our city. About 440 jobs have been created and more importantly, we expect that this energy efficient store will stimulate additional economic growth and sustainable development in East Gainesville.

Nowhere is the need for new economic life more apparent than in the southeast quadrant of our City. That is why implementing the Southeast Gainesville Renaissance, or SEGRI, initiative is a priority for sustainable development activity.
The centerpiece of this initiative is the redevelopment of the former Kennedy Homes site. Last year, District One Commissioner Scherwin Henry, the sponsoring champion for this initiative, joined with me to announce that the City had acquired the Kennedy Homes site and completed the SEGRI master plan. The old Kennedy Homes Apartment buildings were demolished and we were considering ways to move forward with redevelopment opportunities.

In April 2008, thanks to the efforts of our City Attorney’s Office, and Gainesville Community Redevelopment Agency staff, the City received permission to develop the site without federal Housing and Urban Development use restrictions. In May 2008, the City Commission accepted a draft SEGRI special area plan from project consultants Wilson and Miller. Since then, our planning and legal staff has been working to incorporate the special area plan into the City’s Land Development Code. The revised Code is scheduled to go before the City Plan Board in February 2009. Concurrently, final legal review of a Request for Proposals, or RFP, for a high-quality mixed income housing and mixed use development located at the former Kennedy Homes site is nearing completion. The RFP calls for walkable community design elements, priced at a market-rate that is affordable for our local workforce. The RFP should be released to developers in late January or early February of this year.

Additionally, there are a number of smaller projects underway in the southeast area that will complement the redevelopment of the Kennedy Homes site. The CRA is managing enhancements to the Hawthorne Trail, and our economic development efforts in the area include plans for a business incubator for small restaurant start-ups on Hawthorne Road. Beautification efforts along major traffic corridors in the area are also ongoing including: installation of new fences, paint upgrade programs, and street lighting improvements. You also may have noticed that construction of a gateway feature in the Five Points area is well underway and should be complete by spring 2009.
Another major initiative under the economic development and redevelopment goal is the continued implementation of the Strategic Redevelopment Plan for Depot Park. It is no coincidence that I serve as the Commission champion for this initiative. I first began advocating for this project during my tenure as a City Commissioner, more than a decade ago. This ongoing initiative is moving forward under the management of GRU for soil remediation activities and under the management of the Gainesville CRA Manager and staff for design and construction activities.

In March 2008, the Depot Park Master Plan and Implementation Timeline were approved by the CRA Board of Directors and the City Commission. If you’ve had opportunity to drive by Southeast Depot Avenue, you’ve noted that the 1907 historic Gainesville train depot has been sectioned and relocated to another location at the Depot Park site. This was done so that we can excavate the contaminated soil near that location. Remediation efforts involve permanently removing and replacing the contaminated soil near the Depot building and leaving a partial excavation for subsequent stormwater pond construction. GRU is finalizing administrative and technical tasks and actual remediation should begin in July 2009, funded by GRU’s gas utility with some assistance from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Reconstruction of Southeast Depot Avenue from South Main to Southeast 7th Street will be bid in February 2009 and construction is scheduled to begin in May 2009. The design of the park to the point of development construction drawings will begin during the first quarter of 2009. Development of rehabilitation plans for the Depot train building will also begin in the first quarter of 2009.

In 2008, the Cade Museum leadership selected Depot Park for its museum site. The Cade Museum will be based on the ideas of Inspiration, Invention, and Innovation. The Cade Family and their museum leaders are working with the Boston-based museum design firm E. Verner Johnson and Associates to develop a concept for a new building by the first quarter 2009. The building size is anticipated to be
approximately 50,000 square feet and will be located adjacent to South Main Street. The project is also moving ahead with establishing a museum preview center at the old downtown Firestone Building to assist with fundraising. The museum leaders have expressed interest in incorporating exhibits in the historic Gainesville Depot after its rehabilitation. The target date for opening the Cade Museum at Depot Park is late 2011. This will be an exciting addition to our park, and a fitting tribute to Dr. Robert Cade, a true renaissance man who, as the inventor of Gatorade, was our most high profile role model for bringing useful and profitable products out of the academic laboratory and into the marketplace.

Other initiatives under the economic development and redevelopment goal include continuing implementation of the Strategic Redevelopment Plan for 14-acres of GRU maintenance area located in downtown Gainesville, a tremendous amount of land in our small downtown. The CRA has employed the planning and design services of Atlanta architectural firm, Lord-Aeck-Sargent, which successfully directed efforts to develop the Technology Square project in midtown Atlanta. The consultant team continues to refine the vision for the area surrounding the Kelly Power Plant. The consultants are developing a potential regulatory toolset that will allow flexibility and high-quality redevelopment to occur in the manner they have described to the CRA and to local stakeholders. As the firm finalizes its master plan for the site, which considers site layout, various uses, compatibility with surroundings, redevelopment phasing, and design issues, it will also review economic and business considerations associated with the redevelopment of this property.

Continuing efforts to remove barriers to economic development and redevelopment is another initiative that our Planning and Development Director and staff are working hard to address. The Gainesville Technology Enterprise Center (GTEC) is a community program providing early stage technology startup companies with tools, training and infrastructure to help them grow and develop into financially viable technology enterprises. GTEC is at approximately 93 percent of capacity, housing 8-10 companies with approximately 60 employees. These companies have received
up to $49 million in the form of revenues, investment capital and research grants while using the facility in the last three years. I’m happy to announce that land assembly for future development adjacent to the GTEC facility has been completed.

Positioning the City to take advantage of an innovation economy and identifying plans for an innovation zone located near the University of Florida will become increasingly important as we seek to stimulate job development within our city. As much as we despair over the loss of Alachua General Hospital, we will work to support Shands in a smooth transition that ensures access to quality healthcare across our city. As recently as this week, Shands CEO Tim Goldfarb assured me that Shands is developing a plan to keep AGH employees working, and working together in consistent functional teams at “the big Shands.” His intent is to also ensure that no healthcare gap is left behind. If these goals are achieved, then we can look optimistically toward a day when doctor’s offices are more geographically distributed, and SW Second Avenue transitions into a new economic reality.

Our community needs more good paying jobs and more affordable housing for people to earn a decent, living wage. Our Housing Division Manager and staff are working hard to accomplish this pressing initiative, but increasing the amount of affordable housing and low-cost housing throughout the City is not just another initiative, it is an imperative. During the current economic downturn, families are feeling the pain of depreciating home values and the specter of stagnant wages. We must do all we can at the local level to improve affordable housing opportunities for City residents. In 2008, Gainesville’s Housing Staff provided funding or services to nearly 1,000 residents. This ranged from more than 420 nights for homeless individuals housed in city-funded winter shelter beds, to nineteen former residents of Buck Bay being provided with cash assistance for relocation.

The final initiative of this goal is to improve coordination with Alachua County in order to more effectively plan and develop Gainesville’s Urban Reserve Area. As evidenced by our recent cooperation on the Southwest annexations, our partnership
with Alachua County to achieve seamless and efficient service provision has never been stronger.

The third goal of the City Commission focuses on investing in Human Capital. Our intent is to assist every person in reaching their true potential. While some families are feeling the current economic pinch, others are subject to the hunger, danger, uncertainty and other serious challenges that plague our homeless community. That is why the first of four initiatives that fall under this goal is to continue implementation of the 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness.

Mayor-Commissioner Pro-tem Jack Donovan is the sponsoring commissioner for our efforts in this area. Our counterparts in this endeavor include the Alachua County government, the Gainesville/Alachua County Office on Homelessness, the Alachua County Coalition for the Homeless and Hungry, and a consortium of non-profit providers including faith-based organizations, local businesses, the homeless, educational institutions, and you, the public. One of the biggest challenges to providing homelessness services remains finding a suitable site location for a One-Stop Homeless Assistance Center.

In September 2008, the City Commission considered ten possible sites for the proposed GRACE Marketplace One-Stop Homeless Center that were brought forward by community stakeholders. The Commission narrowed possible location choices for the Center, which is intended to provide services such as job training, showers, meals, counseling, laundry and housing assistance, down to three sites. In the meantime, we continue to work with neighborhood residents and communicate with homeless advocates as we search for additional sites that may be suitable locations for the One-Stop Center and we have authorized the City Manager to continue to negotiate on behalf of the City to acquire a suitable site. I know there is a degree of skepticism, or even cynicism, regarding whether this facility will ever be sited or opened. Let me assure you that the city staff intends to bring a site to the Commission by April 30, and I believe we will move forward to build a facility that
offers not just the services described but also dormitory-style housing for homeless individuals. Gail Monahan of the Alachua County Housing Authority and the Office on Homelessness has had great success in attracting grants for actual housing, and I believe this should and will be the primary key to success for a remotely-located One Stop Center.

Strategic goal four outlines our emphasis on providing you with an effective municipal government that maintains its commitment to administer public funds in a fiscally responsible manner. Initiative one under this goal seeks continued growth and diversity of properties within Gainesville’s corporate limits.

Last year, I reported to you that Gainesville and Alachua County Joint City/County Orderly Annexation Team was meeting regularly to collaboratively develop strategies to improve and expand annexation efforts. In March 2008, the Team presented a progress update at a Joint City/County Commission meeting that identified fourteen areas in Gainesville’s Urban Reserve Areas for further evaluation. Thanks to this intergovernmental effort, and more significantly, because of the cooperation of Clark Butler, a long-time friend and civic activist in our community who passed away last year, we were able to bring a substantial portion of the Archer Road area into the City limits through voluntary annexation petitions.

The second major annexation activity in 2008 occurred by voter referendum on November 4th when voters in the proposed Southwest 20th Avenue annexation area approved a ballot measure to become a part of our City. This annexation will take effect beginning June 1, 2009 which will allow us to work collaboratively with Alachua County to ensure the seamless transition from County to City services for approximately 6-thousand new city residents in the area, bringing our estimated population to about 130,000, with a 66% voter approval rate on election night. I wish to thank everyone who has worked to achieve these significant milestones in the growth of our city.
To fulfill other initiatives under the goal of government effectiveness and fiscal responsibility, your municipal government has also taken steps to increase our use of technology to provide you with improved services in a cost effective manner. In September 2008, the City’s website redesign was unveiled after a year of intense collaborative staff work between our Communications Office and Information Technology Department. In addition to updating the site appearance and improving its user-friendliness, much of this in-house redesign focused on behind the scene enhancements that will extend the site’s functionality for several more years, and give our staff greater decentralized ability to respond to your requests. At a total cost of $7600, the project was completed at approximately one-tenth the estimated cost provided by an external vendor. We continue to seek ways make the website more informative, functional and easier to use.

Developing a strategy for E-Commerce using the City’s website to provide citizens with the ability to conduct business with the City online is an essential part of improving government effectiveness. In 2007, the City developed and implemented the Online Parking Citation Payment and the Business Tax online portions of the Web site. What this means is that you can now conveniently handle these transactions on line, rather than making a trip to City Hall or the post office. The results? In 2008, 62% of parking citations were paid online, or 11,284 of 18,307 total tickets. So far this fiscal year, 28% of business tax renewals or 1,238 of 4,476 payments have been made online. And 75% of parking decals, 1,752 transactions, were completed online. Our website hosted nearly 386,000 unique visitors, for a total of more than 11.6 million hits. Increasingly, from accessing employment listings to obtaining program information to watching live streaming video of our public meetings, people can do business with the city without leaving the comfort of their home or office.

The sheer volume of these web-based interactions are one indicator that people are interested in what we are doing in the City of Gainesville, and having many of their interests met. Another indicator is seen in the results of our citywide Citizen Survey,
conducted last January to help us determine citizens’ perceptions of government. For example, seventy-two percent of surveyed citizens ranked Gainesville above the norm compared to other Florida cities as a place to raise children. Our citizens also ranked our educational and recreational opportunities, air quality, mobility and access, community image, sense of community and openness to diverse people above the norm. Additionally, you also ranked the knowledge, responsiveness and your overall impression of City employees above the norm by wide margins. This says a great deal about our desire and effort to provide you with the highest possible quality of service.

From February through May 2008, the City Commission also learned a great deal in a series of four District Commission meetings that we held in an effort to increase citizen participation and feedback and to find out what your neighborhood concerns are. Each district Commissioner served as host as we traveled to each of the City’s four districts to bring municipal government closer to you. Each meeting included short presentations by City staff on municipal and private projects within each district, as well as discussion of key citywide issues and key issues within each district. As a result of the meetings, we were able to develop a city budget for fiscal years 2009 and 2010 that is responsive to the priorities you gave us. The City Commission has expressed an interest in continuing efforts such as these to take government to the people, rather than waiting for the people to come to us. There is little doubt that next year’s budget will be even more difficult to balance than this year’s was, so any insight we can gain from our citizens is highly valued.

We’ve also helped citizens better understand the role of municipal government through Gainesville 101: The City of Gainesville Citizens’ Academy. This six-week program developed and offered by our Communications Office is designed to educate citizens about the provision of City services and the issues and challenges faced by their city government. The program also provides an opportunity for City staff to engage in a two-way dialogue to hear about citizen perspectives on important issues.
Our fifth goal calls on us to improve our infrastructure and transportation systems, including the green infrastructure of our parks and conservation lands.

This goal may have the greatest impact on the everyday lives of our residents, and represents a tremendous opportunity to leave a healthy natural environment for future generations to treasure. The champion for this initiative is Commissioner Craig Lowe, who has been a dogged advocate for land conservation, and reinvestment in older infrastructure. Our Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Department and numerous community stakeholders worked with tremendous success in 2008 to find ways to fund land acquisitions and improvements to our parks infrastructure. Since bonding $22 million for capital improvements in 2005, and overseeing completion of more than 70% of planned projects since that time, the city has also been blessed with the confidence of voters to continue improving our parks and saving ecologically significant land.

In April 2008, the Gainesville area Chamber of Commerce and the Trust for Public Land conducted a poll which revealed that there was strong support among local voters for a half-cent sales tax for parks, recreation and land conservation. County Commissioners voted to put the measure, which will raise approximately forty million dollars during the next two years, before voters on the November 4th ballot. In July, the City released a list of recreational projects and land conservation projects that are eligible to be funded with the nearly fourteen million dollars the Sales tax will generate for Gainesville over its two-year life-cycle. On November 4th, our citizens voted to approve the Wild Spaces & Public Places Half-Cent Sales Tax initiative. This endorsement of the Alachua County Forever program and the recognition of the need for improved active recreation and the willingness to pay for these programs are extraordinary in this terrible economic time.

Again, this confidence is based on a history of achievement. For example, Gainesville’s newest nature park, the 74-acre Hogtown Creek Headwaters property was acquired in 2008 through a grant from the Florida Communities Trust and a charitable donation from Home Depot Corporation. The Alachua Conservation Trust
worked with FCT and Home Depot to negotiate the acquisition of this property at very little cost to the city. We owe an extraordinary debt of gratitude to Robert Hutchinson, not just for his work on Wilds Spaces, Public Places or the Hogtown Headwaters project, but for decades of effort to save natural Florida.

I am pleased to announce that this year the city will acquire the Florida Division of Forestry’s Smokey Bear Park and the Waccasassa Forestry Center located at 1600 NE 23rd Avenue. This acquisition will mean that the 5-acre park, with playground and picnic facilities, will remain open to the public and the Forestry Center will become be available as a maintenance facility for the city. This will be the first major active recreation project of Wild Spaces Public Places and, again, is being done at a very competitive cost.

When one discusses public infrastructure in Gainesville, it isn’t long before the subject turns to our community’s transportation needs, and particularly to our ability to manage and monitor the flow of traffic along our major roads. This time last year, I reported great progress in implementing a new traffic management system. You’ll recall that the system features retimed signal lights that should improve traffic flow by 10 to 20 percent in Gainesville and Alachua County. This year, I am pleased to report that in 2008, Phase 1 of this fully funded $18 million project was completed and became operational. Phase 2 is now underway and is proceeding on-time and on budget.

In March 2008, Gainesville’s Public Works Department announced that the department had been awarded national accreditation after a nearly five-year, in-depth evaluation process. Gainesville is one of only 47 other cities in the nation to have achieved accreditation from the American Public Works Association since the organization began accrediting municipal public Works departments. We are the only city to do it by achieving 100-percent compliance in all 343 management practices that were reviewed. Please join me in acknowledging this distinctive professional accomplishment by the men and women who serve in our Public Works department.
Gainesville’s Regional Transit System also functions as part of the Public Works Department and has also been honored with award recognition in 2008. The Florida Public Transportation Association recently awarded RTS the first annual Outstanding Public Transportation System Achievement award to recognize public transportation system achievement in efficiency and effectiveness. RTS competed against several other transit agencies in the state for this distinguished honor. The award was given based on a wide array of both qualitative and quantitative data, including ridership, revenue, safety, operations, maintenance, marketing and community relations. In 2007, RTS recorded more than eight point nine million passenger trips, last year RTS carried more than nine million passengers. What this means to you is that as more people use the public transit system we reduce the number of cars and trucks on our streets, and reduce the amount of auto emissions that pollute our air. I always say, even if you never step foot on a bus, those nine million passengers are not in cars, on the road, in front of you. And, of course, again, your city is working to reduce our carbon foot print and prepare for a green future.

There are two other initiatives under our Infrastructure and Transportation goal that I want to mention. They are closely linked in that they both refer to supporting the reconstruction of transportation facilities to encourage development. This is a subject that is near and dear to me, and also to Commissioner Thomas Hawkins, as our new sponsoring commissioner for the redevelopment of the 6th Street Rail Trail. In that capacity, he is working with the Public Works Department and others including: residents, businesses, GPD, and other stakeholder organizations. After more than a decade of negotiation with CSX, and again, with the invaluable assistance of the Trust for Public Land, The State of Florida completed acquisition of the trail corridor in April of last year. It was my honor to testify before Gov. Charlie Crist and the Florida Cabinet to advocate for the final approvals needed, after having, at points in the process, nearly given up hope that this trail, that will be like a zipper between the University area and downtown, would ever come to pass. The City Commission
approved the design consultant contract in April, and a lease agreement between the City and State is nearing completion of a review process. Phase one design documents should be complete later this month. Two million dollars in funding is available for the project through our partnership with the University and F-D-O-T.

Turning to the last initiative of this goal, which is the redevelopment of Depot Avenue, I remain particularly interested in this project, because when combined with other enhancements in the Depot Park area and the reconstruction of Main Street, it has the potential redefine and expand the area that currently refer to as downtown Gainesville. Construction plans for the segment from South Main Street to Southeast 7th Avenue have been updated and some limited construction activity is occurring, and is expected to increase this year.

Neighborhoods are the fundamental building block on which a thriving city is built. Our sixth goal is to improve the quality of life in our neighborhoods for the benefit of all city residents. Our new Landlord Licensing Program has been effective in gaining cooperation from absentee and derelict landlords. The program notifies landlords after a tenant receives a point for a codes violation. This effort has resulted in 565 point warning letters being mailed to landlords of problem properties informing them that continued non-compliance will result in revocation of their permits. This information is now available in real time on the Code Enforcement Web site at www.gainesvillecodes.org. Now most landlords of problem properties are very active in making sure that their properties are well-maintained and comply with city ordinances designed to keep our single family neighborhoods intact.

Our seventh goal, to Protect and sustain our natural environment and address future energy needs, is primarily overseen by the staff of our public utility, GRU. Working with uncommon creativity in 2008, GRU has embraced its role as an energy leader for our community, our state and the nation. I am pleased to report that over the past two years, we have surpassed our targets for demand side management programs by offering customers incentives for things like upgrading appliances, using solar electric and solar for water heating, recycling secondary refrigerators, repairing duct
work and upgrading air conditioning systems. Custom rebates for businesses have been a huge part of this success. In fact, cumulative results for FY 07 and FY 08 indicate business and residential customers combined have saved more than 35-thousand megawatt hours of electricity. While GRU has invested substantially in conservation, customers have invested nearly $17 million as well. What does this mean for our citizens? Nearly $4.9 million in annual customer savings or enough energy to power 3,100 homes for one year. In addition, the energy saved has resulted in the removal of more than 31-thousand Tons of Carbon Dioxide.

We continue to set ambitious energy efficiency goals - just one strategy the City of Gainesville is implementing to help us meet the international goals for carbon reduction set by the Kyoto protocols, which call for reducing carbon to below 1990 levels. Based on the current strategies, we will meet the Kyoto target by 2013. This is an extraordinary achievement for a city that is primarily coal dependent, and is a testament to the commitment of our citizens and our talented utility staff. In July, I was honored to be an invited speaker at Governor Crist’s Climate Change Summit, representing Gainesville as one of just three local governments in Florida chosen as an example for others to follow. Gainesville has also been represented on the Governor’s Climate Change Task Force by Kathy Viehe, of GRU, and I have given nearly a dozen presentations on our efforts at the Florida League of Cities, the Mayors’ Innovation Project, the Jacksonville Business of Green Summit, and other venues. The details of our city’s successful effort to address climate change are detailed in our new report, which is both available on our website, and provided in hard copy for you this morning.

Our efforts to reduce our emissions have not been at the expense of our fiscal strength. On the contrary, as mentioned earlier, again this year, GRU has maintained sound financial footing, even in these turbulent economic times. The utility has been awarded a “AA” rating by financial services agencies Standard & Poor’s and Moody’s Investors Service. Cited as factors behind this vote of confidence include our competitive electric power costs, our well-managed financial
operations, our good debt-service coverage, a strong cash position, a stable economic base with a growing customer base and, perhaps most importantly, our experienced and proactive management team. Among more than 2000 public utilities nationwide, only have a bond rating as high as GRU’s with Moody’s and Standard and Poor’s. Having participated in meetings with these two rating agencies for the past three years, I can assure you that they are scrupulous in their analysis of our industry, and our utility should be proud of this achievement.

GRU recognizes the need to meet the future energy needs of our community with reliable and affordable service, while preserving natural resources for generations to come. To maintain and build upon our reputation as a forward-thinking utility, in 2008 GRU continued to invest in new technology, form strategic partnerships and expect the unexpected. 2008 highlights include:

In May 2008, the City Commission gave approval for GRU to begin negotiations with Nacogdoches Energy, LLC to help meet the community’s future energy needs through a 100-megawatt biomass-fueled electric generating unit. Fueled by waste wood from forestry operations, the new carbon-neutral facility will be known as the Gainesville Renewable Energy Center, LLC, and will be located at GRU’s Deerhaven Generating Station.

The $141 million construction project to install air emissions controls on Deerhaven’s 235-megawatt coal fired electric generating unit saw significant progress in 2008. The project will allow GRU to use a lower cost coal to reduce fuel costs for customers while reducing emissions in the production of power.

GRU’s South Energy Center is now available to provide 100 percent of the new Shands at UF Cancer Hospital’s energy needs. The 4.2 megawatt facility utilizes the most efficient modern technology to burn environmentally-friendly natural gas for providing electricity, steam, chilled water for air-conditioning and backup power for emergencies. It will be the first facility of its kind in the eastern United States.
We should acknowledge, however, that the sharp increases in fuel and energy prices experienced worldwide last year had a disproportional impact on low income and elderly people. As a result, GRU increased fund raising efforts for GRU’s Project Share, a program that helps vulnerable customers with their bills. Last year more than $70,000 was contributed to this effort, primarily by GRU customers, and through outreach efforts we hope continue to substantially increase donations.

Work continued this year on the Paynes Prairie Sheetflow Restoration Project – a project involving a partnership with Public Works, GRU and the Florida DEP. This project will protect the Floridan Aquifer by helping us meet DEP-established total maximum daily load for nutrient levels in the Alachua Sink. Upgrades are planned for our Main Street Water Reclamation Facility, a new wetland will be constructed and an historic drainage ditch will be removed to reestablish the sheetflow of water onto Paynes Prairie.

Tropical Storm Fay gave GRU the chance to test out a new outage management system. The storm caused 118 outages affecting 20,000 customers. Using the new system and crews of dedicated employees, the average time a customer spent without power was one hour.

Through our GRUCOM division, GRU became a certified Fiber to the Home (FTTH) provider. Fiber optic cable going all the way into the home is a technology that increases bandwidth, property value and may help keep cars off the road by expanding the potential of telecommuting.

I would like to close my remarks about GRU with information on a very exciting new development. GRU has drafted an ordinance and taken the initial steps needed to become the first utility in North America to offer solar feed-in-tariff (FIT). This program has been featured in newspapers, web sites and blogs all across the country. Under this program, GRU will provide a long-term guarantee to customers
to buy the energy generated by photovoltaic systems at approximately double the price that GRU sells power to its customers. This provides greater incentives for businesses to install PV systems, and will increase the amount of renewable energy serving the community. The FIT could also bring solar manufacturing and development jobs to our community. In early February, we are hosting a delegation from Germany that wishes to explore solar business and investment opportunities here in Gainesville. We are initially projecting an average of 1,000 kilowatts of PV to be installed per year when this program is implemented, and this will certainly go a long way in helping us meet our carbon reduction goals.

Turning to the goal of partnerships, the City is working toward establishing effective and institutionalized relationships with other government entities and community partners. With champion Commissioner Lauren Poe, we are moving to formalize relationships with other community partners, especially with the University of Florida, Santa Fe College, and the School Board of Alachua County to address issues of mutual responsibility and concern. This includes our effort to establish a proposed innovation zone to capture biotechnology spin-off enterprises within our community.

Now we are entering another era of undeniable change that offers the hope of new leadership and a new vision for the future of our nation, and its cities. Although hope enables action, hope without purpose is ineffective. However, hope combined with purposeful action, will overcome any obstacle. Most of us understand that the current maelstrom of external economic, political and social forces compels our society to think differently about what it means to be a citizen of the world, our nation, and our great city. We sense our obligation to each other, to our children, and to those who will come after us, to think about what we must do together today to prepare a better world, nation and city to leave in their care tomorrow.

That’s why I wanted to speak to you today about our sense of place as the beating heart of north central Florida. There is no question that Gainesville is a leader among similarly sized peer cities. We often implement innovative solutions to solve
difficult issues and, because of that, we are looked to as a leader in the provision of municipal services. However, we are most widely praised for our efforts to protect and sustain our natural environment while providing for our future energy needs. Our community recognized early on that our natural resources are not infinite and must be actively managed to conserve them for the future.

At times some folks speculate that the policy wonks and politicians at City Hall are out of step with the larger community, our bosses, the voting public. In my own view, we are not leading our citizens, but following their vision for a stronger city that they can grow in, and sometimes struggle in, but be proud of. But you need not take my word for it. Just look at last year’s election results. With more than 80% of voters turning out, Gainesville’s residents spoke with a strong voice. Almost 71.5% cast ballots in support of President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-Elect Joe Biden. Over 78% voted to support an additional mill in property taxes to fund local school operations, and over 64% voted to increase their own sales tax by ½ cent to fund Wild Spaces and Public Places. And despite a passing vote statewide, 58% of Gainesville voters rejected Amendment Two, which restricts the right to marry to opposite sex couples. Going back to last January, during the presidential primary, over 60% of Gainesville voters rejected the property tax cutting measure that passed overwhelmingly statewide. While we must live and work in harmony with our neighbors, Gainesville is not a place that always conforms to conventional wisdom or follows the easy path or popular view. Some may consider this quirky, or the inevitable burden of a college town. To me, it is an indicator of a visionary citizenry.

Visionaries learn from the past and operate in the present, but, perhaps more than anything, place hope in the future. A well know visionary once said, “I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.” Those are of the words of President John F.
Kennedy from his last major public address in October 1963 at Amherst College. They ring as true today as when first spoken more than forty-five years ago.

Gainesville’s vision for the future is green--it’s our combined responsibility to do all we can to protect, preserve, and nurture our home and the vision we share for tomorrow, while being fiscally responsible and respectful of all people.—Together we can and will do it. Thank you for the privilege of serving you.

Again, we have made copies of the 2008 Citizens Report and our Climate Change Report available to take with you as companion pieces to this address. I hope you will find them informative. God Bless you and our City.

Thank you.